

# SYRIA EDUCATION PROGRAMME



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## Syria Education Programme Research Brief: Equity in Learning Outcomes

JANUARY 2021

## Disclaimer

This document has been redacted to protect the individuals involved in the Syria Education Programme. All names of people and locations have either been altered or removed, as has any information that may identify people or locations.

## Project Description

The Syria Education Programme (SEP), also known as Manahel, provides access to safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities. Across its lifecycle the project will reach half a million primary-school-age children in Syria.

SEP enables teachers, school staff, and education sector leadership to deliver quality education. In response to the ever-changing landscape of conflict and crisis in Syria, SEP invests in and applies research to respond to the educational, psychological, and protection needs of Syria's children.

From the specialised requirements of disabled children to the psychological demands of childhood within conflict, students' needs are as diverse as they are urgent. SEP takes a broad and nuanced approach to the myriad needs of individual children and groups. By broadening educational access, promoting a safe and secure environment, and creating quality learning opportunities, SEP strives to meet children's holistic needs at scale.



The Syria Education Programme is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
Defining Equity .....	3
Previous Manahel Research Considering Equity .....	4
Research Purpose and Questions .....	7
Research Design .....	8
Findings and Analysis .....	9
Conclusions and Next Steps .....	19
Appendices .....	21

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

KAP	Knowledge and Perception
CFS	Child-Friendly Space
DFID	United Kingdom's Department for International Development
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EGMA	Early Grade Mathematics Assessment
FCDO	UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psycho-social Support Services
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SGO	Safeguarding Officer
UIS	UNESCO Institute of Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs



# Introduction

This research is a continuation of work that the Syria Education Programme, also known as Manahel, has been undertaking over the last year to understand equitable children's learning outcomes. It draws on the actor-based model in our Theory of Change and our Continuous Assessment dataset (described further below). It tells a data-driven story on how children in Manahel are doing, what we know about them, and what more we need to understand.

This brief starts by setting out the work that we have undertaken thus far to understand equity issues. It then sets out the research questions that this brief seeks to answer and outlines the research design.



# Defining Equity

Our understanding of education equity draws on work by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, notably their *Handbook for Measuring Equity in Education*<sup>1</sup>. This takes ‘equity to mean that a distribution is fair or justified. Equity involves a normative judgement of a distribution, but how people make that judgement will vary.’ (UIS 2018:17). The Handbook expands on this idea to explore different types of equity, including equity of opportunity and equity of outcomes. It is equity in learning outcomes that we focus on in this research brief.

In discussing equity in relation to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, and specifically the equity in education target (SDG 4.5<sup>2</sup>), UIS identifies specific groups who might be vulnerable to inequity in their education:

- Children with disabilities;
- Children displaced by conflict;
- Girls or boys (noting that in different circumstances, they can have different vulnerabilities);
- Children in ‘vulnerable situations’ (including poverty);
- Children engaged in child labour.

Manahel recognises the potential vulnerability of all the above groups, and where possible we collect metadata so we can track whether children in these groups have equitable opportunities and outcomes, as discussed in this brief.


Recognising the subjectivity of defining ‘fairness’ of outcomes, we opt to identify how learning outcomes differ amongst these groups and note the additional support that Manahel offers them. The intention is to prompt reflection and debate on whether the additional resourcing these groups receive is proportionate to increased barriers to learning they might face in comparison to their peers.

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<sup>1</sup> UIS (2018). See also their Equity in [Education topic area](#).

<sup>2</sup> By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.





# Previous Manahel Research Considering Equity

There are three significant pieces of research that this research builds on: our 2020 Gender Analysis, the 2019 legacy DFID Help Desk Research and the 2020 Learning Assessment:

## Gender Analysis

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In Syria, women and girls face diverse challenges that are exacerbated by the war.<sup>3</sup> As UN Women (2018) has reported: ‘from food insecurity to loss of educational opportunities, lack of safe water or health services, and high rates of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), women and girls are facing the brunt of the crisis’ in Syria. Manahel seeks to ensure gender parity across all school communities in which it operates. Of the 201,545 learners enrolled in Manahel schools, 51% are female and 49% are male.

The 2019 Manahel report on out-of-school children and youth found that those learners most at risk of not attending school are male, secondary-age learners from poorer and internally displaced families. Key barriers to attending school include financial constraints, resulting in the need for many young people, especially adolescent boys, to engage in the labour market and provide for their families; children’s lack of interest in, and attitudes towards, schooling; and insecurity when travelling to school. Although Manahel only works with Grades 1- 4 at present, in order to address these challenges, Manahel enforces a protocol in which learners who are at risk of truancy are referred to safeguarding officers (SGO). The SGO follows-up with these children and their families to encourage school participation, identify the barriers that these young people face, and together with the support of the Child Protection Committees, they devise tailored solutions to the barriers each child faces so that learners can return to school. For example, families facing economic hardship may be referred to an external agency that provides livelihood support. Other support provided may include cash assistance or a micro-grant, if appropriate. All support is based on the needs of the family, while considering what assistance will be most sustainable and do-no-harm.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth report of the types of gender-based violence experienced by women and girls in Syria, see European Asylum Support Office. (2020). *Syria Situation of women: Country of Origin Information Report*.

## FCDO Disability Research

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The FCDO led statistics and modelling research assessed whether children with and without disabilities had the same learning outcomes in the Manahel education programme. Children's literacy levels were assessed using Manahel's Eight Literacy Levels: (1) The learner can recognise letter names; (2) The learner can read letters, words and sentences with short vowels; (3) The learner can read and sound out all letters, words and sentences with the Sokoon modifier; (4) The learner can read letters, words and sentences with long vowels; (5) The learner can read words and sentences with modifiers (6) The learner reads words with comprehension; (7) The learner reads sentences with comprehension; and (8) The learner reads paragraphs with comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

Disability was measured with the Washington Group<sup>5</sup> questions (the extended set). This captured whether children had difficulties on one of the following domains as assessed by their teacher: seeing, hearing, self-care, communication, learning, remembering, concentrating, accepting change, controlling behaviour, and making friends, as well as anxiety and depression. More than half of children reporting a cognitive or psychosocial disability reported more than one disability, though few of these children reported three or more cognitive or psychosocial disabilities. For psychosocial disability (having difficulties with any of the following: self-care, communication, learning, remembering, concentrating, accepting change, controlling behaviour, and making friends), there was a significant association with learning. Children with a psychosocial disability had a reduced likelihood of moving learning levels compared to those without this type of disability. They had an odds ratio of 0.54 (95% CI 0.35 - 0.94) of moving, meaning their chance of moving multiple levels was about half that of a child without this type of disability. For children reporting two or more disabilities, their change of moving multiple learning levels was lower than those without a disability. Their odds ratio was 0.51 (0.35 - 0.76), meaning that they were about half as likely as children without a disability to move multiple learning levels.

## Learning Assessment

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The 2019 learning assessment study examined the performance of Grade 3 learners in reading and mathematics across Manahel-supported schools. The study drew on data collected from Grade 3 learners at the start of the 2019/2020 academic year. In total, 1,479 learners (749 boys and 730 girls) from 149 schools were sampled. Manahel captured learner data using three tools: the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), which measures learner performance of foundational reading skills; the Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA), which measures learner performance of foundational mathematics skills; and a Student Stressors Survey, which examines students' experiences and feelings of safety during the conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> These learning levels have been revised in 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The Washington Group's main purpose is the promotion and coordination of international cooperation in generating statistics on disability suitable for censuses and national surveys. Its major objective is to provide basic information on disability that is comparable worldwide. ([About the WG - The Washington Group on Disability Statistics \(washingtongroup-disability.com\)](https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com))

Headteachers also provided school enrolment and attendance data. Although the proportions of girls and boys in the non-reader, beginning and progressing levels were comparable, the proportion of girls in the proficient reader level was significantly higher than the proportion of boys at 16.0% versus 11.9%. In contrast to reading, boys outperformed girls in all mathematics subtasks. Boys' higher performance was reflected in their significantly higher accuracy scores and lower percentages of zero scores. Gender appears to be an important factor in reading and mathematics performance for Manahel learners.





# Research Purpose and Questions

This research returns to the personas in the Theory of Change to discuss what we are learning about their progress, and what we still need to find out. It follows the same format as the stories we share in our quarterly report. It is important to stress that the descriptions below are personas, not actual children. Whilst, the personas are based on the actual data, they make some assumptions - hence not all children with the same characteristics as a given persona will have the same outcomes.

**This research answers the questions:**

- Are particular groups learning less quickly than others?
- What are we, or could we be, doing to identify and counter inequity?

# Research Design

Our 2019 Theory of Change articulates the positive change Manahel should have for learners, both in terms of their wellbeing and their learning outcomes. We described personas in the Theory of Change, who reflect the characteristics of typical learners we are working to support. Examples of these personas include Saleh, a third-grade boy who gets scared by the sound of warplanes, and Sara, a fourth-grade girl who was displaced and out-of-school for a year. This rapid research revisits these personas after one year of Manahel interventions to examine issues of equity in learners' progress.

## Methodology

### MANAHEL'S CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT DATASET

This research draws on Manahel's continuous assessment data to analyse issues of equity in learning over a period of one year. Four assessments were conducted over this period. The sample reduced over the time period, reflecting difficulties in tracking/re-contacting individual learners. Our future plans for this are discussed in the recommendations section. The datasets we collected were:

Timepoint	Quarter	Data collection month(s)	Sample size <small>(selected from a population of 31,156)</small>
0	Q6	September/October 2019	3,313
1	Q7	January 2020	3,313
2	Q9	April 2020	2,872
3	Q10	September 2020	2,303

The challenges associated with COVID-19 meant no data was collected in Q9. We have taken this data and disaggregated by key characteristics: gender, grade, and location. In the next iteration of this brief (due with the Quarterly Report) we will also add in comments on displacement and Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) data, which is currently still being collected. We have used this continuous assessment data to describe how children with similar characteristics to the personas are typically performing in Manahel.

In addition, follow-up interviews with three Manahel staff members, add depth to the quantitative data. In particular, interviews were designed to explore possible strategies to find out more about these Manahel personas in the future, either through quantitative monitoring or qualitative assessment.

# Findings and Analysis

## What Have We Learnt About Our Personas?

Each persona represents various issues of equity that have been extracted from the data. Iman represents students who were making progress in face-to-face learning and then struggled to maintain their learning progress during distance learning; Saleh represents those learners with disabilities; Sara represents Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or learners living in temporary refugee camps; Farid represents learners from lower socioeconomic levels, especially older boys who are forced into child labour or those learners without access to Internet at home; and Rama represents learners who experience trauma and need significant psychosocial support. Let's meet them now.

### MEET IMAN



Iman is nine years old and in the fourth grade. She attends a Manahel school in Province B and loves it. Iman has always been a hard worker and takes her studies seriously. She started the 2019 academic school year at literacy Level 2 and numeracy Level 2 and in the first quarter of classes increased both of her test scores to reach Level 3 in each subject. But then, due to COVID-19, schools shut down and distance learning started.

#### ***What have we learnt about girls like Iman - and how are we responding?***

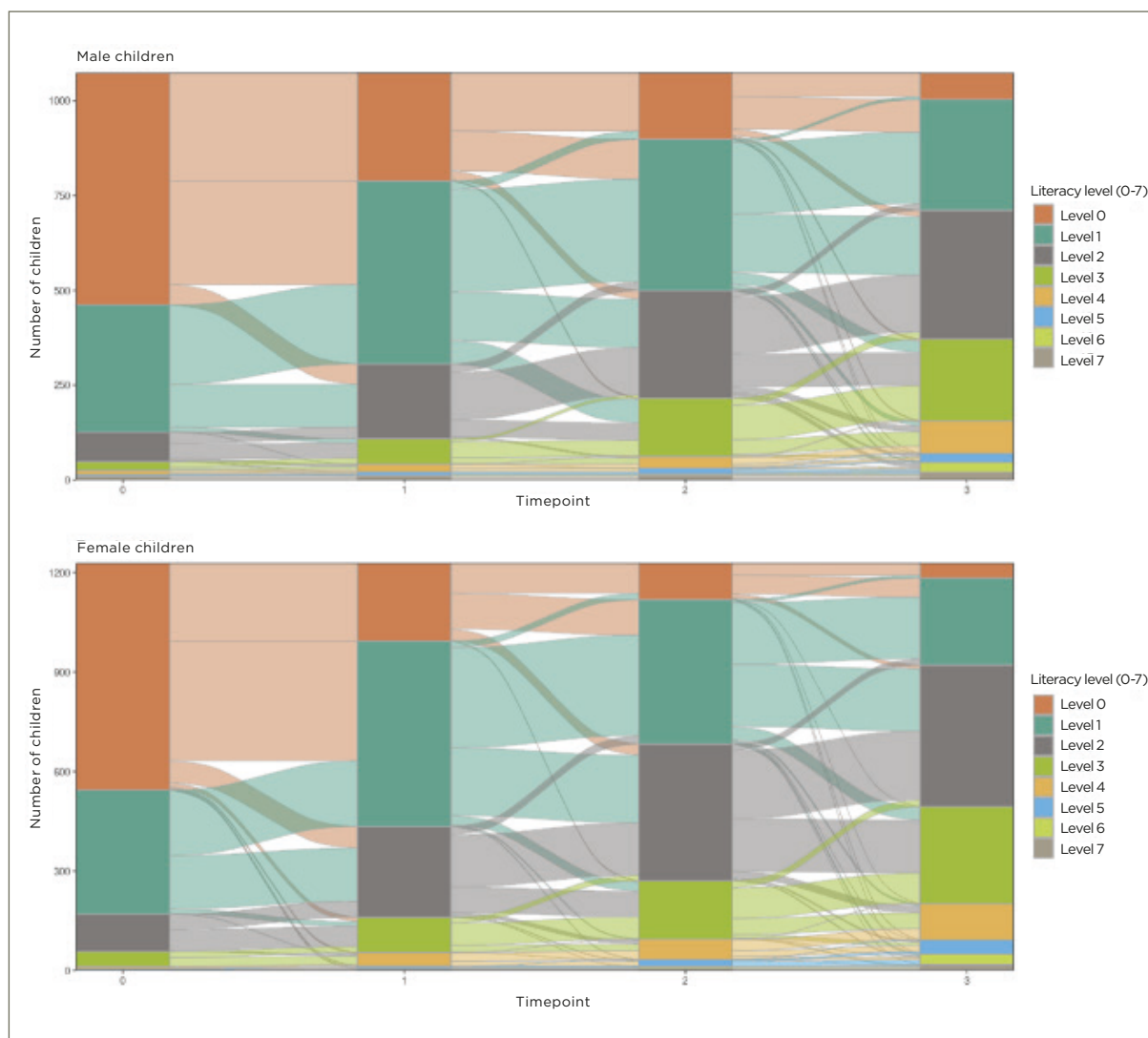
Iman has struggled to keep up with her learning progress whilst studying at home. She did not make any progress in either subject from January to April 2020, and since April has regressed in both her literacy and numeracy scores. Iman is now back at literacy Level 2 and numeracy Level 2, where she had originally started one year ago. Distance learning has taken a toll on Iman, and her other classmates – especially the girls – in Province B.

The Sankey charts<sup>6</sup> below highlights how girls' and boys' learning has progressed over time. In the first chart below, the four columns represent the continuous assessments in

<sup>6</sup> A sankey diagram is a visualization used to depict a flow from one set of values to another. The things being connected are called nodes and the connections are called links. ([Sankey Diagram | Charts | Google Developers](#))

Quarters 6, 7, 9 and 10. The columns of solid colours represent the number of children at each level at each timepoint (the 'stock') – for example, the green rectangle labelled 'X' below represents all the boys at Level 1 in Q7. Translucent green lines flow out from the right of that, showing how children's progress has changed between Q7 and the next column, Q9 (the 'flow'). The largest flow is from Level 1 in Q7 to Level 1 in Q9 – that is, children did not make a full level of progress in that quarter (they might still have made some progress; children will typically take a couple of terms to make a level of progress). The second largest flow – of about 175 boys – is from Level 1 to Level 2 (the grey rectangle in Q9). In the chart below, you can see a green line flowing from X to the orange box in Q9, Level 0. These children have fallen in their attainment. There are various reasons why this could be, including 'learning loss' from conflict/displacement to personal circumstances that could lead to missed schooling, such as illness. It could also be indicative of an assessment error at one or both timepoints. One other feature to look out for is flows of more than one level. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that many children would make such a dramatic increase (or decrease) in their learning in normal circumstances. A flow changing by more than two levels could suggest an assessment or monitoring error. It could also be indicative that children have had additional support, such as private tutoring.

Figure 1. Charts Showing How Boys' and Girls' Learning Changes Over Time



To understand Iman's case, we need to dig further into the data, filtering the information above to show only Grade 4 girls and boys in Province B. We go into that detail and provide more discussion in Appendix 3. In summary our continuous assessment data suggests that overall, in Province B, both girls and boys in Grades 3 and 4 have lower attainment levels now than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, reduced attainment is a predictable outcome of children not going to school. We are cautious to attribute this finding entirely to COVID-19: it is important to note the relatively small sample sizes (with stocks of perhaps 10 or 20 children), and that conducting assessment through WhatsApp, rather than face-to-face, reduces the reliability of results. Still, the team believe that the biggest contributing factor is the decrease in time spent studying while at home, and it is important to note that there is a gendered difference at upper grades, with girls losing out more than boys. Manahel staff shared this finding with school coaches, leading to an animated discussion as to whether this data reflected the reality in Province B school communities. We discussed:

- If girls had a higher domestic workload than boys. This was almost certainly the case, but the group did not know if this was significant enough to reduce learning time (as opposed to free time).
- If girls' education is not prioritised as highly as boys. There were mixed opinions in the group on this issue.
- If the findings were just not representative (given the small sample, as noted above).

As a result of this finding, the group agreed to put additional efforts into increasing learning hours for older children, particularly girls, in Province B. This is discussed further in *Conclusions and Next Steps*.

## MEET SALEH



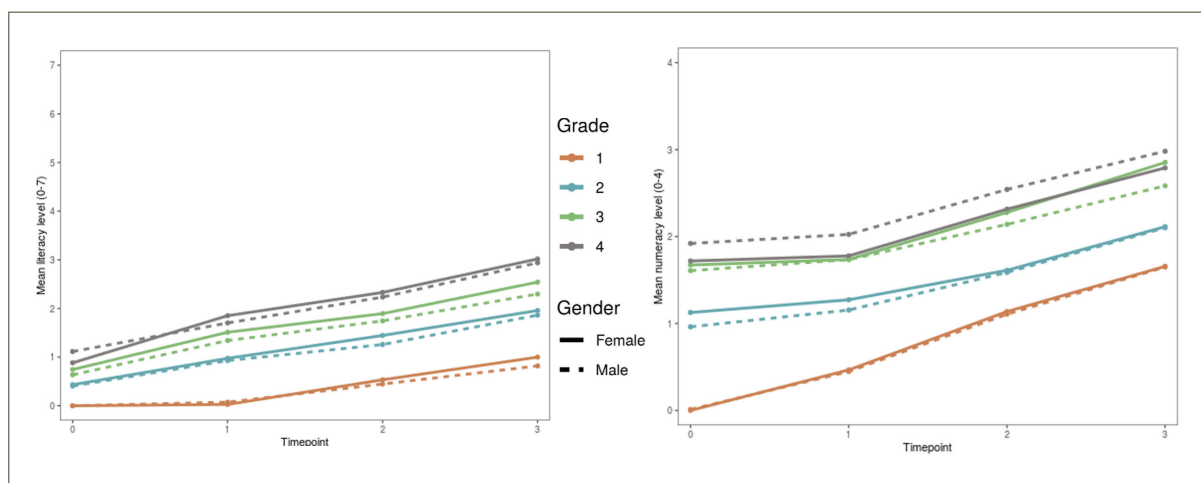
Saleh is an eight-year-old boy in Grade 2 and has multiple disabilities. In addition to not being able to walk independently, Saleh's Child Functioning Screening suggested he has concentration difficulties, making it difficult for him to remember what he is taught. He is friendly and loves to include people in games. He hates the sound of warplanes flying overhead.

### ***What have we learnt about children like Saleh - and how are we responding?***

Our latest continuous assessment data shows that Grade 2 boys are typically at Literacy Level 2, slightly behind their female peers. In numeracy, girls and boys are more evenly pegged at Grade 2. Saleh is more likely to be at Level 1 in literacy: the disability modelling research suggests that children like him are half as likely to advance by multiple literacy levels compared to colleagues without disabilities.

Manahel has taken steps to support learners like Saleh by, for example, giving them time outside classroom for one-on-one or small groups support, led by the Lead teacher. However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these structures have been much more limited (children in special education centres have continued to receive support).

Figure 2. Average Literacy Levels (Left) and Numeracy Levels (Right) of Different Grades and Genders, from Sept 2019 – Sept 2020. Larger Charts Can be Seen in Appendix 1

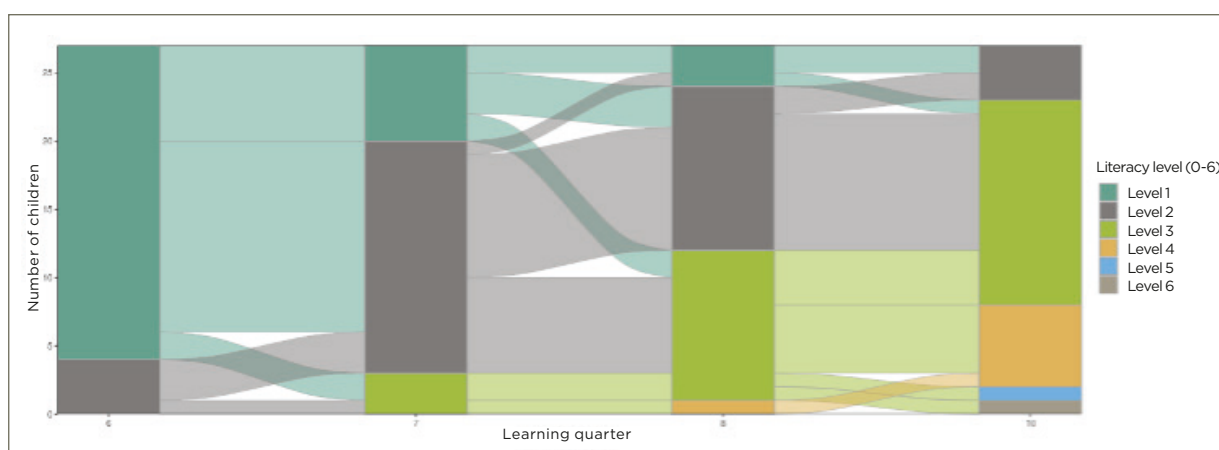


A senior member of the Manahel team notes that, due to COVID-19, “children who have multiple disabilities, the children that used to have additional support, are the ones that have high risk of not achieving.” Aware of this, Manahel is supporting learners with disabilities through four key actions:

- Continuing to identify learners with disabilities and ensuring teachers and schools are aware of these learners’ needs;
- creating WhatsApp groups specifically for learners with disabilities to support parents and scaffold learning at home;
- offering 5 hours of weekly face-to-face or blended learning opportunities once schools reopen; and adapting literacy materials to tend to a wider range of learning styles.

Manahel’s concerted focus on supporting children with disabilities is delivering results. 27 learners in our cohort of 2303 learners have multiple disabilities (20 girls and 7 boys). When we first started following their progress in October 2019, 23 of those 27 had attained Level 1 literacy and just 4 children Level 2. None of these children had progressed beyond Level 2. Now, just over a year later, all have made it past Level 1, and most are at Level 3 or beyond. This is a testament to the work their teachers are undertaking, with Manahel’s support.

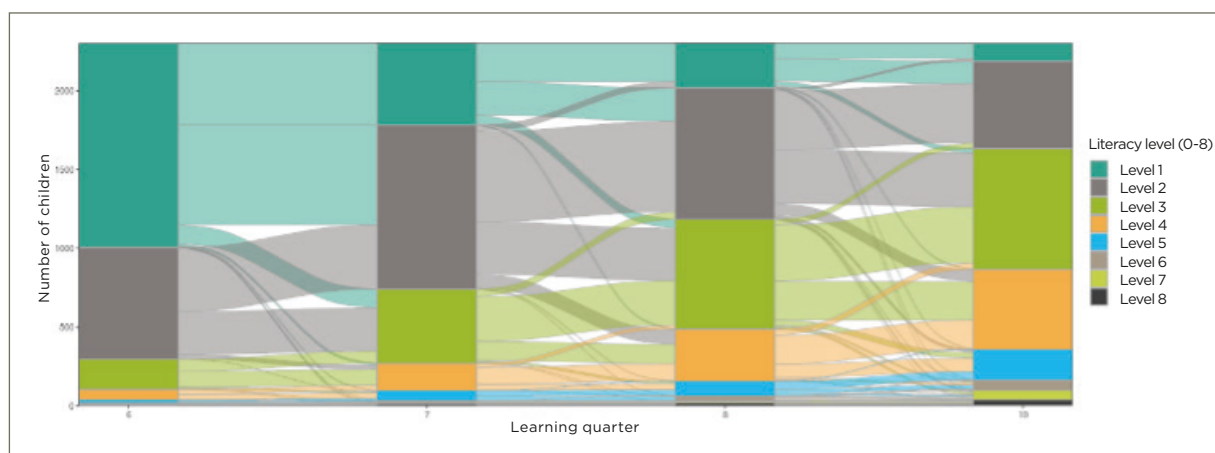
Figure 3. Literacy Attainment By Quarter of the 27 Learners with Multiple Functioning Difficulties in the Continuous Assessment Cohort





From an equity perspective, Manahel invests considerably more resources (through, for example, lead teacher support, specialist support, professional development for teachers, and alternative education plans) in helping learners with disabilities. To consider equity of outcomes, we compare learners with multiple functioning difficulties (Figure 3) with the whole cohort (Figure 4). We can see that children with multiple functioning difficulties are progressing more slowly, but comparably: in both cohorts, the majority of learners are in Level 1 or 2, and a similar proportion have progressed to levels 4 and 5. Findings for numeracy were similar. Our interpretation of this data is that children with multiple functioning difficulties have broadly equitable outcomes against with those learners without functioning difficulties. This is another piece of evidence to suggest that Manahel’s additional support is having a positive impact.

Figure 4. Literacy Attainment by Quarter of All 2303 Learners in the Continuous Assessment Cohort



## MEET SARA

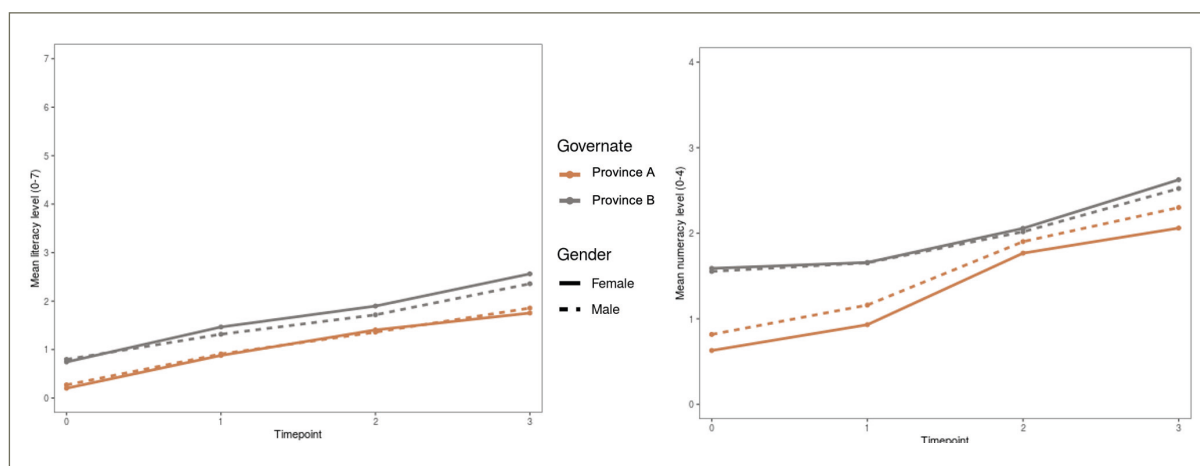


Sara is a seven-year-old girl in Grade 1. Like most girls, Sara is outperforming her male peers in literacy, but is at about the same level in numeracy as her male peers. However, Sara’s learning has been interrupted since schools shut down in February due to conflict. Sara is from a small rural town in Northwest Syria where armed attacks occur frequently. This has caused her and her family to move on multiple occasions. Sara is now living in a temporary camp setting, where infrastructure and Internet connectivity is poor.

***What have we learnt about girls like Sara - and how are we responding?***

Children in Grade 1 make the most rapid progress in numeracy of all grades, and a comparable rate of progress to other grades in literacy. Figure 2, above, showed that this progress has been maintained on average even through the COVID-19 period – although, as discussed when we met Iman (above), that does not mean all children are making equitable progress. Averaging data masks increased variance (some learners doing much better than others within a grouping) and the fact that our continuous assessment sample size has reduced – and those we have not been able to reach are most likely to be the ones who have not been engaging in distance learning. Sara and her schoolmates in Province A typically make faster progress than children in Province B. However, being displaced multiple times means Sara would not have benefited from continuity of education, and children in both Province A and Province B have experienced the devastating effects of conflict.

Figure 5. Average Literacy Levels (Left) and Numeracy Levels (Right) of Different Governates and Genders, from Sept 2019 – Sept 2020. Larger Charts Can Be Seen in Appendix 2



Manahel staff realise that, as a senior team member stated, “the more [learners] change schools, the more likely their performance will be poorer on literacy and numeracy.” We saw this reflected in the 2019 Learning Assessment. Manahel is working to track internally displaced learners and ensure they have access to Manahel teachers and schools. Our rightsizing and Manahel Index exercises ensure we are focussing on supporting the most vulnerable learners. Some ways we are tracking learners include:

1. having teachers track learners’ whereabouts through phone calls;
2. using summer club as a catch-up for learners who missed out on parts of the previous academic year;
3. opening schools at least once a week to provide those learners without internet with self-study packs and teacher support.

## MEET FARID



Farid is a ten-year old boy in the third grade. He has three siblings and lives in Province B with his family. In February 2019, Farid lost his father during an attack on rebel groups. This has greatly affected Farid emotionally. His father’s death has also exacerbated economic challenges for the whole family. Now, as the ‘man of the house’, Farid has to work to earn money and provide food for his family. Because of this, he often misses out on classes, and his literacy and math learning has declined.

Farid’s participation in Manahel programming is inconsistent. When he is not working, Farid uses his mother’s phone to connect to the Manahel WhatsApp groups, but often times his mother also has to work, so he does not have access to a device at home. When he does have access, the family does not always have money to pay for an Internet connection.

### **What have we learnt about boys like Farid – and how are we responding?**

It is difficult to track Farid’s story using our continuous assessment data. We can disaggregate by grade and gender, so could estimate (from Figure 1) that he might be at about Level 2 in literacy and working towards Level 3 in numeracy.

However, our Out of School research tells us that this is unlikely. We need to collect more information to understand this - and we discuss this further in the recommendations.

While our continuous assessment dataset requires more information if it is to be useful for data-informed decisions in Farid's case, through our other work (e.g. with Safeguarding Officers at a local level), Manahel is aware of these issues. In terms of distance education, although nearly half of Manahel learners are connected to WhatsApp groups, an estimated 30% of those connected are not actually interacting or participating in teaching and learning activities. In order to encourage parent and learner involvement, the Education Directorate has run communication campaigns stressing the importance of education for children and a Manahel partner organisation has created and disseminated a video tutorial as a 'how to' guide for using the Manahel website to access teaching and learning tools. Connectivity and infrastructure, however, continue to be an issue for many Manahel beneficiaries. To address this, Manahel conducted a needs assessment and provided internet cards for those houses and families without Internet.

## MEET RAMA



Rama is six years old and is new to the Manahel programme. She will only just start Grade 1 in the upcoming school year. Rama's mum registered her for school in District 6 during Manahel's "back to school" campaign. Since Manahel values relationships as a part of child wellbeing and resilience, the back-to-school campaign allowed Rama to meet her teacher. This is especially important since her classes will be conducted in blended learning models once schools reopen.

### ***How will we learn about the progress of girls like Rama?***

An early child functioning screening suggests that Rama has experienced severe trauma in her short six years of life. Knowing this, Manahel staff has established a three-tier system to support Rama as she starts the new academic school year. First, psychosocial workshops will be mainstreamed into teaching and learning activities to develop Rama's socio-emotional learning. Second, if Rama does not respond to those workshops, she will be referred to Mental Health and Psycho-social Support Services (MHPSS) for support; and the third tier will refer Rama to further child protection services.

## Characteristics that Signal Risks of Inequity

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This section draws on qualitative data from interviews with Manahel staff, and integrates international literature, to help deepen our understanding of equity in the Syrian context. The personas above are helpful for bringing the data alive. But not all of the data fits neatly into a persona – and, indeed, some of the most marginalised children could defy easy categorisation. This section discusses some of the other trends we are seeing in the data, and speaks to the research questions: how can our continuous assessment dataset help us identify those children or groups of children who are progressing less quickly, and what (from an equity perspective) can we do about that?

### DISABILITY

As a senior Manahel team member said: *“What is missed [since COVID-19] are the people in the middle: those who really need that additional support to catch up with others, but their case is not severe enough to have a one-to-one face-to-face or case management. That’s the bit in terms of implementation that we are missing.”* Manahel Lead teachers, who are specifically trained in special education, are key actors in supporting learners with disabilities. Since they do not have their own timetable of classes, Lead teachers act as support teachers and provide five hours of additional instruction to learners with disabilities. During COVID-19, Manahel set up specific WhatsApp groups for those learners with disabilities, so that lead teachers could offer support through text messages, videos, and other digital content. The senior Manahel team member described that this *“worked to some extent,”* but was *“not as successful as we used to see with the regular support sessions for those learners in the school.”* Because of this, as schools re-open, Manahel plans to provide a new blended learning model of individualised support for learners with disabilities: *“We have again the same assumptions that if the teachers get to see those children, and meet their parents, [and] the Lead teacher [says] ‘I will be doing additional support for you in the form of five hours per week, either face-to-face if you come [to school] or online,’ that can help in strengthening that process for them. So, what we are keeping is ensuring that the teacher and the lead teacher know about the learners and the type of disability, specifically those with multiple disabilities and creating opportunities for additional support for them. Because that’s what they need”.*

When we explored Saleh’s experience, above, we discussed how learners with multiple functioning difficulties have made good progress in both literacy and numeracy.

### DISPLACEMENT

Displacement is perhaps one of the most common challenges that Manahel learners face. Of the 6.1 million IDPs in Syria, 52% are children and 86% live in urban areas (UNESCO, 2019). According to Manahel staff, in February 2020 alone, an estimated six thousand children were displaced daily. Assessment data suggests that those learners who are displaced more than once learn at a slower rate compared to their peers.<sup>7</sup> Displacement has direct effects on learning by limiting access to teaching and learning materials (because of the need to move or due to the of lack of resources), and indirect effects on learning due to trauma or hardship faced.

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<sup>7</sup> Based on the 2019 Learning Assessment

Although we are currently reaching about 54% of learners through WhatsApp groups, the assumption is made that a large portion of the other 46% are IDPs without access to the Internet or devices. Previous Manahel research indicates that displaced learners are more at risk of being out-of-school.

Moreover, Manahel recognises how displacement is experienced very differently across learners, depending on when or where the displacement occurred, how long ago it occurred, or where learners were placed. According to a senior member of the Manahel team, those IDPs who are placed in camps, *“are less likely to have access to distance learning in general, and those same children are more often moving around and being deprived of the [tools] that support their learning.”* The team member added how issues of displacement have only been exacerbated by COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, they stated, *“we define what is out-of-school, [as] not engaging with online learning. So, if the child has a compounding effect of being displaced and ending up in a camp setting, and does not have access to online [teaching], what we are doing now is that we are reopening schools for one day a week at least for all year groups, for that child to come and say, ‘I cannot access online learning, give me the booklet and I will do it and then return for my teacher to correct it’. A lot of the decision to partially reopen schools is because of those fifty percent of children”.*

The next iteration of this brief will report on how children with different displacement statuses are performing against the literacy and numeracy learning levels in the Continuous Assessment dataset.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS - INCLUDING GENDER AND AGE**

There is a substantial evidence base that learners from lower income backgrounds underperform compared to their peers. These inequities are only exacerbated in humanitarian settings. But poverty is experienced differently by girls and boys at different ages. For example, older children may be forced to work to provide for their family, while younger children are looked after at home. In Syria, a recent study found that about 85% of assessed communities report child labour as a key barrier for school attendance (UN OCHA, 2019a).

Manahel’s out-of-school research found that male, secondary-age learners from poorer and internally displaced families were most at risk of dropping out of school (Chemonics & STS, 2019). This was before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Since the pandemic, more households have been experiencing economic hardships. International literature suggests that in other countries, girls are also being pushed into the job market, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Grown & Basquet, 2020). While we have not seen substantial evidence of that in Manahel as yet, we must remain aware of this increased probability. Commentators have noted that, globally, girls have faced additional unique challenges since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Girls lose out on more learning time than boys because of the need to engage in household chores or childcare duties (UN, 2020a). Girls are typically more at risk of gender-based and domestic violence (ibid), and of ‘falling behind and not returning when schools re-open’ (UNHCR, 2020).

Considering Syria more specifically, UNFPA (2020) published a recent report on how girls are more at risk of experiencing gender-based violence since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A World Vision (2020) report conducted a needs assessment of communities in northwest Syria and the preliminary data points to several risks that

have been exacerbated since COVID-19, including exploitation and early forced marriage. Adolescent girls in Northwest Syria reported significant changes in behaviour, including isolation from the community, violent actions, melancholy, crying and nightmares.

We will keep monitoring for qualitative and quantitative evidence of differences in girls' and boys' learning outcomes. As we have noted previously, trends are not straightforward. The clearest gendered trend in learning outcomes that we have seen so far – that girls' progress typically tracks behind boys in numeracy – is again shown to be broadly true in the Continuous Assessment dataset, but not universally. For example, Figure 1 shows girls' and boys' outcomes are comparable in Grades 1 & 2, and girls outperformed boys in Grade 3, only to fall behind in Grade 4. Our team does not have a simple explanation for this, and we will continue to look into the assessment approach (as discussed in Next Steps) to confirm the reliability of these findings.

## ROBUSTNESS AND LIMITATIONS

Manahel is pleased with the Continuous Assessment process and dataset. We have been able to collect data in all but one quarter over the last five quarters – with the gap occurring early in the COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen high attrition rates but still have good enough stratified samples to have confidence in the broad trends we have identified. Relatively few issues of inequity are apparent. However, this is only when considering three variables: gender, grade, and governorate. Regarding girls' education, in particular, we remain aware that the relatively small differences in outcomes compared with boys are atypical compared to other conflict affected/fragile areas and less pronounced than in our own EGMA learning assessment.

Two additional factors that are frequently associated with education marginalisation are disability or displacement. Based on qualitative data from interviews, and previous research from the legacy DFID Help Desk, it is evident that these two variables play a significant role in shaping learning. These issues will be explored in the next iteration of research.

It has been a challenge to gather the data on learning outcomes and metadata on the five factors highlighted above. Despite this, we have the ambition to gather more metadata, as discussed in *Next Steps*.

A final point that should be made is about those learners who were not assessed, or who Manahel has struggled to track, especially since distance learning measures have been established. In the words of a senior Manahel team member, *“those [learners] who did not engage in online learning are the ones who keep us awake every night, because we don't know what's happening there... there are a lot of unknowns. I'm not saying there was no learning, but we don't know really, because we couldn't reach them for assessment.”* Manahel has been able to maintain some education for about half of our learners during the COVID-19 pandemic (and ongoing conflict). Nevertheless, programme staff recognise that the largest challenge is reaching those learners who are currently not engaged in WhatsApp groups. Whilst this report has focused on the data that Manahel does have regarding equity in learning and progress, 46.2% of Manahel learners are not currently involved in the distance learning structures established, thus comprising an entirely separate group of vulnerable learners. In addition, of the 53.8% of learners who are connected in WhatsApp groups, only an estimated 30% participated in the remote learning assessments. Again, this impacts the representativeness of the data. As the participating sample size decreases, the data figures miss out on the nuances of the equity in learning.





# Conclusions and Next Steps

## Are Particular Groups Learning Less Quickly Than Others?

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This research highlights several areas of potential inequity based on key characteristics, such as:

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Disability:</b>            | Learners with multiple disabilities are half as likely to progress in their literacy compared to their peers without disabilities.   |
| <b>Displacement:</b>          | Learners who have been displaced miss out on learning and thus progress slower than their peers. They may struggle to catch up and may face additional child protection issues, due to the trauma they experience during displacement. |
| <b>Gender:</b>                | Girls generally outperform boys in literacy; there is mixed evidence regarding whether boys outperform girls in mathematics.   |
| <b>Grade and Governorate:</b> | Learners from Province B – especially in Grades 3 and 4 – have been most negatively affected by distance learning.   |

## What More Could We be Doing to Identify and Counter Inequity?

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### PROVIDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO LEARNERS IN PROVINCE B

As noted in the section *Meet Iman*, we used the findings from this research to discuss the learning loss amongst Grades 3 and Grade 4 learners in Province B. We concluded that the difference in girls' and boys' outcomes was not pronounced enough to justify different instruction for girls than boys, but that all learners should receive additional support. We will ask teachers to review continuous assessment data for their class again, noting that girls' learning loss is more pronounced in Province B Grade 3/Grade

4 in our data, to establish if they have missed any learners who would benefit from additional support. In theory, any learner who is falling behind will receive additional support, regardless of their gender, but we would like teachers to double-check with particular emphasis on girls in case they have missed anyone.

Based on findings from this research, we have adapted our literacy/numeracy intervention: coaches will share additional work booklets for learners in Grades 3 and 4 to use at home. We will share additional WhatsApp recorded lessons in the afternoons related to the morning's homework. In addition, coaches will ask teachers to provide guided instruction for previous learning levels, recapping the competencies developed to consolidate learning before children engage in the next level's material.

## **REFINE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTERISTICS THAT SIGNAL A RISK OF INEQUITY**

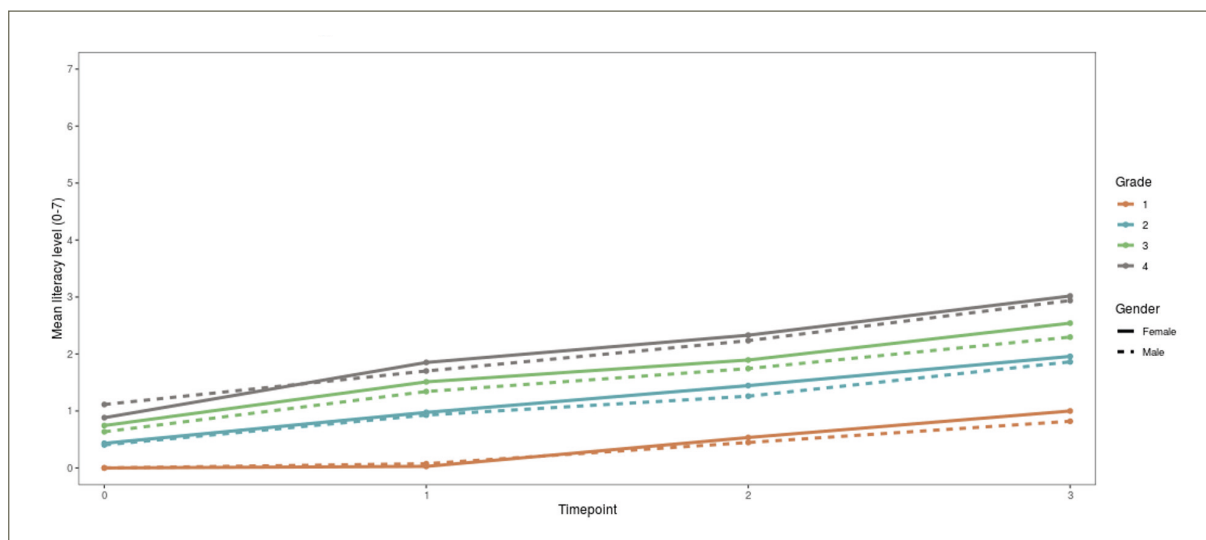
Concepts such as access or displacement are complex, and we need to be careful that data we capture on these concepts does not oversimplify. The senior Manahel team member, in his interview, recognised how 'displacement' as a concept varies greatly for Manahel learners. The distance learning research (a companion research brief to this one) also suggested that access, at least to WhatsApp, does not necessarily mean access to quality teaching and learning opportunities.

Creating clearer definitions will help improve consistency in data collection, measurement, analysis, and how data is acted upon. The Education Equity Research Initiative's (2018) Education Equity Indicators for Access is one resource that will assist Manahel standardise concepts that are essential to programme metrics and objectives over time. Our next opportunities to reflect on which characteristics we will try to capture in our assessment data, and the metrics we will use to measure those, are the Q11 Continuous Assessment and the 2020 EGRA/EGMA learning assessment.

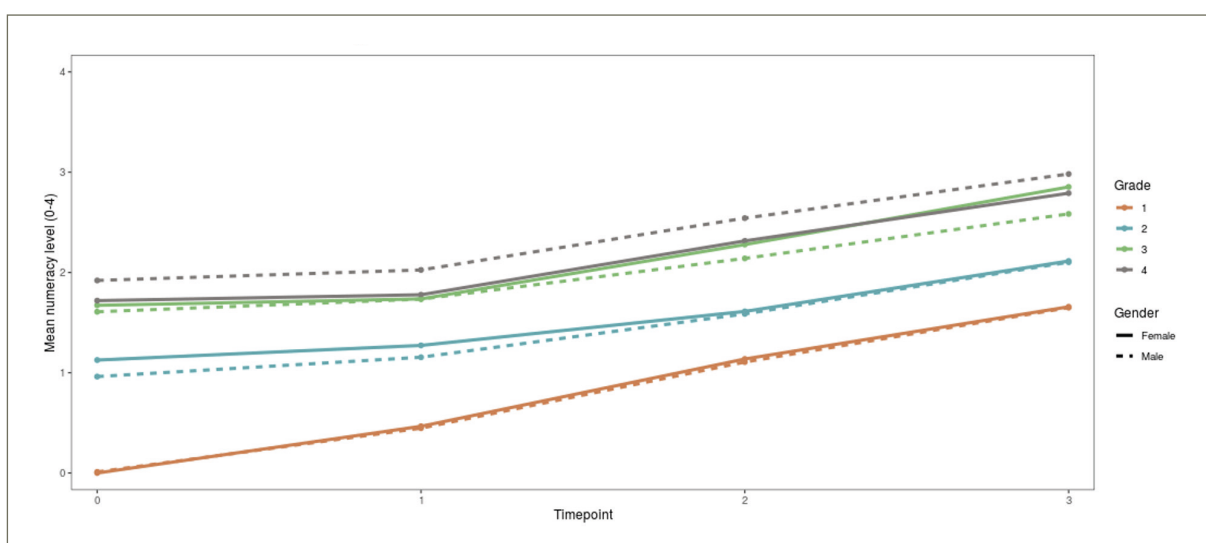
While there are many more vulnerability criteria we would like to be measuring, we must be realistic about resource limitations and the uptake of external stakeholders if we hope for continuous assessment work to be institutionalised in the education system beyond Manahel. That said, there is room for improvement. Based on this rapid research brief, we are already considering, for example, how we can capture information about whether children are orphaned, involved in labour, or have caring responsibilities, in the assessments mentioned above.

# Appendix 1: Average (Mean) Literacy and Numeracy Levels by Grade and Gender

## MEAN LITERACY LEVELS



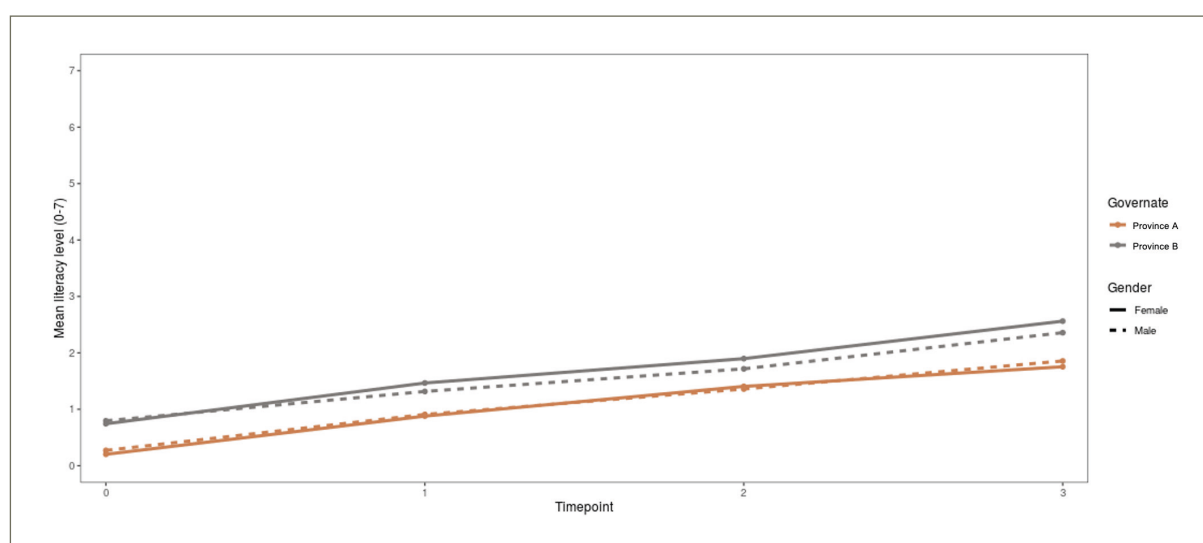
## MEAN NUMERACY LEVELS



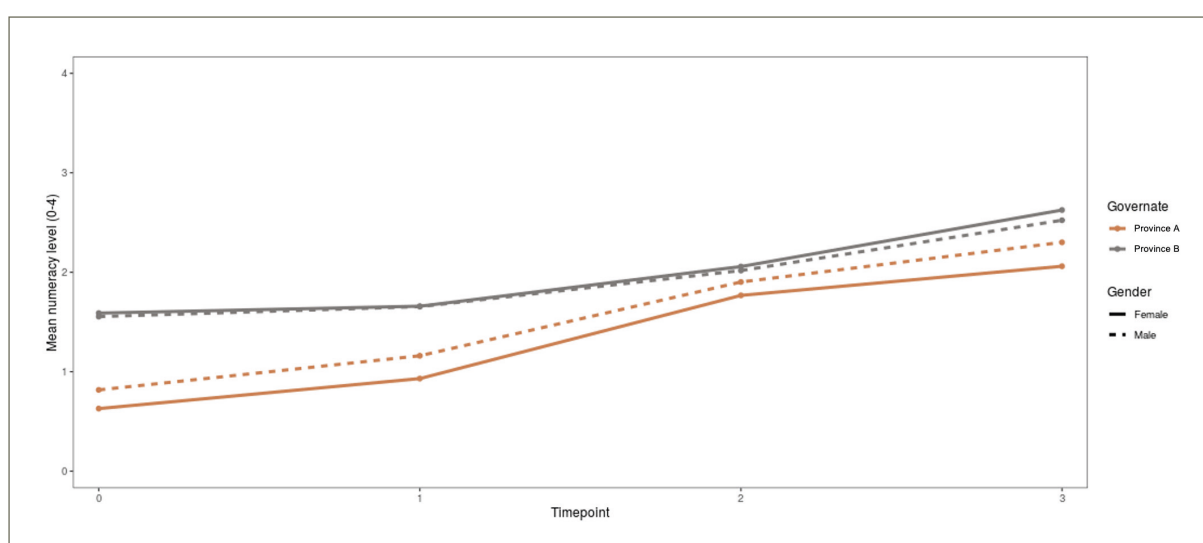
Timepoint 0: September 2019 (Q6)  
 Timepoint 1: January 2020 (Q7)  
 Timepoint 2: April 2020 (Q8)  
 Timepoint 3: September 2020 (Q10)

# Appendix 2: Average (Mean) Literacy and Numeracy Levels by Governate and Gender

## MEAN LITERACY LEVELS



## MEAN NUMERACY LEVELS

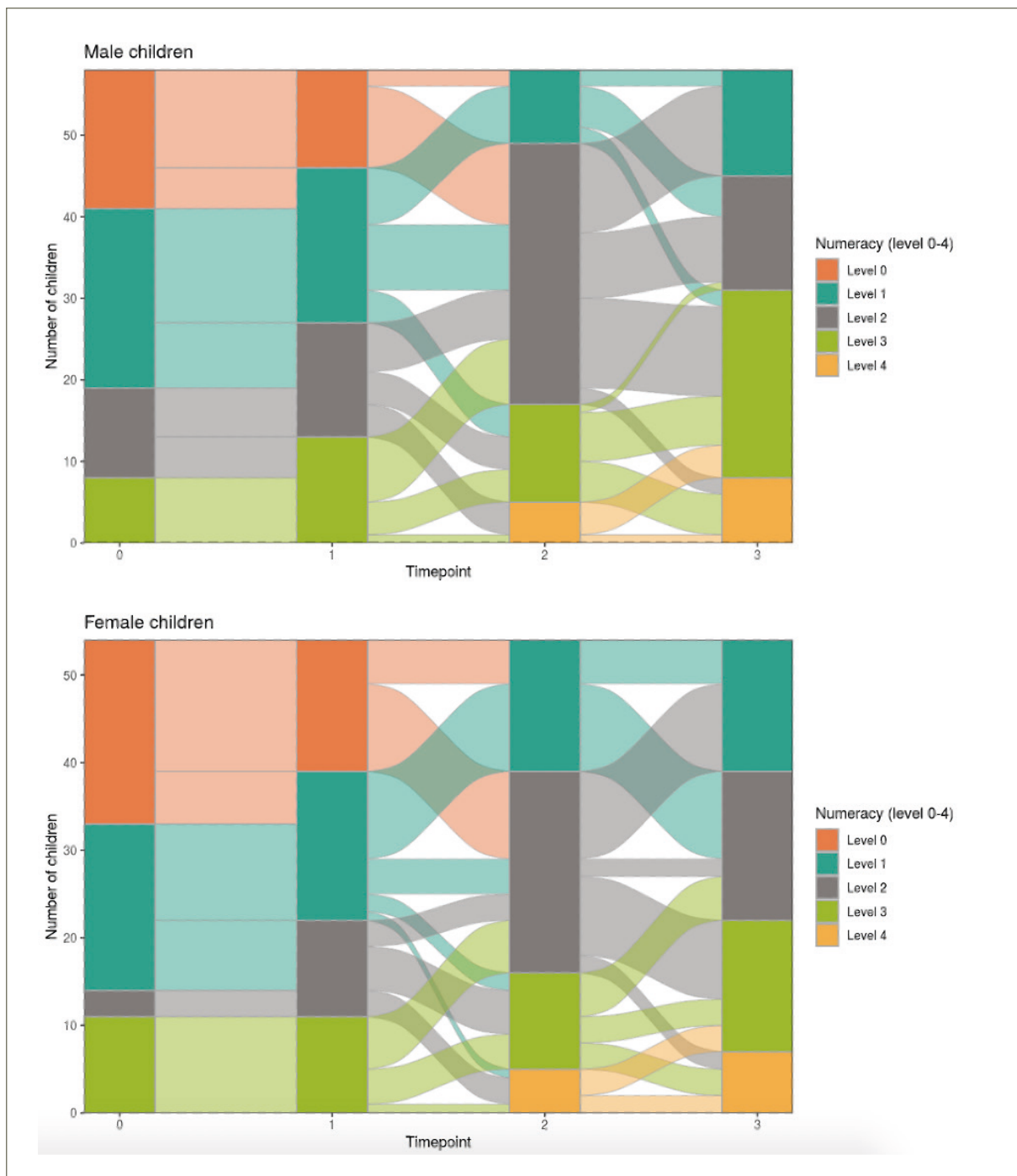


Timepoint 0: September 2019 (Q6)  
Timepoint 1: January 2020 (Q7)  
Timepoint 2: April 2020 (Q8)  
Timepoint 3: September 2020 (Q10)

# Appendix 3: COVID-19 Impacts on Grades 3 and 4 Learning

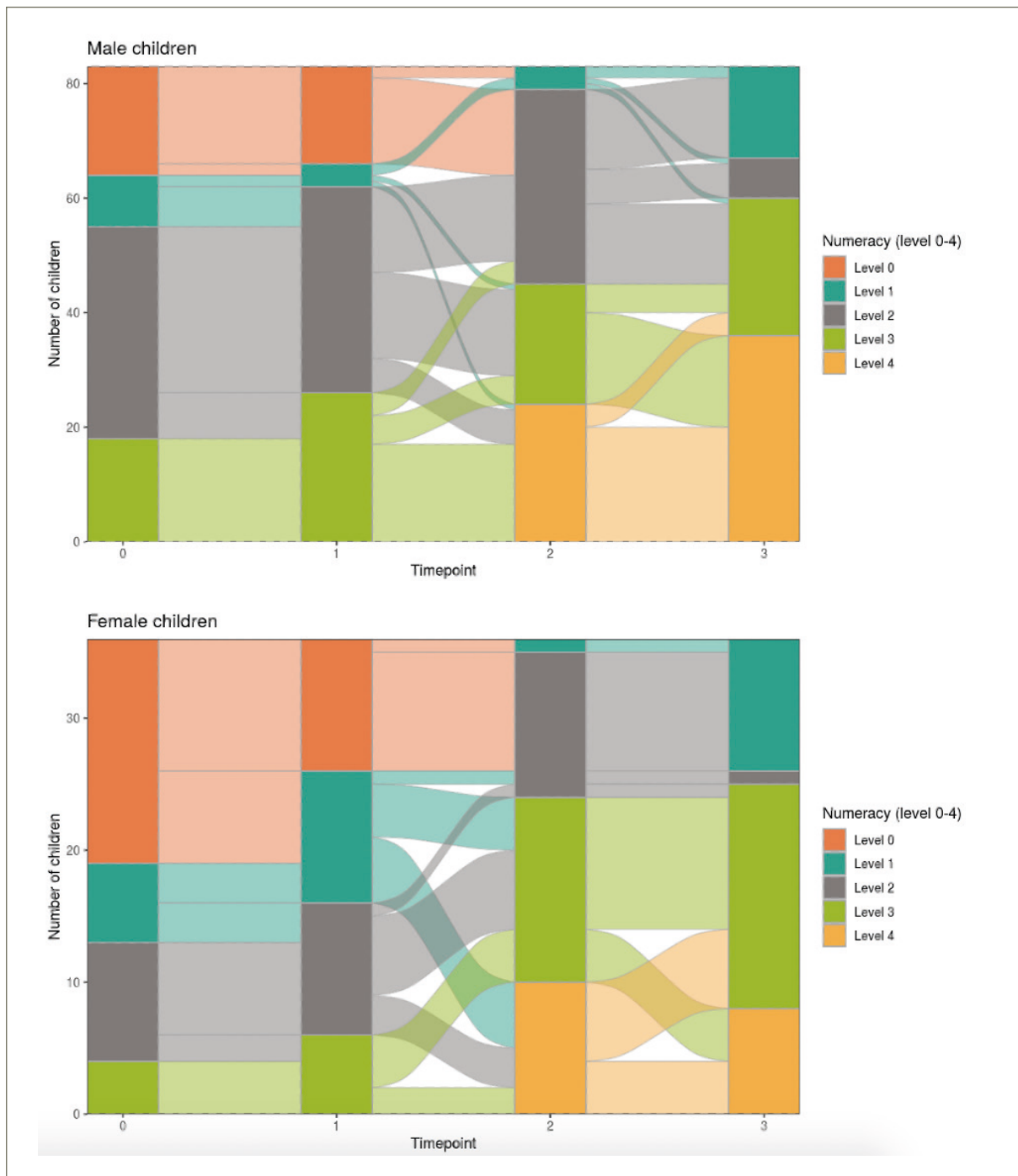
The following graphs depict issues of equity for learners from Grades 3 and 4 in Province B. Each graph is also accompanied by a brief description below to summarise the findings. We would like to draw the reader's attention to the varying sample size (set out on the y axis of each chart) when considering differences between boys and girls.

Figure 6. Numeracy Learning Progress for Grade 3 Province B Learners, by Gender



Groups of both girls and boys in Grade 3 in Province B have seen a reverse in their attainment since the start of distance learning. In particular, see Level 3 (lime) learners from timepoint 1 to 2 to 3; and Level 2-4 learners from timepoint 2 to 3. Of note, we see girls regressing from timepoint 2 on (after April 2020), which may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

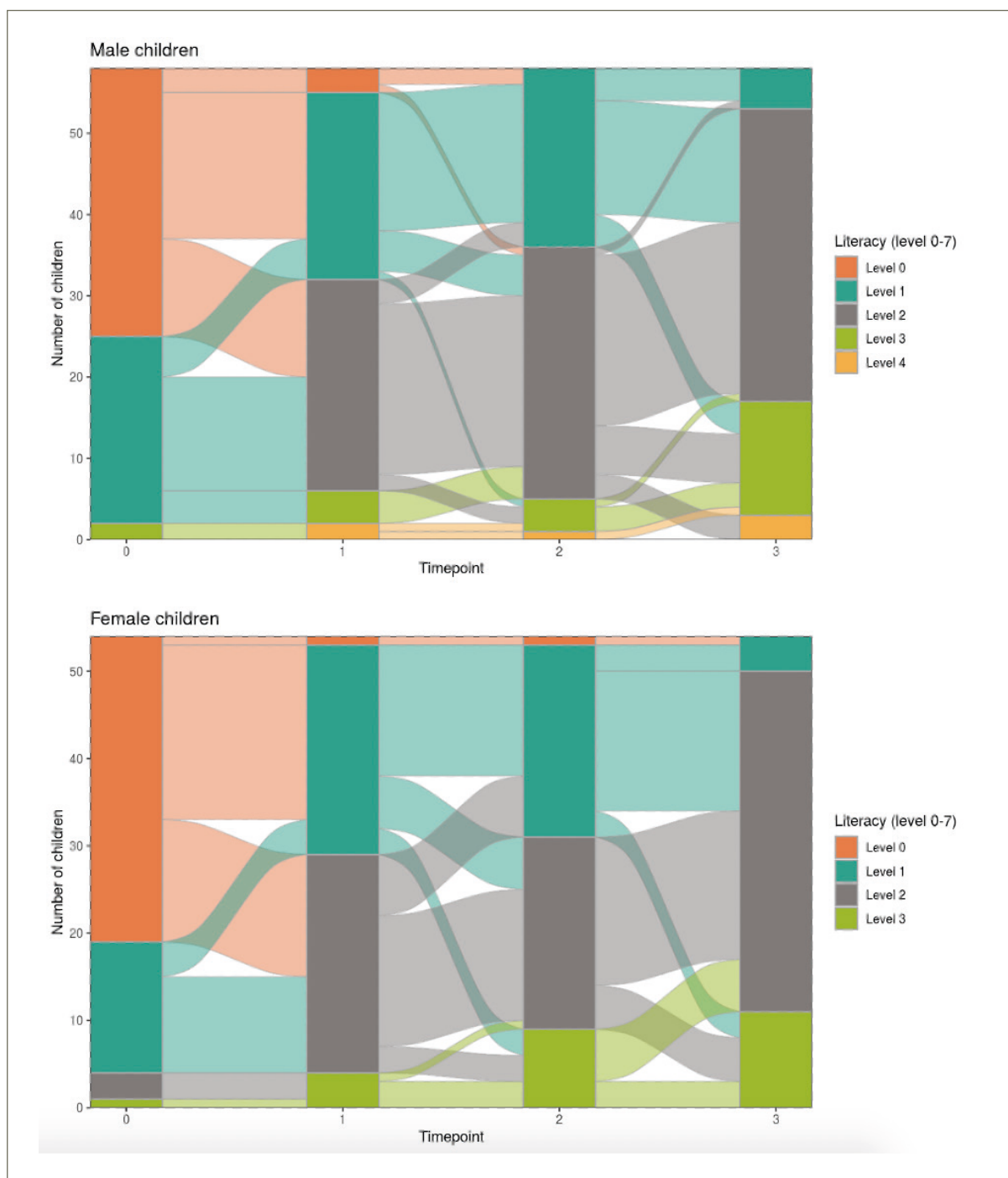
Figure 7. Numeracy Learning Progress for Grade 4 Province B Learners, by Gender



The data indicates Grade 4 learners do not seem to have been affected as much as Grade 3 learners by distance learning, but girls seem to have regressed significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, more girls in Grade 4 have regressed than progressed since the COVID-19 pandemic (from timepoint 2 to 3).

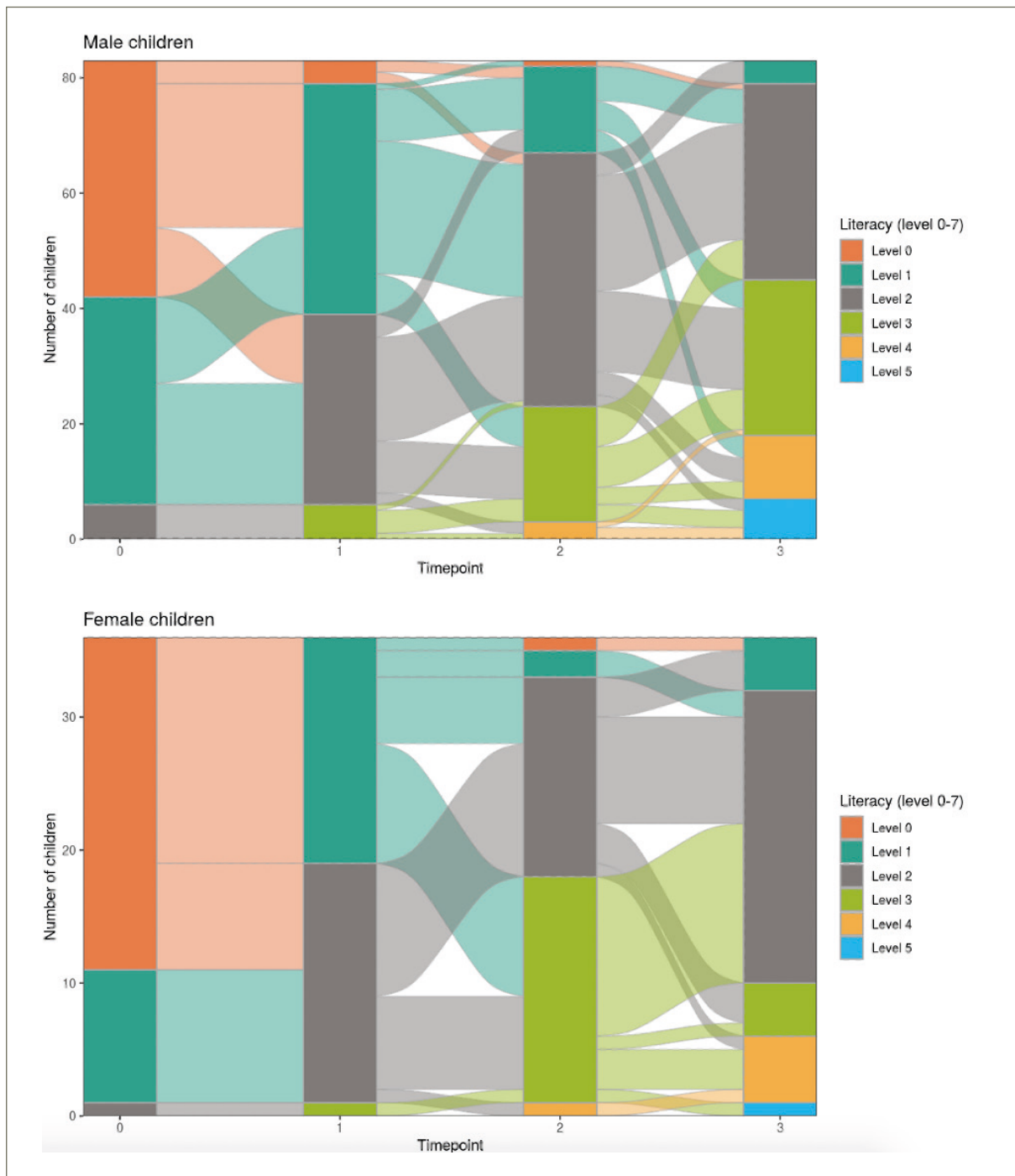


Figure 8. Literacy Learning Progression for Grade 3 Province B Learners, by Gender



The data above indicates that many Grade 3 girls and boys in Province B have regressed in their literacy learning since the start of distance learning. Boys in Levels 2-3 regressed from timepoint 1 (January 2020) to 2 (April 2020) and again to 3 (September 2020). The same occurred for girls, suggesting that distance learning has affected all learners negatively. It does seem that girls may have been more affected, as the portion of learners regressing is larger than that of boys. This may have to do with the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative effects on girls.

Figure 9. Literacy Learning Progress for Grade 4 Province B Learners, by Gender



The data above illustrates that Grade 4 girls in Province B started to regress in their learning from timepoint 2 (April 2020) to timepoint 3 (September 2020), to the point that now boys are reaching higher literacy levels than girls. Girls at Level 3 regressed significantly from timepoint 2 to 3, adding to the evidence that they have been affected negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Disclaimer

This document has been redacted to protect the individuals involved in the Syria Education Programme. All names of people and locations have either been altered or removed, as has any information that may identify people or locations.



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