



Global Dialogue 2021

Promising practices for a post-pandemic renewal of learning: lessons from Global Dialogue 2021

Background

Global Dialogue 2021, '**Practical steps to a post-pandemic renewal of learning**' – the first virtual edition of this event – brought together leading experts from across the world for important discussions on the future of learning after the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. The event, hosted by Education Development Trust, facilitated discussion among global experts on the design of education interventions which seek to make the tumultuous events of the past 18 months less damaging to the futures of children and young people around the world.

In addition to a plenary session examining key issues, the event included three panel sessions on effective teachers, home and community support of learning, and girls' education and inclusion. It was specifically designed to give participants the opportunity to share new insights and hypotheses with an emphasis on identifying practical approaches and potential collaborations to help improve the future prospects of young people as we emerge from this pandemic.

While the discussions covered diverse and distinct topics, several broad themes emerged from across the dialogue. In this follow-up report, we draw on the rich discussions to develop our thinking on some of the key ways in which we may be able to improve education outcomes around the world as we look towards long-term education recovery.

The importance of evidence and data in informing interventions and solution design

Perhaps one of the most fundamental points highlighted by Global Dialogue – and one which sits at the heart of our own work at Education Development Trust – is the importance of ensuring that any interventions are based on sound evidence of what works. This is true both for measures both short-term (for example, for catch-up programmes and remedial education) and longer-term (such as teacher professional development and keeping the most vulnerable students in school). Programmes and interventions will be most effective when they are based on evidence of effective practice – so decision-makers must take careful stock of the evidence that exists in judiciously considering programming options.



In some cases, there is already a significant evidence base as to what works. For example, if we consider girls' education, there is already substantial evidence of which practices can be most effective in increasing girls' participation in school:

- eliminating school fees;
- providing school feeding programmes; and
- building additional schools.

There is also substantial evidence of what works in teacher development, from the existing evidence base on adult professional learning. However, the pandemic itself has generated a wealth of new evidence with real potential to teach us a lot about the successes – and failures – of interventions, although this has been highly dependent on the collection of quality data for targeted approaches.

Such data can ultimately make meaningful and important contributions not only at the classroom level, but also to wider policy, for example, helping to ensure a necessary focus on the most marginalised. It is therefore critically important for policymakers to understand this in specific contexts and collect data accordingly. From there, they can design targeted interventions that actually meet the needs of affected groups, creating an evidence-driven approach to education reform.

Such an approach relies first on the synthesis of high-quality, research-based evidence. Quantitative research, notably randomised control trials, has seen a great increase in recent decades, and meta-analyses to synthesise these findings are becoming more common as a result, increasing the evidence base available. However, simply applying insights from global research is unlikely to be effective without proper contextualisation and modifications for specific systems or localities. Interventions should combine global insights with a thorough understanding of local realities, risks and barriers to success.

Decision-makers therefore need plentiful information from their own education contexts, with system-level infrastructure for gathering and analysing data on student outcomes. Student data collected through Educational Management Information Systems (which almost all countries have) can provide policymakers with additional evidence to sit alongside research-based insights. Such granular data – especially where it is disaggregated by gender, age, location, and other demographic factors – can be used to target resources and professional development according to where there is most need, to monitor the success of interventions, to ensure accountability and to support adaptive programming.

The need for mechanisms for participation and problem-solving

Barriers to learning renewal may, in some cases, be best addressed by collaborations across and between communities and sectors, and the creation of mechanisms for these actors and sectors to participate and solve



problems. Such participation and collaboration may be particularly valuable in enhancing the learning agenda for the most marginalised. For example, leveraging collaboration between the education, health, social and private sectors can help address barriers to girls' participation in education.

That said, collaboration and participation are valuable tools in other areas too. For example, collaborative communities of teachers (often referred to as communities of practice) hold real potential to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes as teachers share their knowledge and experiences with one another. Given their creativity, experience and understanding of local contexts, collaborative networks of teachers sharing good practice (such as *Comunidad Atenea* in **Argentina**) may be one of the most powerful resources available to strengthen teaching and learning outcomes.

However, key to enabling such collaboration is creating or harnessing the appropriate mechanisms to allow different stakeholders and actors within (and indeed outside) an education system to participate and solve problems. This is especially important when we consider teacher innovation and teacher leadership, especially in systems which have traditionally followed strict hierarchies. Teachers will be absolutely critical to the recovery process from the Covid-19 pandemic, to re-engaging learners and to overcoming the pre-existing learning crisis. In these circumstances, we must consider how innovation and leadership among teachers can be encouraged, supported and incentivised, as well as how these qualities correspond to the training that teachers receive. This will be all the more important in light of the additional burdens – from catch-up programmes to socioemotional support – that are likely to be placed on teachers in the wake of school closures, for which many teachers across the globe are currently unprepared. Teacher participation in decisions as to how to best prepare them for these additional responsibilities may prove invaluable in their success.

One key element of creating mechanisms for participation – especially in the context of the pandemic recovery, where many countries are likely to continue encouraging social distancing measures – is through the flexible use of technology. The potential of technology for teaching and learning has perhaps never been clearer than through this pandemic, but the challenges, especially relating to equity and mismatched expectations regarding its use, have never been more apparent either. It is increasingly clear that technology – particularly digital technology – is not a silver bullet, and to realise its potential, we must first and foremost consider context-appropriate solutions from a 'spectrum of technology'. Within this, we must not undervalue low-tech options, such as radio or messaging services, which have reached millions of children with remote lessons throughout periods of school closure. Of course, there are settings in which high-tech options, such as video calls and virtual classrooms, are available and more suitable, but in many places the potential for successful use of technology for education and participation will rely on adaptability – not only to local contexts and infrastructures, but also at the level of individual communities, schools, teachers and pupil households. To enable such adaptability, strong data and needs assessments will be required, and multiple modality tools which can easily adapt to different community or learner needs may prove highly valuable. There have, for example, been applications of multiple-modality uses of technology in successful back-to-school campaigns – and the



success of these measures is arguably in that they are able to meet students and communities where they are and adapt to their specific contexts.

Of course, the use of technological tools (for both participation and teaching) will require training and development for teachers and school leaders, and digital literacy will be an increasingly important skill for teachers across the world. Interestingly, however, these tools may in themselves help to provide a means of providing some of this support, as the use of technology has proven to be an effective means of providing training and development activities for teachers. This is not only through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, but also through lower-tech avenues. There have been successful examples in **Rwanda** and **Lebanon**, among other places, of providing teachers with professional development and support through phone calls, SMS and WhatsApp. Again, the best platforms for these purposes are likely to be heavily context-dependent, and this will need to be a consideration that is given careful attention by leaders and decision-makers.

Harnessing community and parental engagement

Finally, it is increasingly clear that communities can – and should – be effectively harnessed to improve education outcomes for pupils in the wake of the pandemic and in the longer term. Local community and parental engagement appears to have real potential to effect positive change. For instance, remote learning initiatives are notably more effective with caregiver or community support for learners, and community-led back-to-school campaigns have proven to be effective. In **Rwanda**, for instance, community-driven back-to-school campaigns have been used, especially targeted at vulnerable children. As a result, 95% of learners had returned to school by January 2021.

The formal and intentional inclusion of family and community in education efforts is an exciting area for potential development – one which has not previously been accepted as a natural component of education delivery, but has been confined to special projects or part of multi-sectoral responses to specific problems. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has in many places served to strengthen relationships between schools, families and communities. In Himachal Pradesh, **India**, for example, 92% of parents have engaged with their children's teachers using WhatsApp during the crisis, while in **Ethiopia**, university students have assisted remote learning efforts in local communities. Such strengthened relationships may hold promise for future education initiatives and a greater acceptance of parental and community roles in education delivery. There may even be potential for more citizen-led assessments, which could be built on to understand children's remedial support needs.

The pandemic has also strengthened evidence on the role of caregivers in students' engagement with learning. During school closures, students in many countries engaged more in education activities when their parents were involved: in **Mongolia**, almost three-quarters of children engaged in distance learning required a caregiver to support their educational activities; while in **Kenya**, a greater number of children accessed educational resources from their parents than via the radio, WhatsApp or the national online learning repository. Meanwhile,



in **Ghana**, a lack of adult supervision was the most commonly cited reason for which children were not spending more time on education during school closures.

Furthermore, where parental support is (for practical reasons or otherwise) limited, community-centred initiatives have real potential to help vulnerable students, and especially girls. For example, in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) areas of **Kenya** during Covid-19 school closures, a recent study found that community-based Reading Clubs offered a structured and supported opportunity for girls to meet and learn together, accessing the government-provided radio lessons and other educational materials provided by the WWW programme, in a peer learning environment.¹ Girls who attended reading camps scored higher, on average, in both reading and mathematics assessments compared to their peers who did not attend. Learning in these groups provided a particularly supportive environment for girls who did not have literate members of their household available to support them with their studies.

The presence of community-based initiatives may also help to address some gender barriers to education access, as some caregivers will be reassured that their daughters will be safe in a structured and supervised environment when they are not at home or in school. For instance, in most cases, parents or caregivers were happy to let girls attend reading camps as they provided a structured environment that ensured girls were safe. Holding the reading camps in a location that was close to home and agreed with caregivers in advance was essential to ensuring girls could attend, while the presence of camp mentors from the community and community health volunteers eased caregivers' concerns for their daughters' safety.

The experience of the pandemic has in many places demonstrated the real potential for community and parental roles in education engagement. While these measures have developed in an emergency context, the involvement of caregivers and communities in education delivery may be incredibly useful in the post-pandemic recovery period, as well as in the longer term. However, the power of these initiatives needs to be effectively harnessed and genuine partnerships between schools, homes and communities need to be created.

There may be a place for specific policies or national initiatives in this process, but crucially, capacity building will be required for teachers and school leaders, to give them the skills for effectively harnessing parental and community engagement. It will also be necessary to build capacity and role clarity for parents, caregivers and community members to ensure maximum benefit from these new relationships, especially where caregivers lack confidence in supporting their children due to their own educational background (or potential lack thereof). In these circumstances, peer support within communities can be especially helpful, potentially even extending to parent or caregiver communities of practice. In any case, expectations of parents' roles in education need to be more clearly defined by schools and school systems to enable effective and context-appropriate collaboration. Critically, this should enable sharing, rather than shifting, of responsibility between schools, families and communities.

1 Amenity, D., Fitzpatrick, R., Njeri, E., Naylor, R., and Riggall, A. (2021) The power of girls' reading camps: Exploring the impact of radio lessons, peer learning and targeted paper-based resources on girls' remote learning in Kenya (<https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/P8IAN448>), EdTech Hub



There clearly remains much to be done to enable learning recovery – or indeed renewal – in the wake of school closures around the world. The need for evidence, data, problem-solving and widening participation in education delivery appears abundantly clear, but ensuring that such solutions are applied with due consideration of – and adaptation for – local needs and contexts will be critical to their success. Adaptive approaches which apply evidence of what works in all of these areas, from data collection to teacher and parental capacity building, will need to be combined with local nuance to best support both teachers and learners as we go through this period of learning recovery, both now and for the longer term.