



SEA-PLM 2024

Main Regional Report Summary

Children's learning in 6
Southeast Asian countries
1st Edition

Introduction

The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) is a regional, large-scale learning assessment and capacity-building programme, aimed at generating comparable data on Grade 5 students' foundational learning outcomes. It was launched by the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat and the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (UNICEF EAPRO) to improve regional capacity to measure learning outcomes, use data, and advance regional peer exchange on foundational learning. Launched formally in 2014, the first cycle of SEA-PLM, the 2019 cycle, included six countries: Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. The ensuing SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report and subsequent secondary reports have been widely used to advance foundational learning policies and practices in the region.

The successful completion of the 2024 cycle has demonstrated the successful integration of SEA-PLM into regional and national accountability mechanisms on foundational learning and the continued commitment of Ministries of Education and an increased number of partners to advance learning for all children in Southeast Asia.

The 2024 Main Regional Report provides a comprehensive picture of the reading and mathematics proficiencies of Grade 5 students in the same six participating countries. The learning data is complemented by student, teacher, and school-level questionnaires; the 2024 cycle also introduced system-level questionnaires designed to capture the basic education contexts, policies, and programmes that describe the foundational learning systems across the participating countries. The report presents not only the learning levels in 2024, but also seeks to examine how learning trajectories have changed since 2019. Where do we see improvements? Where are children still being left behind? This 2024 report draws attention to some of the continued barriers and lasting inequalities observed in the region, particularly for the most disadvantaged populations, amidst polycrisis and ongoing external shocks facing education systems.

We hope that this regional report, complemented by upcoming national reports developed and released by respective Ministries of Education and future thematic secondary reports, will provide meaningful insights into the learning outcomes of children at the end of primary education in Southeast Asia. The data can confirm priorities, support resource allocation, and identify areas for policy, curriculum and teacher training reforms, amongst other things. SEA-PLM seeks to drive evidence-based decision-making and support the identification and implementation of the most cost-effective policies and practices, especially in an increasingly resource-constrained and volatile global environment.

The SEAMEO Secretariat and UNICEF will continue to support Ministries of Education in their efforts in advancing foundational learning, ensuring that each child is able to enjoy their fundamental right to a quality education. We invite more partners and stakeholders to join in these efforts.

The SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat is co-managed by the SEAMEO Secretariat and UNICEF EAPRO

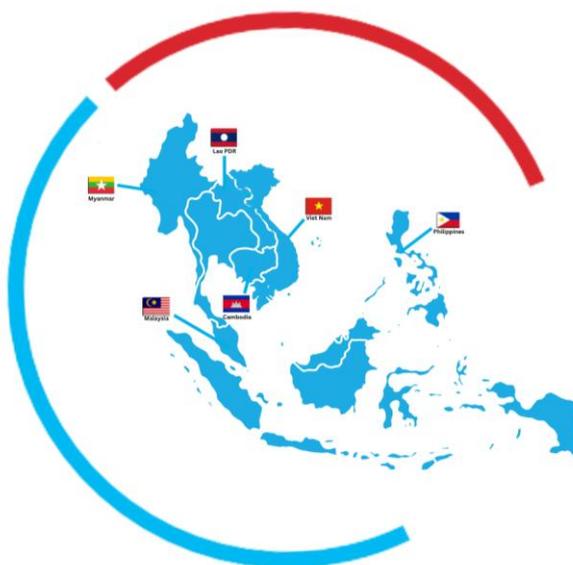
Summary of the 2024 Regional Report

Chapter 1: Primary Education in Southeast Asia – Contexts, Challenges and Systemic Insights

SEA-PLM is a regional assessment and capacity-building programme, now in its second cycle, covering Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Since 2019, the region has faced major shocks: COVID-19, climate change, demographic shifts, declining education budgets, political instabilities, and rapid digital transformation, including the emergence of AI. Understanding the extent and impacts of the ongoing polycrisis is critical to interpreting how post-COVID disruptions have shaped learning outcomes across the region.

Education is the fundamental right of every child. Governments across the region have implemented, in varying degrees and capacities, different policies, programmes, and reforms to address persistent challenges in achieving equitable access and quality, with continued disparities in resources, learning outcomes, and system resilience. Major policy reforms have been introduced since 2019, including learning recovery, digital initiatives, climate adaptation, curriculum changes, and the implementation of remedial and catch-up programs.

Figure 1.1: Map of SEA-PLM 2024 participating countries



Important disclaimer: The Minister of Education of Timor-Leste informed the SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat that Timor-Leste concluded it is best not to include Timor-Leste in the SEA-PLM 2024 Main Regional Report for internal reasons in late November 2025. In adherence with the SEA-PLM technical standards, this exclusion removes all of Timor-Leste’s data from the public domain; it will not be made publicly available and will not be used for reporting, research, or other purposes by any parties. The SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat will not endorse or recognize any references to the collected SEA-PLM 2024 data in Timor-Leste.

Chapter 2: Design, Methodology, and Implementation Features

SEA-PLM is underpinned by a rigorous methodology informed by best practices and standards adopted from the international large-scale assessment (ILSA) community. The 2024 survey was conducted in six countries, targeting a representative sample of Grade 5 students in each country. Instruments included reading and mathematics tests, and contextual questionnaires for students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. The survey was administered in the official national languages of instruction, with careful adaptation to local contexts and rigorous quality assurance of translated materials. Data collection was staggered to align with national school calendars. Despite challenges such as declining enrolment and COVID-19 disruptions, high participation rates and robust sampling were achieved, ensuring reliable, comparable results across countries and cycles.

Table 2.1: SEA-PLM 2024 main survey operation period by country, sorted by date

Country	Main survey data-collection period	School year period
Batch 1 – Viet Nam	22–27 April 2024	September 2023 to May 2024
Batch 1 – Philippines	22 April – 10 May 2024	July 2023 to June 2024
Batch 1 – Lao PDR	13–17 May 2024	September 2023 to July 2024
Batch 2 – Cambodia	22–24 August 2024	January 2023 to September 2024
Batch 2 – Timor-Leste [^]	30 September – 6 November 2024	January 2023 to December 2024
Batch 2 – Malaysia	7 October – 7 November 2024	January 2024 to November 2024
Batch 2 – Myanmar	29 November 2024	November 2023 to December 2024

[^]In accordance with the decision by the Minister of Timor-Leste to not include Timor-Leste’s data in the 2024 SEA-PLM Main Regional Report, no results from Timor-Leste are included in this report.

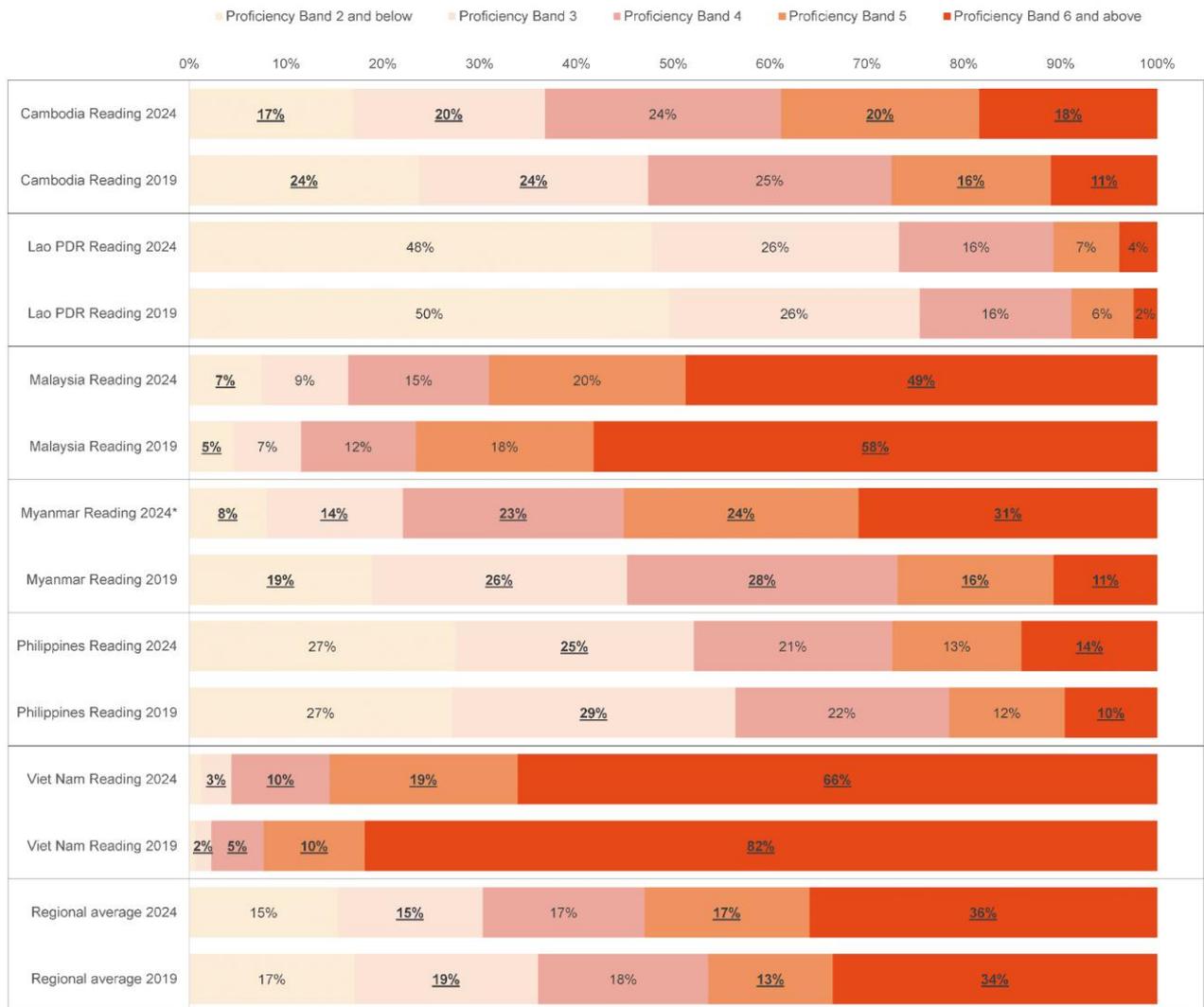
Chapter 3: Children’s Proficiency in Reading and Mathematics

The SEA-PLM 2024 results confirm the continued learning crisis in the region. While regional averages in reading showed little or no progress, there was modest improvement in mathematics. SEA-PLM proficiency scales allow for nuanced reporting of student achievement and a deep insight into who is learning and who is not.

In 2024, SEA-PLM changed its benchmark against the Sustainable Development Goal indicator on learning at the end of primary education, adopting Band 5 as the new cut-off point (a change from Band 6 in 2019) within the SEA-PLM proficiency scales in reading and mathematics. Consequently, any comparison with the 2019 benchmarks uses the updated Band 5 threshold to ensure consistency. Only one in two students (53 per cent) reached this minimum proficiency level in reading; two in three (67 per cent) reached it in mathematics, an improvement from 2019 (from 47 per cent and 56 per cent respectively). However, looking beyond minimum levels at national curriculum expectations, the highest proficiency levels (Band 6+) were reached by 36 per cent in reading, and 52 per cent in mathematics. Simultaneously, 15 per cent of students remain at very low proficiency in reading; 9 per cent in mathematics. The wide distribution across proficiency bands points to systemic issues in equity, access, and quality of recovery from post-pandemic disruptions and other external shocks. These gaps highlight persistent challenges in foundational learning.



Figure 3.3: Percentage of Grade 5 children in each reading proficiency band, by country and survey year



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

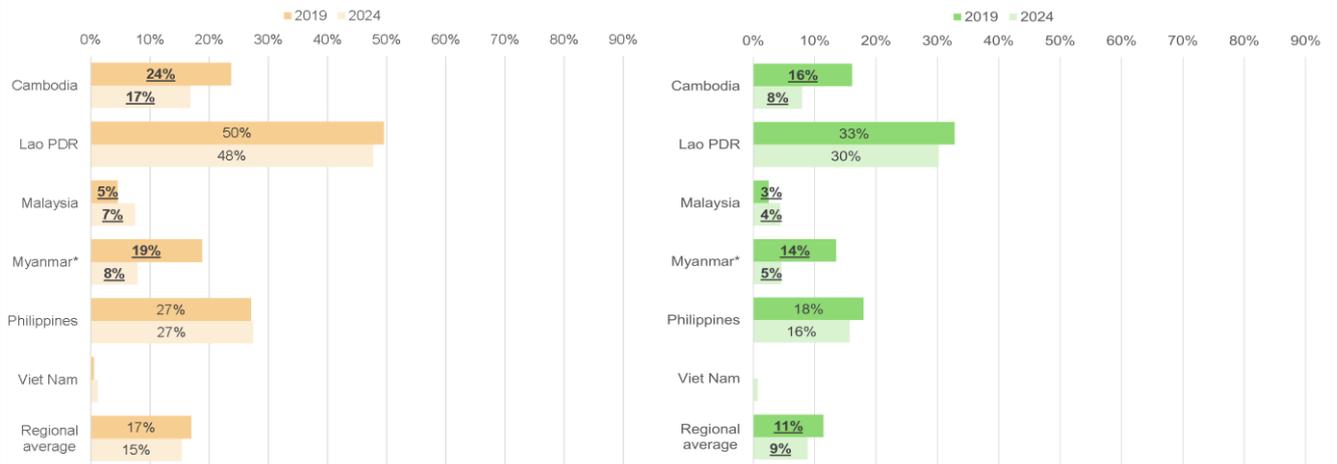
Figure 3.4: Percentage of Grade 5 children in each mathematics proficiency band, by country and survey year



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Figure 3.5: Percentage of Grade 5 children considered to have very low proficiency in reading, and change over time

Figure 3.6: Percentage of Grade 5 children considered to have very low proficiency in mathematics, and change over time



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Note: Statistically significant percentage changes observed between 2019 and 2024 are underlined and indicated in bold in the 2019 and 2024 bars. Percentages under 1 per cent are not indicated.

Figure 3.10: 2024 and 2019 percentage of Grade 5 students performing at or above SDG 4.1.1.b 'end of primary' in reading

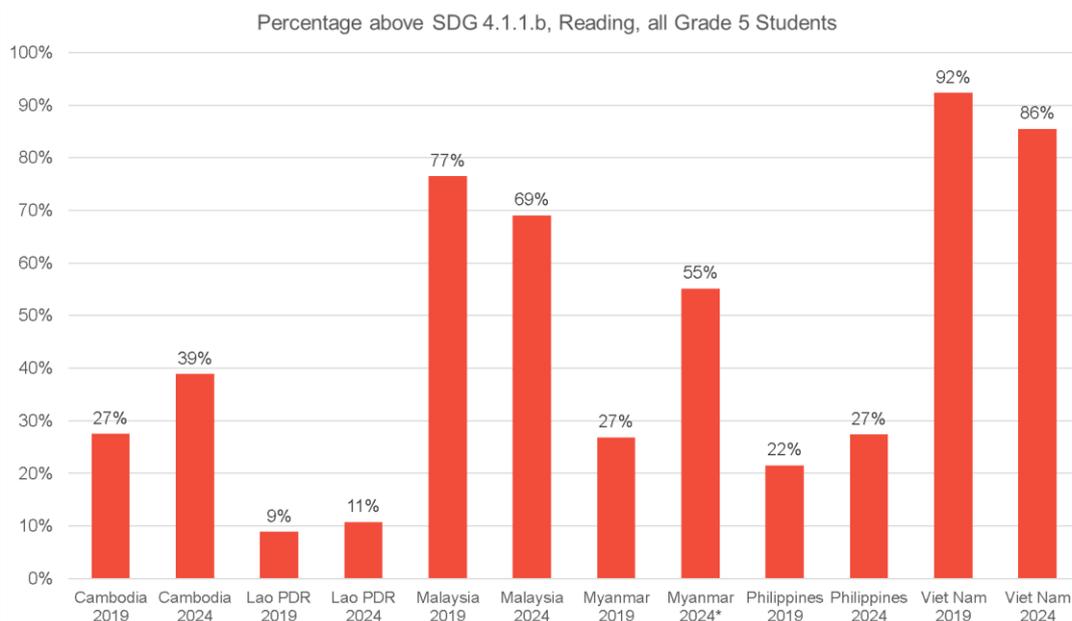
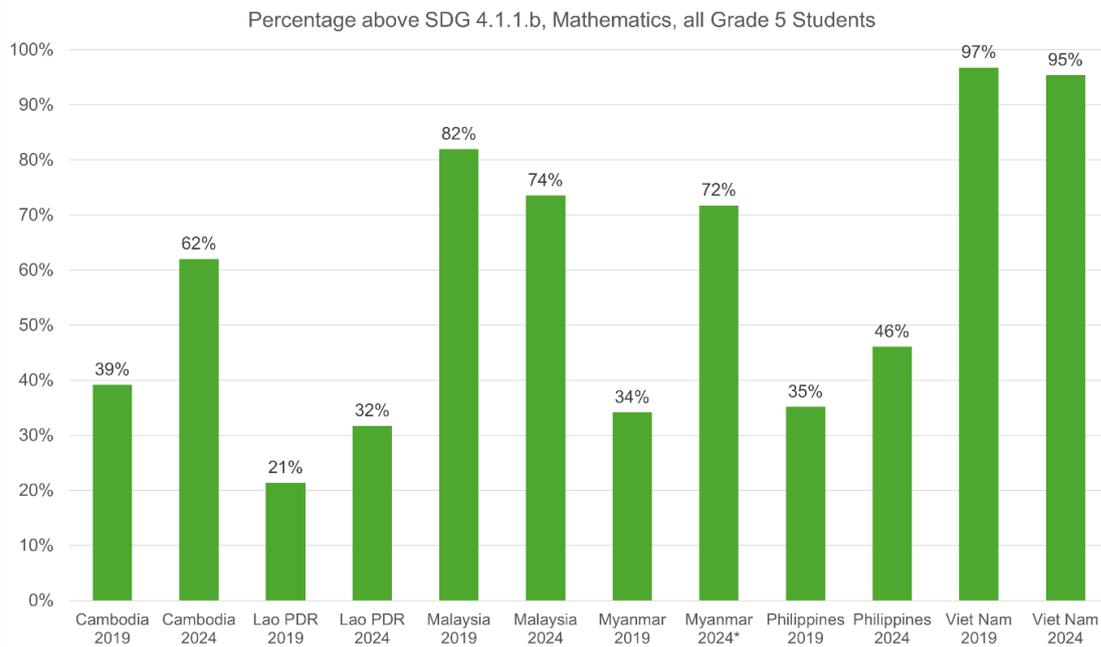


Figure 3.11: 2024 and 2019 percentage of Grade 5 students performing at or above SDG 4.1.1b 'end of primary' in mathematics



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Note: Not all differences have been statistically tested at the 95% confidence level. These values will be reported in an upcoming secondary research piece on SEA-PLM and the SDGs.

Chapter 4: Equity and Learning Opportunities in Primary Education

Learning outcomes are shaped by numerous different factors, ranging from student backgrounds and behaviours to teachers' capacity and empowerment, to the actual learning environment in schools. SEA-PLM 2024 shows that despite overall improvements in access to primary education, persistent inequities continue to influence children's learning trajectories by the end of Grade 5.

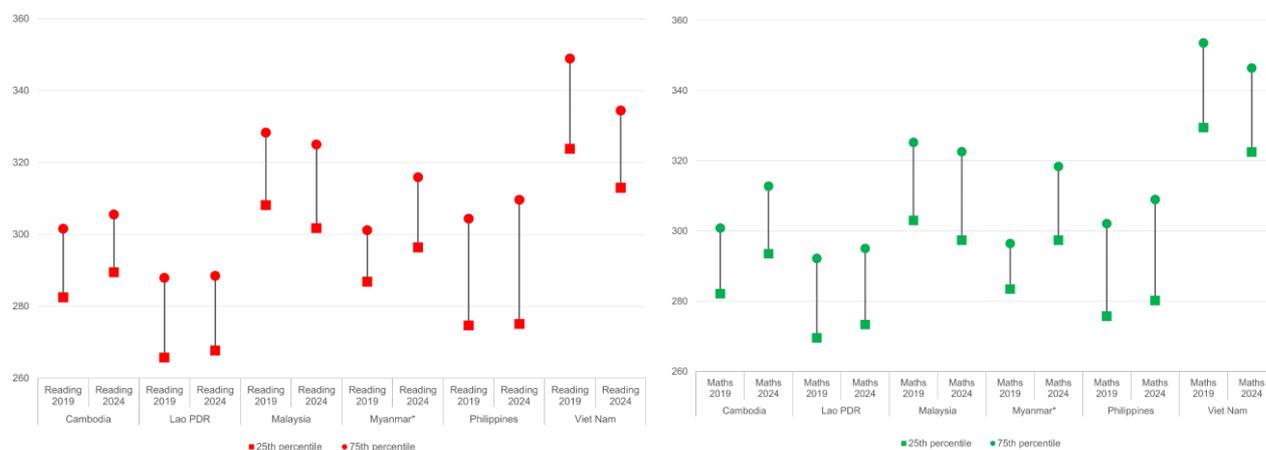
At the student level, socioeconomic status (SES) remains the strongest predictor of achievement, with gaps equivalent to up to two years of schooling. Systemic barriers continue to lead to different learning trajectories for boys and girls, resulting in persistent gender gaps: girls outperform boys in reading, while mathematics differences are smaller and sometimes reversed. The results also highlight the importance of language alignment between home and school, with closer alignment linked to higher learning outcomes, especially in reading.

Teachers remain central to the improvement of foundational learning. There is an improvement in teacher qualifications, but variations in pre-service education, specialization, and exposure to in-service training can be observed. Teacher preparedness is still limited in several countries. Many teachers reported that many students struggle with lack of basic skills, further complicating management of classroom learning.

When considering the learning environment itself, school factors—urban/rural location, public/private status, class size, resource availability, and teacher qualifications—further shape outcomes. School directors report that bullying, violence, and resource shortages remain prevalent, affecting well-being and achievement. While SEA-PLM cannot conclusively determine the impact of COVID-19 closures on learning outcomes, preliminary patterns suggest that the duration of school closures alone did not have a major effect on students' scores. This underscores the importance of ensuring high-quality learning continuity through flexible, appropriate, and effective delivery modalities

Figure 4.1: Differences in average reading by lowest and higher socioeconomic status, by country and survey (red)

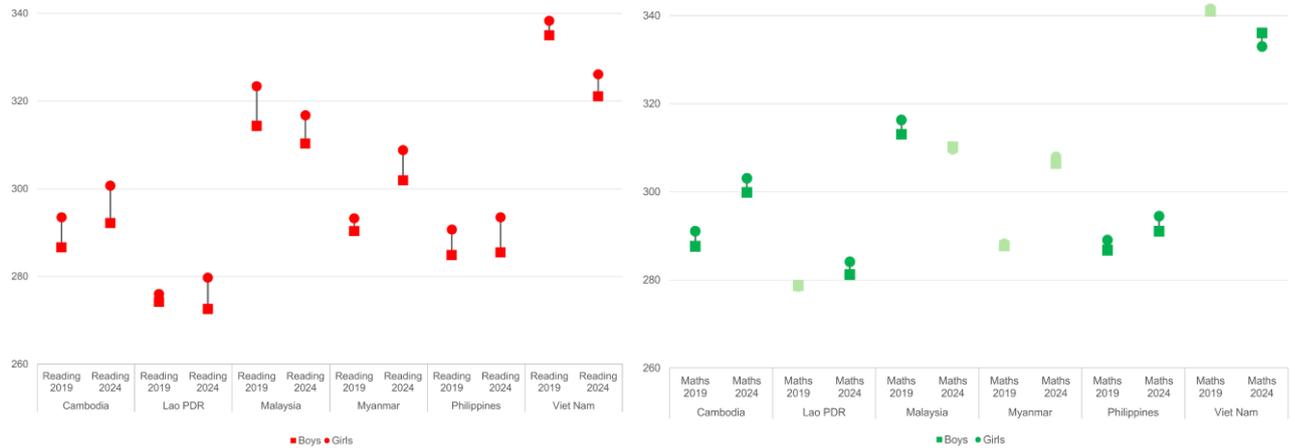
Figure 4.2: Differences in average mathematics by lowest and higher socioeconomic status, by country and survey (green)



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Figure 4.5: Differences in average reading by gender, country and survey cycle (red)

Figure 4.6: Differences in average mathematics by gender, country and survey cycle (green)

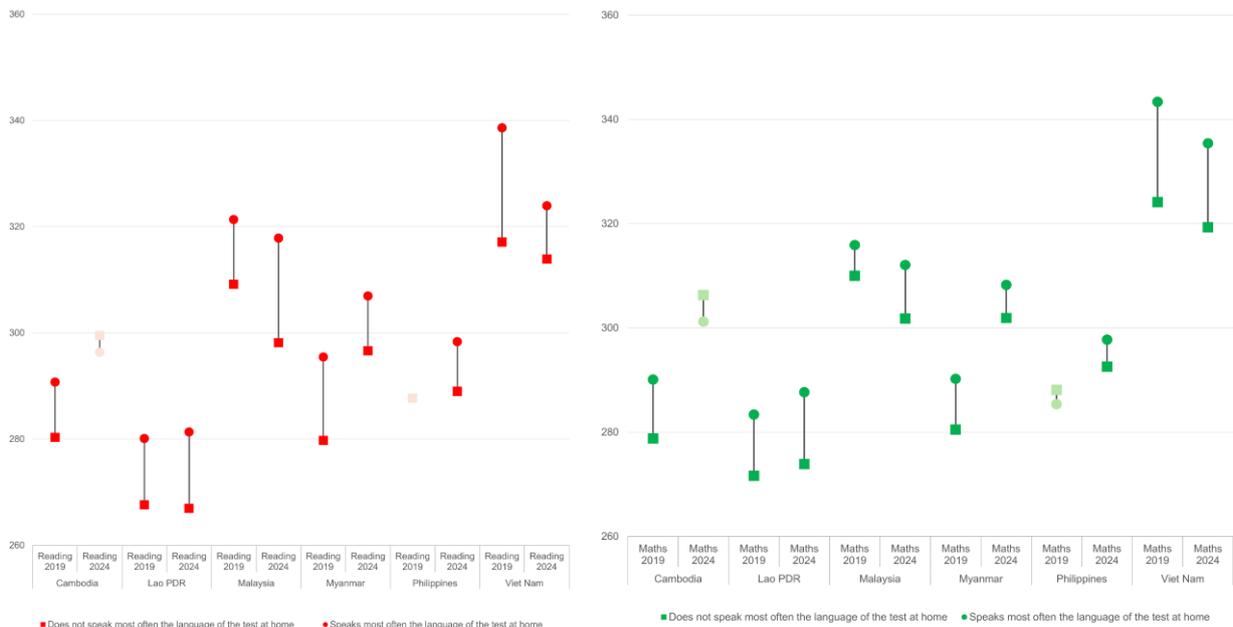


* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates in Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Note: Markers in light colour indicate that mean differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 4.22: Differences in average reading scores by language practices at home versus at school, by country and survey cycle (red)

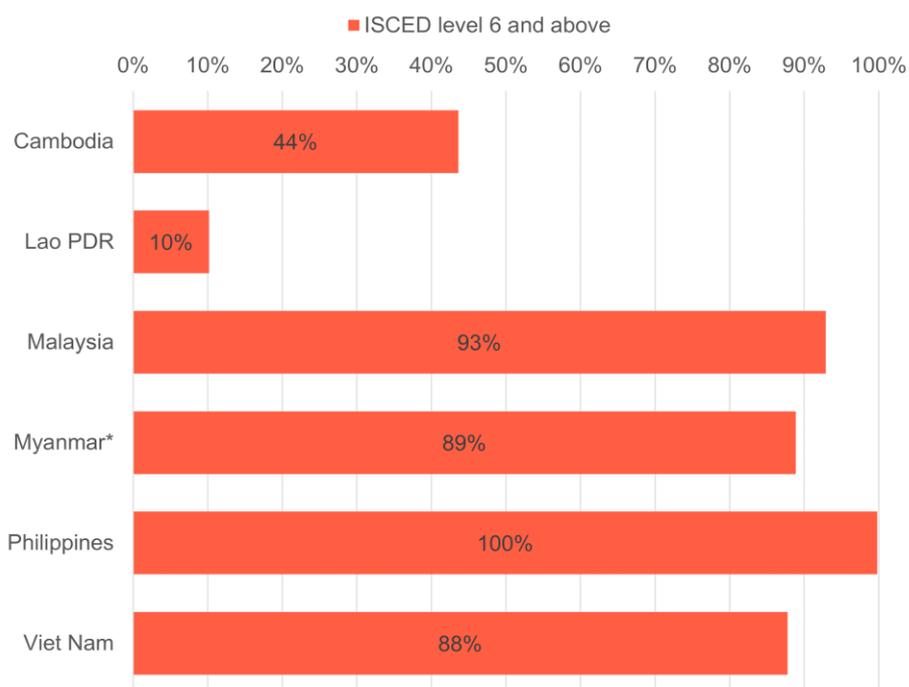
Figure 4.23: Differences in average mathematics scores by language practices at home versus at school, by country and survey cycle (green)



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates in Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

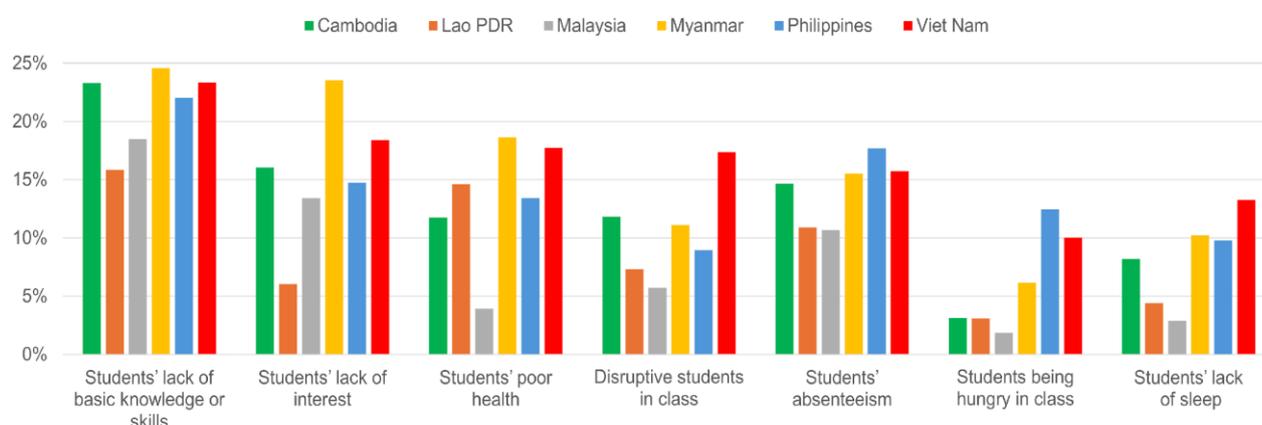
Note: Markers in light colour indicate that mean differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 4.48: Percentage of Grade 5 students by whether teacher in charge of reading lessons in the language of the SEA-PLM 2024 test had reached university or above as the highest level of education upon entry into the profession



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Figure 4.52: Percentage of Grade 5 students facing a specific issue ('to a large extent' according to their teachers) in 2024



Chapter 5: Key insights and policy considerations from SEA-PLM 2024

SEA-PLM provides the region with critical insights into the current status of learning in the region. Ten key insights and policy considerations were drawn from the data, to be complemented and further developed.

1. Only half of the children meet minimum proficiency levels in reading; in mathematics, one third achieve this level. There is an urgent need to increase investment in foundational learning, prioritizing the most disadvantaged learners and schools.
2. A degree of stability in learning outcomes has been achieved despite significant external shocks since 2019. Future-looking action and continued investment in building system resilience will be needed to prepare students and schools to face diverse shocks.
3. The pace of improvement among students at the very low proficiency levels remains slow. Targeted strategies and accelerated support for the lowest performers will be needed to close the gap in learning outcomes.
4. Education systems continue to demonstrate barriers to learning that differentially affect students, resulting in different learning trajectories for boys and girls across the region and within countries. Greater efforts in building inclusive and gender-responsive systems will be needed to support all learners to reach their full potential.
5. Inequalities in learning outcomes continue to be driven by the socioeconomic status (SES) of the children. Greater efforts will be needed to address socioeconomic inequities and to understand the multiple factors shaping and impeding learning.
6. Early learning opportunities and school resources significantly boost student performance, but unequal access, driven by socioeconomic differences, limit these benefits. Investing in equity-focused interventions, such as quality ECE, teacher support and learning environments, will be needed to narrow achievement gaps.
7. Language alignment boosts learning and students generally perform better when their home language matches the test language. Aligning language policies with language needs will support children in their learning journeys.
8. Teacher qualifications have improved, but persistent gaps in teacher preparedness continue to be observed. There is a need to further focus on strengthening teacher capacity beyond qualifications, with a focus on differentiated learning, inclusive pedagogy, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT).
9. The region is witnessing declining investment in education and a closing demographic window of opportunity. Education systems will need to increase equality and efficiency to ensure continued national development.
10. The use of data for evidence-based decision-making is still nascent. Further focus on monitoring progress and understanding and scaling up what works will strengthen data-driven policymaking and ensure the efficacy of investments.

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Conclusion

*SEA-PLM's goal is that by 2030, countries in the region make **measurable progress** towards equitable foundational learning, narrowing equity gaps, ensuring that every child has a fair chance to learn.*

The region has made considerable investment in foundational learning, and progress is starting to be visible. This will need to be sustained for the next generations of learners.

SEA-PLM 2029 represents not just the next cycle of assessment but also a chance to reimagine the role of data in driving educational transformation across Southeast Asia. The journey from 2019 to 2024 has shown that commitments at the policy level must be matched by effective implementation, a stronger equity focus, and the deeper use of evidence.

In this vision, SEA-PLM is not only an assessment but also a regional driver of change, strengthening evidence use, advancing accountability, and uniting Southeast Asian countries around a shared commitment: that no child in the region should be denied the chance to learn, thrive, and contribute to their society.

Acknowledgements and thanks

The successful accomplishment of the SEA-PLM 2024 cycle was only possible through the strong collaboration with the Ministries of Education in the SEA-PLM participating countries, and the commitment of all Southeast Asian countries to foundational learning. Special thanks are given to the SEA-PLM national teams of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam, led by the SEA-PLM High Officials, National Project Managers, and National Technical Team Members, and the UNICEF Country Office Education colleagues in the six countries providing invaluable technical and financial support.

SEA-PLM would not have been possible without the unwavering support of our key regional and global partners. The ASEAN Secretariat - Education Youth and Sports Division, the Republic of Korea through the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, and the United Kingdom Foreign, Development and Cooperation Office through the ASEAN-UK Supporting the Advancement of Girls Education program, co-led by the British Council and SEAMEO Secretariat. UNICEF would also like to extend special thanks to the governments and private sector partners providing funds to the global education thematic fund, as well as the UNICEF National Committees for Austria, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and the United Kingdom for their continuous support to the children of Southeast Asia through UNICEF.

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The SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat extends its appreciation and thanks to all Ministry officials, partners, experts, collaborators, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students who have been part of the SEA-PLM 2024 cycle. This regional report is a true testament to the spirit of collaboration and cooperation to improve learning for the children of the region.





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 **SEA-PLM**
Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics



**Southeast Asian
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