Leading Educational Change During a Pandemic

Reflections of Hope and Possibility

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Educational Change and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections of hope and possibility

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The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the global education landscape. On the surface, the pandemic constrained the opportunities for many students to learn during the period through which educational institutions were not able to operate in person because the social distancing measures that were adopted to contain the spread of the virus. But the educational consequences of the pandemic are considerably deeper and their impact far reaching. As the pandemic continues, and until such a time when widespread distribution of vaccines produces herd immunity, opportunities to learn around the world have been, and will continue to be, impacted as follows:

a) Considerably less structured learning time. During a very long period, ongoing in much of the world, schools either shut down operations, or created alternative forms of education delivery with severe limitations in the amount of learning time they engaged students, and with vast heterogeneity in how effectively they reached students from different socio-economic circumstances. Structured learning time was more constrained for disadvantaged students because alternative delivery systems were less effective in reaching them.

b) Diminished home support for studying for those students whose families faced negative health or economic impact from the pandemic, leading to food insecurity and other pressing challenges. These impacts were direct and indirect. Direct impacts include those experienced by the students or direct family members who were infected, whose mental health was compromised, or who lost income and security because of the pandemic. Indirect impacts resulted when those directly impacted where part of the extended family or social circle of the learner, a relative, a classmate, a

c) member of the community or neighborhood. These impacts translated into anxiety and stress for learners, sometimes in food insecurity, and in pressures for them to make greater contributions to the livelihood of their families, further diminishing their time to study and their ability to focus on their studies.

d) Diminished disposition for learning as students and their families, and diminished disposition for teaching as teachers and their families experienced prolonged periods of anxiety and stress resulting from the dislocations caused by the pandemic.

e) Diminished financial resources to support school operations as governments faced competing demands created by the pandemic, and a diminished tax base resulting from the economic contraction induced by the pandemic. Private education institutions, and education organizations that depended on private funding also experienced challenges resulting from the economic slowdown.

f) Diminished administrative support for teaching and learning as multiple demands stretched the capacity of educational institutions. As a result, a number of ongoing programs and initiatives were interrupted with the consequent lost opportunities to address the problems they were designed to address.

The predictable consequences of these impacts will be considerable learning loss, disengagement and withdrawal from school, and widening educational gaps among different groups of children: girls vs boys, poor vs. rich, rural vs. urban, etc. The long-term consequences of such loss of knowledge and skills will be greater difficulties for people to get out of poverty, to find jobs, to be productive, to engage civically. A lost generation, educationally speaking, will compound the other impacts of the pandemic producing, to put it bluntly, development in reverse.

To be sure, the pandemic also created the opportunity for much innovation, for rethinking, for collaborative and heroic efforts to sustain education amidst very challenging circumstances. Chief among these silver-linings was the realization of how important schools were, of how difficult it was to substitute the learning environment that schools provide with other arrangements. Educators were also immersed on short notice into the largest global sink or swim experiment involving the utilization of technology-based alternative education delivery systems. This massive global experiment served to build capacity, to experiment, and to learn about the limitations and the potential of these technology supported approaches to education. Particularly salient was the realization that many children and families lacked adequate access to these technologies. It is likely that what has been learned from this experiment out of necessity will stimulate more interest in using technology in the future, in ways more discerning, with more time to plan implementation of these approaches, and with provisions to ensure technology reaches all children.

We can anticipate that the ripple effects of the pandemic will be far reaching, extending beyond the time when communities achieve herd immunity. Not only will educational institutions face the challenge of trying to reengage students who disengaged from learning during the pandemic, and to help them recover learning loss, but they will have to operate in a social, economic and political context changed by the pandemic. The economic and jobs losses resulting from the pandemic will have impact years into the future. Those whose health was directly compromised will likely face various forms of long-term effects, those who lost family members to the virus will bear those burdens for a long time. Governments ability to finance education will be crippled by new demands and a diminished tax base, while the economic recession endures. In overindebted nations, servicing very high levels of debt will constrain the ability to fund education. The slow economic recovery will have systemic effects, a slow recovery in the global north will constrain demand for exports from the global south, and diminish the level of remittances, for example.

Furthermore, there may be unpredictable effects of the pandemic, resulting from interactions between the direct effects and pre-existing challenges. For instance, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the poor and marginalized, may exacerbate some of the challenges to governance already resulting from high levels of social inequality in a number of countries. The impact of the pandemic may augment the tensions resulting from intolerance and various forms of discrimination, as bigotry increases along with the perception that resources and opportunities are more limited. As the pandemic makes visible and compounds these pre-existing challenges, it will create a formidable set of difficulties to sustain the priority of and attention to education.

Illustrative of the unpredictable nature of the ripple effects of pandemics, a recent study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York demonstrates how the pandemic of 1918 contributed to the breakdown of democracy and the rise of fascism in Germany, principally through the impact of economic constrains on municipal spending, which marginalized groups of the population consequently contributing to their radicalization as they joined white supremacist groups[1].

While we do not yet know what surprises of this sort the Covid-19 pandemic will bring, unusual political developments in the United States, recently led to an attempt to disrupt the constitutional order by a group of white supremacists, supporters of President Donald Trump, who stormed the US Congress on January 6, 2021, in an effort to prevent the certification of the legitimate election of President Joseph Biden. Following this failed effort to use violence to disrupt the Constitutional order and democratic process, the Federal Bureau of Investigations warned the police chiefs throughout the country to be on high alert for extremist activity. The

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[1] Blickle, K. (2020). *Pandemics Change Cities: Municipal Spending and Voter Extremism in Germany, 1918-1933*, Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Staff Report 921. May 2020 Revised June 2020.

National Counterterrorism Center and the Justice and Homeland Security Departments warned of threats from armed militia groups and racist extremists[2]. The formation of these hate groups in the United States certainly predates the pandemic, their growth and mobilization in recent years a result of the globalization of the movement of violent white supremacists and to their incitement first by then presidential candidate and then President Trump and his associates during the last five years. But the unusual violence and attempted lethality of their actions on January 6, 2021 begs the question of what contribution to these events was played by a pandemic that has infected 23.4 million people and taken the lives of 389,000 of them in the United States, with an economic fallout resulting in 10 million jobs lost, or 6.5% of the jobs available before the covid-19 recession. In 32 states net jobs loss was greater than during the great recession[3].

The risks that the pandemic may fuel violent extremism are hardly unique to the United States. A report from the Brookings Institution from April 2020 states "that violent extremist and terrorist groups ranging from Colombian hit squads to ISIS affiliates in sub-Saharan Africa to far-right extremists in the United States are watching the disruption caused by COVID-19. Many are at least aware of the potential to benefit from that disruption, and in some cases, they are already taking advantage."[4] A more recent report explains how white

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[2] Eligon, J., F. Robles, Z. Kanno-Youngs and H. Cooper. *F.B.I. Urges Police Chiefs Across U.S. to Be on High Alert for Threats. New York Times.* Jan 13, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/fbi-police-threats-inauguration.html and Z. Kanno-Youngs. *Federal authorities warn that the Capitol breach will be a 'significant driver of violence.* New York Times. Jan 13, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/politics/capitol-breach-driver-of-violence.html

[3] Ettlinger, M. and J. Hensley. (2021). *COVID-19 Economic Crisis: By State.* University of New Hampshire. Casey School of Public Policy. https://carsey.unh.edu/COVID-19-Economic-Impact-By-State

4 Rosand, E., K. Koser and L. Schumicky-Logan. *Preventing violent extremism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.* Brookings Institution.

supremacy terrorism has become globalized and represents a major threat[5].

Given these multiple destabilizing effects of the pandemic, sustaining education is crucial to mitigate such impact and to build the resiliency to help build back better in ways that advance social inclusion and sustainability. Education is crucial for people to access jobs, to engage civically within the rule of law, and to prevent their recruitment and indoctrination into hateful ideologies. It is for these reasons that the fact that the pandemic is limiting educational opportunities is especially troubling. Just as troubling is the fact that the impact of the pandemic will amplify preexisting educational inequalities, first because the pandemic has most severely hit the most vulnerable, and secondly because the arrangements to sustain educational opportunity have been less effective in serving vulnerable children.

Given the predictable educational toll of COVID-19, leadership and ingenuity will be crucial to sustain education in the more defiant context we can anticipate. Considerable innovation will be necessary to address the new educational challenges, along with the preexisting unmet educational challenges, in particular, the challenge of ensuring that educational opportunities contribute to reducing, rather than amplifying, social inequalities, and the challenge of ensuring that the education accessible to all is in fact aligned with achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

April 28, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/28/preventing-violent-extremism-during-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/

5 Byman, D. *White supremacist terrorism: Key trends to watch in 2021.* Brookings Institution. January 15, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/white-supremacist-terrorism-key-trends-to-watch-in-2021/

In an effort to contribute to this conversation about the need for educational innovation in the new context created by COVID-19, I invited twenty-eight leaders of innovative educational organizations around the world to reflect on how the pandemic had impacted their organizations, how they had responded, what leadership challenges it represented, and what educational order they foresaw resulting from this global plague. This book systematizes their reflections, written in the last weeks of 2020.

The education leaders I invited to share their reflections were chosen because the relevance of the educational problems they were addressing, the evidence of the impact they had achieved, and the scale that their efforts had reached. Their organizations have been recognized in various ways, including with awards from the World Innovation Summit for Education and other organizations. The organizations reflected in these reflections work in a variety of world regions and education domains including supporting early childhood education, providing or supporting schooling (in early literacy development or other academic and socio-emotional domains), preventing dropout, supporting the education of girls, the inclusion of students with disabilities, second chance accelerated education program, job-skill development, entrepreneurship education, leadership development, educating incarcerated people and in higher education. As these essays show, these organizations make considerable and important contributions, directly and in partnership with governments and other organizations, to the global education movement. Most of them focus on the education of disadvantaged learners.

These reflections are valuable for several reasons. First, because, given the constrains facing governments, the work of these organizations and others like them will be even more important during and after the pandemic, so taking stock of how the pandemic impacted them, and how they faced these challenges, is intrinsically valuable. Second, because their previous track in innovation leads me to hypothesize these organizations might have been more innovative

and resilient than other education organizations in responding to the shocks caused by the pandemic and learning from the experience of organizations with well exercised innovation muscles might be valuable to other civil society organizations as we move into times when the capacity to innovate will be at a premium. Perhaps more importantly, reflections making sense about the educational impact of the pandemic have a reflective quality, a certain self-fulfilling character, and I thought it useful to engage those with the capacity to make the best out of the storm, those whose sense making could inspire hope. I will discuss later the principle of reflexivity and how it undergirds my reliance on appreciative inquiry approaches to inform dialogues to transform education for the better.

As I reached out to the leaders whose reflections are included in this book, I invited them to address the following questions in their essays:

1. What educational leadership challenges has this Pandemic represented? Could you give some examples of the kind of challenges you have faced?

2. How are these challenges different from the challenges of leading in education under normal conditions?

3. How have you faced these challenges? What forms of leadership have you used that are different from what you would have used to lead under ordinary conditions?

4. What has helped you lead in your sphere of influence during this period of the Pandemic?

5. What has been most difficult about leading during this period of the Pandemic?

6. In your opinion, what will be the educational consequences of the Pandemic in the next five years?

To preserve the voices and style of each contributor, which differ somewhat across the collection of essays, and the unique character

they reflect of their organizations, I avoided trying to standardize them in any way, keeping editing to a minimum.

Inviting practitioners to reflect on their practice in a structured way, and then publishing their reflections, is one of the ways in which the Global Education Innovation Initiative which I lead at the Harvard Graduate School of Education supports the transformation of public education to make it more relevant.

We advance this goal of transforming public education through three interrelated activities: conducting applied research, supporting informed dialogues, and developing tools and protocols that can support more relevant and effective educational practice. Our studies have been published in eight books, focusing on system level educational change. Still unpublished, our two most recent research studies include a comparative study of the way in which universities partnered with education systems to support educational opportunity during the pandemic, and a comparative study of the educational impact of the pandemic. The tools and protocols we have developed include curriculum to guide instructional practice in elementary and secondary schools aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Our Informed Dialogues consist of conversations, and tools to support them, that generate collective intelligence and shape narratives about how to tackle challenges of educational policy and practice. Among the tools that support these dialogues are publications that systematize and make public knowledge based on practice, with participation of practitioners.

An Informed Dialogue is anchored on several premises[6]: The first is that educational change is sustained by conversations and narratives. Narratives help construct shared beliefs, mindsets and visions

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[6] For a fuller discussion of the concept of 'Informed Dialogue' see Reimers, F. and McGinn, N. (1997). *Informed Dialogue. Using Research to Shape Education Policy Around the World.* CT: Praeguer.

among various stakeholders and provide the frameworks for advocacy coalitions. In their seminal study of the policy process, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith argue that policies are shaped by Advocacy Coalition Frameworks, which mobilize multiple actors at various levels of government and help reduce uncertainty and ambiguity. These coalitions allow the coordinated activity over time of a variety of stakeholders: elected representatives and their appointees, civil servants and technocrats, political and civic leaders and researchers. These conversations and dialogues are the means through which advocacy coalitions are formed, sustained and through which they learn[7]. Overtime, narratives shape shared beliefs about what education should be about, in this way shaping the 'culture of education' "Such 'culture of education' includes several interrelated domains: how educational institutions are understood to relate to other social institutions and to social purposes and values, how society sees teachers and learners, and how instruction is understood to take place."[8]

These narratives integrate knowledge from various sources, including research and practice, but also beliefs, more refractory to influence by evidence, providing frames which help people involved in the implementation of educational change make sense of their own role in the process of change, and defining what problems are important and how to tackle them.

The second premise of an Informed Dialogue is that practitioners generate valuable knowledge when they solve problems, and that it is helpful to the advancement of a profession to codify this knowledge and share it with the profession. It is such transformation of 'private knowledge' into 'public knowledge' which allows for this knowledge to be challenged, to become falsifiable when challenged

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[7] Sabatier, P.A., and Jenkins-Smith, H. (1988). 'An Advocacy Coalition Model of Policy Change and the Role of Policy Orientated Learning Therein.' *Policy Sciences* 21: 129-168.
[8] Reimers, F. (2020). *Educating Students to Improve the World*. Singapore, Springer. page 10.

by other interpretations and by empirical evidence, and this process allows policy learning, the result of learning among advocacy coalitions.

The third premise is that informed dialogues are essential because the process of education involves multiple stakeholders, each understanding the process from a unique vantage point. A more complete understanding of the challenges which need to be addressed emerges from dialogue, and with it, a more complete understanding of how to address it.

These conversations take place in the institutions where the profession is practiced, in schools, in professional meetings and publications, in universities where people prepare for the profession, in professional organizations and networks, in other venues including books such as this one and the settings in which this book will be discussed and, of course, on cyberspace and the media.

I see this approach, the systematization of reflection from practice, as a way to contribute to codifying professional knowledge. Such systematization as a form of appreciative inquiry, an opportunity to identify goodness and focus on possibility amidst the many challenges involved in transforming education to advance ambitious purposes, such as the reduction of poverty, greater social inclusion or environmental sustainability. David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, two of the leaders of the Appreciative Inquiry movement, describe the approach in this way:

"Appreciative inquiry is the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and more capable in economic, ecological, and human terms."[9]

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[9] Cooperrider, D. and Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry. A Positive Revolution in Change.* Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Page 8.

Appreciative Inquiry is based on the assumption that organizations have a positive core of capacities, and that discovering them and unleashing them in service of their goals can help organizations grow and develop.

"Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all."[10]

In addition to the value that systematizing and making public the knowledge that education leaders and practitioners draw from their practice may contribute to discovering the 'positive core' of their organizations, and of the process of educational change more generally, in my experience, valuing good practice, and good practitioners, is far more likely to inspire further goodness than obsessing over catastrophe and crisis. This systematization of reflections from leaders about the challenges they faced and the way in which they overcame them can then be used to invite further inquiry and discussion, in other words, 'persistently ask questions' that can help discover the positive core and help organizations grow. The conversations inspired by the knowledge shared in this book can in this way advance shared professional knowledge about many 'positive cores' making such knowledge a 'common and explicit property of all'.

The idea that the conversations and narratives that shape education advocacy coalitions have a certain self-fulfilling nature is based in the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity means that the actions people take based on their beliefs may cause a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such circular relationships between beliefs as causes and actions as effects is a known property of human belief structures. The idea was first developed by Thomas and Thomas in 1928 "If men define situations

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[10] Ibid, p 9.

as real, they are real in their consequences"[11]. Building on the 'Thomas theorem', Robert Merton developed the concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy', where a prediction causes people to act in ways that produce consequences that confirm the prediction.[12] Karl Popper extended Merton's work into his work on the epistemology of history and the philosophy of science[13]. Building on the work of Karl Popper, George Soros systematized the idea that there are self-reinforcing feedback loops between human expectations and the behavior of the market into a theory of reflexivity[14].

The concept of reflexivity has wide applicability in multiple social domains and contexts, including how beliefs about a pandemic produce self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, if people believe that the evolution of a pandemic is preordained by divinity, and not subject to human intervention, they are likely to behave in ways which may cause the pandemic to spiral out of control, for example not wearing masks, not distancing, refusing to take vaccines; the out-of-control pandemic will further reinforce the belief that there is little humans could do to alter the course of the pandemic. Their behavior, based on their prior belief, will produce the results they predicted. Similarly, a belief that the pandemic causes such a challenge to continue to operate schools that massive learning loss and school dropout are inevitable, may cause parents and educators to give up on trying to educate during the pandemic, indeed producing considerable learning loss and school dropout. I am not suggesting that mere wishful thinking can produce the world we

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[11] Thomas, W.I. (1928). *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. NY: Knopf. page 572.

[12] Merton, R. K. (1948). 'The self-fulfilling prophecy', *Antioch Review,* 8, pp. 193–210.

[13] Popper, K. (1957). *The Poverty of Historicism*. New York: Harper and Row.

[14] Soros, G. (2008). 'Reflexivity in Financial Markets'. *The New Paradigm for Financial Markets: The Credit Crisis of 2008 and What it Means (1st ed.).* PublicAffairs. p. 66.

want, I am suggesting that how we see the world influences how we act and that those actions in turn are consequential for the kind of world we end up with. Given this, an appreciative inquiry approach that looks for goodness in trying to sustain education amidst the madness caused by the pandemic, may just help spread goodness around a little. If we want to have hope that the pandemic will produce positive educational outcomes, spotlighting what those who have hope do may in effect cause more people to behave in ways that produce positive outcomes.

In the Global Education Innovation Initiative, we have supported a variety of Informed Dialogues. They include a series of reflections on how to improve teacher preparation in Massachusetts, based on a visit of a delegation of educators in Massachusetts to Singapore, a series of reflections from leaders of government and education organizations of civil society stemming from a two day think tank on the challenges to taking innovative programs to scale, and a series of reflections of former system level leaders about the lessons learned in implementing ambitious education reforms.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we have organized various activities and produced publications to make visible knowledge based on practice, to contribute to the conversation about how to sustain educational opportunity in the challenging context created by the pandemic. One of them a book with reflections on the education challenges created by the pandemic from ministers of education in Latin America and the way they overcame them[15], another with similar questions to graduates of the international education policy program I direct at the Harvard Graduate School of Education[16], we have then used these publications to convene roundtables and conferences that have included other educators in the conversation.

[15] Reimers, F. (2020a). *Liderando sistemas educativos durante la pandemia de COVID-19.*
[16] Reimers, F. (2020b). *Leading education through COVID-19. Upholding the right to education.*

We have also, in partnership with the OECD, the World Bank and the organization Hundred, conducted a series of case studies of educational innovations created to sustain educational opportunity in the context of the pandemic[17], these case studies have subsequently stimulated conversations in virtual fora about ways various jurisdictions could adapt these practices.

This book is part of those efforts to make knowledge generated by practitioners visible, to spotlight goodness and to inspire hope. It is an attempt to influence the conversations about how the pandemic is impacting education, and about the role of innovation in mitigating such impact, in an effort to mobilize such innovation dividend on behalf of sustaining educational opportunity around the world in the challenging context that awaits us all in the coming years. I hope that in discerning how the entrepreneurs in this book saw past the obstacles that COVID-19 brought to their education organizations we will gain essential knowledge to nurture entrepreneurial innovation to address the pre-existing education challenges as well as overcome the predictable challenges for education of the present and of the immediate future.

The twenty-four essays of the twenty-eight education entrepreneurs who contributed to this collection address seven themes:

1) **The pandemic created a challenging new context to operate, which will be protracted.**

The pandemic has challenged the work of educational innovators and their organizations. These challenges are in part collateral impact of the challenges experienced by public education institutions, with which many of these organizations collaborate. If schools are closed,

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[17] These case studies are available here
https://oecdedutoday.com/coronavirus/#Continuity-stories

and many students hard to reach with alternative means of delivery, this makes the work of these organizations more difficult.

In addition, these organizations experienced financial challenges, and challenges as their staff suffered from the health hazards brought by the pandemic. These challenges are likely to persist in the future.

For many of the organizations examined in this book, the conditions created by the pandemic interrupted ongoing programs and projects, in effect setting the organizations back in the pursuit of goals they had established.

These rapid changes in the context in which they operate placed many of the organizations examined in this book at a strategic inflexion point. The term was coined at a different time by American businessman and Intel pioneer Andrew Grove, who defined it as follows:

"Under the weight of an extraordinary force acting on a business, the very way the business is conducted gets distorted. In those circumstances, what tends to happen is that the framework in which the business operates changes and, over a period of time, leads to a different type of framework, where there is a business operating under a different set of influences. In other words, one of the influences is so large that the whole business gets reinvented in a very different way and ends up as a completely different structure. What happens in the middle, during the transition? That is the period of time that I call the Strategic Inflection Point. During a Strategic Inflection Point, the way a business operates, the very structure and concept of the business, undergoes a change."[18]

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[18] Gove, A. 1997. Navigating Strategic Inflection Points. Pages 57-58. Reprinted in *Business Strategy Review* Autumn 2008.

The extraordinary force affecting these organizations, in this case, was the sudden closure of schools, the emergence of new priorities for schools and for students, which displaced the priority previously given to the area in which these organizations worked, and the financial constraints.

2) In response to this new context organizations responded with strategic innovation, rather than incremental adjustment.

In response to the shock created by the pandemic, the majority of the organizations had to implement adjustments. Some of these adjustments were painful, for example laying off staff or closing down programs. While some of the initial adjustments were reactive, attempts to continue providing the same services under new constrains, with different delivery channels, many of the adjustments were strategic, the result of deep self-examination of purpose, plan, constrains and opportunities.

The crisis created by the pandemic caused organizations to engage in self-examination addressing what Peter Drucker called 'the five most important questions': what is our mission, who is our customer, what does the customer value, what are our results and what is our plan[19]. As a result of asking those questions, organizations developed a new plan to meet the, sometimes new, needs of the customer created by the changed context. Some of these innovations have led to impact at greater scale, deeper impact, or more relevancy in the pursuit of the organization's mission. For some of the organizations the pandemic was an opportunity to reexamine what skills mattered and how to support their development, for others it was an opportunity to re-examine their path to scale, or to revisit the needs of their customers. Most of the organizations created alternative

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[19] Drucker, P., with J. Collins, J., Kotler, P., Kouzes, J., Rodin, J., Kasturi Rangan V. and Hesselbein, F. (2008). *The five most important questions you will ever ask about your organization.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

delivery systems to serve their beneficiaries, some created new products to meet new needs of their beneficiaries, including needs that emerged as a result of the pandemic.

A striking characteristic of these innovations is how quickly many of them were developed. Organizations adopted a rapid prototyping approach, reflecting a preference for action over contemplation in the face of the difficult challenges the pandemic brought about, and then using feedback loops to revise and iterate.

Technology played a critical role in many of these innovations, most of them are technology based, which is unsurprising given that the pandemic placed restrictions on the ability of people to learn face to face. What is more remarkable is how rapidly this shift to technology-based delivery systems was made. This transition was not, however, seamless, as organizations quickly discovered that the same social inequalities which shape the educational chances of learners, are present and even amplified when education is delivered online. The rapid prototyping and iterative approach adopted by many of the organizations allowed them to quickly learn and make adjustments to increasingly reach more students and to do so more effectively. Equitable access to technology and internet is an ongoing challenge for most of the organizations examined in this book.

This capacity for strategic innovation, in a context in which the new demands created by the pandemic constrained the already stretched capacity of public education institutions, increased the value of the contributions made by these organizations. It is likely that this increased value of public-private partnerships will continue in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, given that the predictable economic recession will constrain public education resources. Paradoxically, as the value of their contributions increased, so did the financial challenges to their sustainability, resulting from the many competing demands for resources created by the pandemic and by diminished financial resources.

3) **Values based leadership moved organizations towards a higher purpose.**

For a number of the leaders whose essays are included in this book the pandemic represented a crucible moment, one of great vulnerability, where they saw the real possibility that their organization would have to cease to exist. Even more personal, these leaders and their families also faced the possibility of infection. They could easily experience their own vulnerabilities and see those of their own staff and colleagues. These personal vulnerabilities were interdependent with the vulnerability of the organizations. The pandemic heightened the awareness of how critical teams were to the future of the organization, and of how important the well-being of the organization was to the well-being of the staff. Furthermore, nothing was assured, least of all the future of the organizations, as the protracted crisis, with no clear end in sight, made any predictions about the future challenging. Faced with such sense of vulnerability and of possible finality of their work, a number of these leaders turned to asking deep questions of purpose and values. Centering their leadership in values of generosity, putting people first, gratitude, transparency, humility allowed these leaders to invite their staff to meet them at a higher level of purpose, contributing to a culture that allowed collaborative self-examination and invention of a way forward.

Putting people first led some of these leaders and organizations to prioritize basic needs as well as emotional needs for their beneficiaries and staff, to attend to areas such as food insecurity or safety, or to take on new programs when there was great need. Many of the actions during the pandemic reflected generous leadership, in many cases donating resources or services, as a way to address urgent needs created by the crisis.

Some of these leaders deepened their awareness of the value of diversity in their own organization and governance, of the need to develop relationships of mutuality and interdependence with the

communities they sought to serve, for some of these organizations this awareness involved re-examining the nature of the relationship between individuals with more privilege –those leading and working in the organizations, or funding this work—and those with less privilege –the beneficiaries on whose behalf the organizations did their work--, in some cases it involved also re-examining relationships between the global-north -where some of these organizations are based-- and the global-south –where some of the beneficiaries on whose behalf the organizations do their work are based.

In an analysis of the historical evolution of human organizations, Frederic Laloux[20] identifies seven stages, the most advanced of which is what he sees as an emerging form of organization, which he calls evolutionary-Teal characterized by self-management, wholeness and evolutionary purpose, where self-management is possible because there is alignment between deep values of those working in the organization and the purpose of the organization. The other stages in Laloux's typology are:

Reactive, the earliest developmental stage taking place between 100,000 to 50,000 BC. These organizations were bands of a few people who associated for survival.

Magic, these were tribes forming about 15,000 years ago of up to a few hundred people organized mostly for survival and to handle the demands of the present.

Impulsive, forming about 10,000 years ago and comprising chiefdoms and proto empires. The major breakthrough in these early organizations was division of labor and role differentiation.

Conformist, starting around 4000 BC in Mesopotamia these represent a shift from chiefdoms and survival horticultural societies, to the organization of agriculture, states and civilizations, institutions, bureaucracy and organized religion. These are the first

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[20] Laloux, F. (2014). *Reinventing organizations*. Middleton, DE: Nelson Parker.

organizational forms that can achieve long term goals, shaping the future.

Achievement, the product of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment, these complex organizations enabled significant material progress and much liberation and advancement to individuals. This stage "moved us away from the idea that authority has the right answer (instead it relies on expert advice to give insight into the complex mechanics of the world) and brings a healthy dose of skepticism regarding revealed truth. It has allowed us to engage for the first time, in the pursuit of truth regardless of religious dogma and political authority, without having to risk our lives. We have become capable of questioning and stepping out of the conditions we were born in; we are able of breaking free from the thoughts and behaviors that our gender and our social class would have imposed upon us in earlier times."[21]

Pluralistic, a form of organization that acknowledges that all perspectives deserve equal respect, not only 'what works'. "It seeks fairness, equality, harmony, community, cooperation and consensus". "For people operating from this perspective, relationships are valued above outcomes. For instance, where Achievement-Orange seeks to make decisions top-down, based on objective facts, expert input, and simulations, Pluralistic-Green strives for bottom-up processes, gathering input from all and trying to bring opposing points of view to eventual consensus."[22]

Laloux characterizes the development of organizations as an evolutionary, staged, process, where certain stages in organizational development preceed the progression to higher levels. It would be understandable that a crisis such as the one the pandemic caused for these organizations, and the strategic inflection point to which it brought them, would cause the leaders to retreat towards more autocratic forms of leadership, say from pluralistic modes of operating to achievement-oriented modes. That they chose instead

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[21] Ibid, page 25
[22] Ibid, pages 30-31

to anchor their leadership in values that honored the shared stake that all in the organization had in their future, while perhaps counterintuitive and paradoxical, may have contributed to the adaptive changes the organizations were able to make in response to the crisis.

Heifetz and Linsky offer this characterization of adaptive organizational changes:

"We refer to this kind of wrenching organizational transformation as "adaptive change," something very different from the "technical change" that occupies people in positions of authority on a regular basis. Technical problems, while often challenging, can be solved applying existing know-how and the organization's current problem-solving processes. Adaptive problems resist these kinds of solutions because they require individuals throughout the organization to alter their ways; as the people themselves are the problem, the solution lies with them. Responding to an adaptive challenge with a technical fix may have some short-term appeal. But to make real progress, sooner or later those who lead must ask themselves and the people in the organization to face a set of deeper issues—and to accept a solution that may require turning part or all of the organization upside down."[23]

4) Caring leadership.

Because the pandemic caused risks to the physical and mental health of staff and to the students they served, the responses described in the essays in this book reflect deep empathy for this human toll of the pandemic, for the trauma it caused, and genuine caring for the well-being of staff and partners. This emphasis on well-being resonates as a heightened priority in the response of these organizations at three levels: emphasis on the well-being of the students they serve, emphasis on the well-being of staff, and

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[23] Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2002). A Survival Guide for Leaders. *Harvard Business Review.* June 2002.

emphasis on the well-being of the leaders of the organizations themselves.

Leaders understood, not always immediately, they had to care for their staff and for themselves, and many of them made this an explicit priority of the strategy of adaptation to the crisis. As leaders of these organizations became aware of the personal challenges the pandemic created for their staff, they came to know them better, to better appreciate their circumstances and commitments. As a result of this knowledge, they were able to support them better, as people, and to attend to their wellbeing. Leaders describe intentionally creating opportunities for their staff to attend to their emotional and mental wellbeing, promoting periodic check ins, more informal conversations, joint meditations and convocations.

This emphasis on caring for the members of the organizations reflected in the essays in this book contributed to a climate that allowed greater and more open communication and collaboration, and perhaps greater risk taking and joint learning. No one learns very much when in fear. Even though the pandemic likely increased fear for staff as well as for leaders in these organizations, fear for their health, fear for the financial sustainability of the organization or for their jobs, the emphasis on care and well-being created a protective environment that allowed staff to think together, to collaborate in ways which were not just reactive, but proactive and creative.

5) **Collaborative leadership. More sharing than ever, more communication and participation and the** *Medici Effect.*

Their reflections show that the leaders of these organizations relied on their teams, and often on their customers and other partners, to make sense of the unexpected and novel situation the pandemic had placed them in, and to generate a response to challenges for which they had no playbook. The essays describe much more frequent meetings and communications among staff, across units in the

organizations, with customers and partners, more participatory decision making and distributed leadership. Their reflections convey great capacity for listening, great empathy with customers, colleagues and partners. The circles of communication seem to have expanded considerably, within organizations and across organizations. A theme that resonates throughout the essays is how these leaders prioritized communications as a way to find a pathway during the pandemic. Given that these communications were enabled by technology, because of the restrictions on the ability to meet in person, geographical distances became irrelevant, and so the possibility of communicating anytime, anywhere provided many in the organizations with a larger group of interlocutors than was customary.

This greater reliance on collaboration and on communication democratized access to large communities of peers, in diverse contexts, previously reserved mostly to those in senior positions of authority in the organization. If, before the pandemic, the leaders of the organizations reflected in this collection had the luxury of meeting with peers, potential supporters and partners, in the occasional global conference or convening, as the world moved to cyberspace, opportunities for such virtual exchanges increased exponentially not just for leaders, but for many staff in the organization. This increase in communication and collaboration may well explain why these organizations were able to innovate, relatively swiftly, in such a challenging context.

In a study on innovation, Frans Johansson argues that innovation is the result of the exchange of ideas across fields which results from the intersection of disciplines, industries and cultures, a process he claims is exemplified in the role played by the city of Florence in giving birth to the Italian Renaissance, as a result of the investments the Medici's, Lorenzo de Medici in particular, made in arts and

sciences in the city[24]. It is likely that the renewed emphasis on communication across organizations contributed to innovation, the result of collective learning, not just to make rapid adjustments to stay in business, but to examine more deeply core questions of purpose, strategy and plan, and create new, perhaps even better, ways of pursuing the organization's mission.

This emphasis on collaboration and communication augmented the capacity of these organizations to function as learning organizations, which was critical when rapid changes in the external environment required adjustments. A learning organization is one that functions as an open system, in continuous communication with its external environment, and with the capacity to adapt to changes in that external environment, and to achieve alignment among its various sub-systems to those changes in the external environment. Key to the concept of the learning organization is the concept of system, and of being able to understand the complexity of the systems in which organizations are embedded and which undergird their own operations.

Peter Senge, one of the best-known proponents of systems thinking as essential to learning organizations, argues that learning organizations can not only adapt to changes in their environment, but generate alternative futures. Learning organizations depend on team learning, developing shared vision that generates deep and authentic commitment, examining mental models of how the world works, developing personal mastery and the capacity for systems thinking[25].

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[24] Johansson, F. (2006). *The Medici Effect. What elephants and epidemics can teach us about innovation.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
[25] Senge, P. (2006). *The fifth discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Currency-Doubleday.

6) Collective leadership.

Communications and collaboration increased not just within the organizations portrayed in the reflections included in this book, but also between them and their partner organizations, and with other organizations in the larger education ecosystem. All of this made the 'system' of which all these various organizations are a part more readily visible.

One of the challenges of the education system is its complexity, resulting from the many subsystems it comprises. Producing alignment between those subsystems is especially challenging. These challenges stem from various sources. One, the sheer number of actors makes coordination difficult. Second, the various subsystems may represent different 'advocacy coalitions' guided by alternative or competing ideologies. The large number of stakeholders in education creates a problem of collective action. Even if there are clear common interests in creating a public good such as a quality public education for all, it is unlikely that all will act collectively to achieve them because there are incentives for groups to free ride, and while the costs for small groups to organize are small, there are larger for large group, this causes large groups of stakeholders to not incur the costs necessary for collective action[26]. These obstacles to collective action are especially challenging in addressing adaptive challenges[27].

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[26] Olson, M. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[27] Heifetz, R., Kania, J. and Kramer, M. (2004). 'Leading Boldly — Foundations can move past traditional approaches to create social change through imaginative – and even controversial – leadership.' *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and Reimers, F. and McGinn, N. (1997). *Informed Dialogue.* Westport, CT: Praeguer.

As such, the augmented communication with colleagues outside the organization made the necessity for collective leadership, for inter-organizational collaboration in service of the greater good, more visible than in ordinary times. In the emergency created by the pandemic, and with increased reliance on the use of communications platform for business operations, leaders and staff of these organizations increased their interactions with peer institutions. This increased the visibility of the interrelated nature of each organizations' efforts with those of other organizations in the ecosystem, and with it the opportunities for collaboration and collective leadership.

7) Leading from hope and possibility

Facing the uncertainties created by the pandemic, a number of the leaders in this collection relied on creating a narrative of possibility to lead their teams. Rather than framing the crisis as such, they framed it as an opportunity, emphasizing goodness and purpose, reaffirming the strengths and the goodness in the organization. In this sense they relied on the same principles of appreciative inquiry and reflexivity that inspire me in putting this collection together, to spotlight goodness and possibility at an exceedingly challenging time, understanding the self-fulfilling nature of expectations, and trying to inspire hope rather than dwell on the all too obvious education challenges the pandemic has laid bare in front of us.

When asked about the future for education following the pandemic the reflections in this collection acknowledge the likely economic and social devastation that will be caused by the plague. Many of them see education loss and dropout as an enduring legacy of the pandemic. But they also recognize that the conditions prior to the pandemic were deficient in many ways, the very reason that their organizations had been established. Even as they see the challenges ahead for them and their organizations, they also see the possibilities. Some of these possibilities include the greater awareness of the importance of education, of educating the whole child, of cultivating

the ethical capabilities of students, of the necessity and power of collaboration across many stakeholders to create sustainable and relevant schools, and most certainly the possibilities that integrating technology into education delivery systems can bring. Perhaps, the greater visibility brought about by the pandemic to the many obstacles that poor and disadvantaged students face might in time also bring about more support for efforts to support their education. In many ways the pandemic has underscored the necessity and the possibility to reimagine education to serve all children with an education that matters.

I hope these reflections contribute to those conversations of hope and possibility, and that they activate the reflexivity that helps realize those hopes. The more this hope and possibilities become part of the conversations that engage educators while we endure the pandemic, and in the aftermath, the more likely we will be to bring those possibilities about.

How INJAZ adapted to the COVID-19 Context

Akef Aqrabawi

Entrepreneurship is recognized and valued for its role as a key driver of the economy. Successful implementation of an entrepreneurial culture maximizes economic and social success on a local, national, and global scale. Securing meaningful employment is one of the toughest challenges facing youth in the MENA region[28]. Even as youth under the age of 25 make up 50% of the population, a staggering 29% of them are unemployed across the region, that's roughly 50 million individuals who are unable to access the labor market, lead fulfilling lives, and drive economic prosperity in the region. At the same time, MENA youth are hungry for opportunity, bursting with potential, eager to learn, to create, to innovate, and shape the future of the region. INJAZ comes to bridge the gap between the challenges our youth face and the enormous potential they carry.

Since the establishment of INJAZ Al-Arab (JA Worldwide Regional Operating Center in MENA) in 2004, INJAZ has taken bold decisions and steps to expand geographically in the MENA region to include more Arab countries and reach out to more young Arabs. In the first five years of its humble operations, INJAZ was able to establish 13 chapters in the Arab world, with an amazing reach and impact on millions of youths. By delivering a wide spectrum of programs focused on three main pillars; workforce readiness, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship, we strive to bridge the gap between education and the requirements of the labor market through hands-on, highly relevant training and mentoring programs delivered by volunteers, business leaders, and entrepreneurs.

What makes INJAZ unique in this region? INJAZ is the first organization regionally that ignited partnerships between private and

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[28] UNICEF MENA Generation 2030, ILOSTAT, Arab Youth Survey

public sectors, this was the key element of success that enabled INJAZ to fulfill its aspirations in this region. To provide you with more context, the private sector volunteers come into the classroom in public schools and universities to deliver INJAZ programs on a semesterly and yearly basis. This is the beauty of the INJAZ/ Junior Achievement Worldwide (JAW) Model that has been evolving since 1919 when JAW Programs sparked globally. Having volunteers from the private sector dedicating time and knowledge and getting into schools and universities to deliver these programs was a great success. Nonetheless, over the past years, we were struggling with some structural challenges like the lack of government supports, funding, and volunteers where the private sector businesses do not exist, others with educational institutes and their capacity. It is a fact that we have learned a lot from this journey, especially as the MENA region has witnessed a lot of turbulences, economically and politically, and INJAZ has witnessed that and on top of it, the geopolitical tensions, the Arab spring, and lastly COVID-19.

Withstanding all regional hurdles, it's amazing to look back at the network we have developed, the youth we have reached, and the partnerships we have built since 2004. INJAZ started with just one office, now we operate in 14 countries. We have grown from a few hundred volunteers to 88,000 cumulatively, a few schools and partnerships to over 3,000 schools, 350 universities, 400 private sector entities, and 14 ministries of education. INJAZ has become the largest non-profit organization dedicated to overcoming unemployment in the region. Through the work of our member nations across the region, we have reached collectively, and since inception more than 3.7 million students.

What keeps us going is the power of the transformation we see in the lives of our students which is incredibly exciting. Over and over, we see INJAZ youth discover their purpose in life, turn challenges into opportunities, start their own companies, and give back to their communities in amazing ways.

Growing Stronger

In each phase and challenge we have been through, INJAZ was able to continue growing with humble percentages of reach, up until 2016, when INJAZ was challenged by board members and stakeholders on the need to scale up the numbers given that the MENA region is a youthful region, and our penetration rate doesn't even reach 1% of youth in a region where they make up 50% of the total population. So, we had to embark on an ambitious goal to reach one million youth annually by 2022, which is a five-year plan where we need to grow by 25%-30% annually to be able to reach the one million target. We knew this was ambitious, but we believed that the collaborations that have brought us this far – with ministries of education and the private sector – will continue to deliver the system-level impact that we seek, only on a much larger scale.

To be able to scale up from year to year, we had to embark on certain initiatives that could accelerate our operations annually, one of which was focusing on low-cost digital content where INJAZ needs to create digital content and use digital platforms to serve the learning experience and journey for both volunteers and youth, rather than be fully focused exclusively on delivering in-person learning activities. Although we were determined to reach one million young people by 2022, the journey started with doubts, specifically with the shift to digital content and with the conviction that this would not work due to technical issues in some countries. We also believed this would not be as impactful as in person classroom instruction. Nonetheless, we have been able to make quantum leaps in growth over the last three years with other enablers such as partnerships for growth and expanding the reach to elementary, in which during the academic year 2018-2019, we were able to reach half a million students. In spite of these remarkable numbers, we were convinced that following the same model of delivery, would make it difficult to reach the one million target by 2022.

Challenges Associated With COVID-19

Then came COVID-19 to shatter the dreams of our growth, not of INJAZ in particular but of the entire educational system. As is known COVID-19 has created one of the most significant disruptions in so many sectors, but especially in the education system. Although we had watched COVID-19 spreading out globally, it was in a split of a second that we woke up to a reality where all schools and universities had to be suspended, that, in turn, caused us to stop all of our operations in the region. Reaching students via the educational institutes' systems was impossible as those themselves were unprepared and challenged with a sudden disruption, so INJAZ was not a priority due to the load of work they had since February 2020.

Amidst all these novel circumstances: lockdowns, social distancing, flattening the curve, and remote working, one of the key challenges for INJAZ as a regional network stems from the contribution of the private sector in funding opportunities, so when the schools and universities were suspended, and all of our operations stopped, we were unable to fulfill our commitments towards our donors and stakeholders. With uncertainties of how long COVID-19 is going to last, some of our chapters were beginning to experience financial struggles, so we had to jump in and keep a close eye on their financials since most of the funding opportunities had been halted. This made a restructure of the organization necessary in order to be more agile and responsive to the crisis.

Even our response to the e-learning at the beginning was complex, we faced so many questions in a short period: how are we going to make a quick move and shift from the in-person classes to reaching out to students directly on a digital platform? How can we convince our donors to accept turning our grants model to digital to meet their goals? How can we be digital?

When we realized the challenges, we worked closely with our member nations to be knowledgeable at first on the safety of our teams. Secondly, and the most important step we took, we closely coordinated with each member nation to understand the financial health and financial position to discuss their growth percentages and commitments to their stakeholders. This is one of the main actions that kept our engine working because as by keeping a close eye on our financials, we were able to sustain the existence of the organization. Other areas such as operations and growth can be compensated as long as the organization is financially healthy. Thirdly, we have been in discussion with our donors on how to strategize for the next phase with a substitute plan for the in-class model to meet their aspirations as partners to our efforts.

We started embarking on digital activities and inviting the donors to take part and support, which sparked their interest upon seeing the success of this new online model. This seems to have been a successful move, as we were able to have an impact on our youth and satisfy our donors given the circumstances. However, we realized that in our response to the crisis, these various efforts were scattered and disorganized. We had been running numerous online activities to meet our promises until one of the consulting companies sitting on the regional board came in to extend support and stressed the fact that this was the right time to streamline the effort. We were given a great opportunity to look at our operational model and see how INJAZ could be transformed into a new digital era where it can grow exponentially.

Getting into A Digital Era

Right after the first wave of COVID-19, around May 2020, and in close coordination with all of our chapters and stakeholders, we started looking deeply into our model of operations realizing the fact

that in the 13 chapters where INJAZ operates, there are[29] 100 million students. Our stakeholders raised the question of whether we would scale up the level of our ambitions. If our ambitions were to scale, did our model of implementation help us serve and cater to those 100 million? We needed to relook into our implementation model to make it more agile, adaptable, and functional in a time where digital has come to stay rather than serve as complementary.

While doubts have always accompanied the efficiency of broad digital learning, these critical times proved that this is the right moment for this proactive approach to become the focus of our strategy and not just a temporary solution. The education system has shifted massively into a new dimension, and while the success of this model was seen clearly throughout the work of different entities across the globe, it has certainly marked great achievements within our network.

Digital Strategy

As the transition and demand for digital education increases, INJAZ needs to adapt to such digital age. We have embarked on a digitally led strategy which promises a wider spectrum of learning experiences, innovative teaching methods, and an increased number of interactions with youth. With the help of our lifelong partner McKinsey and Company, we are set on a journey that allows us to design a strategic direction for the digital age to define ways to re-invent the INJAZ model. The new model allows us as a network to fast track our goal to reach more students, establish young-long learning journeys, create communities across the region, and enable INJAZ to sustain long-term growth.

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[29] UNICEF MENA Generation 2030, ILOSTAT, Arab Youth Survey

The strategy allows INJAZ to move forward as an orchestrator and a thought-leader through continuing its current efforts, while also expanding on its role by making necessary shifts in our main areas of focus within strategic direction and goals. Based on this forward strategic direction, INJAZ will offer and count multiple experiences to serve youth needs and broaden our reach and impact. Three main learning experiences and categories have been identified, all of which are inclusive of multiple teaching methods including digital, blended, and traditional classroom.

The Forward Direction

Although governments have spent billions of dollars over the past two decades on education, the response to COVID-19 demonstrated unpreparedness for such a challenge. Educators played a heroic role in accommodating the needs of students against all odds, as we all witnessed over the last few months. Nonetheless, the efforts were scattered due to the lack of infrastructure especially in less privileged areas, others were due to technical issues, in addition to the lack of readiness at homes and in communities, all these factors provided clarity on where the 21st education stands in a time of a pandemic.

But there is a bright side to the pandemic, in the past, we have seen many innovative technology ideas for educational purposes, some of which were not embraced by the educational organizations and institutions, either because it was believed there was no need for it, or it was irrelevant at that point. This year many of these ideas and products have been tested allowing businesses to understand the need to improve these ideas and their products, proved they are effective and can help make leaps in the way we work. I believe there will be a significant investment in education from both education systems and solution providers in the coming five years. The education sector will witness a significant boom, budgets of

governments will increase in that direction, and the job market will change accordingly.

As an organization, our commitment remains strong, we believe that we have a responsibility and mandate to keep upskilling our youth, the fact is, our young people must be educated not just to understand the future but to re-invent it.

Akef Aqrabawi *serves as the President and Chief Executive Officer at INJAZ Al-Arab/JA MENA, the regional operating center of JA worldwide Operating in 13 countries across the Middle East and North Africa, and the largest non-profit organization dedicated to overcoming unemployment in the region and aims to inspire a culture of entrepreneurship and business innovation among Arab youth. Extremely ambitious by nature, Aqrabawi is on a mission to enable the Arab youth to lead the region's economy to new heights. One of his goals is to have INJAZ's education and training programs reach over one million students annually by 2022. Aqrabawi completed the Executive Leadership Program from Harvard Business School in 2018 – 2019 and holds a BA degree in Archeology from Mu'tah University, Jordan.*

The Journey from #WhatIf to #WhatNext at a historic time of change

Suchetha Bhat and Vishal Talreja

On March 23rd, 2020 India went into a country-wide full lockdown, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 4-hour notice, as a result, life as we knew it changed overnight. As per UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an education crisis, brought on by the widespread closures of schools, universities and colleges and India was no different. Children in India were suddenly caught in the midst of myriad issues some of which continue to put children's lives and education at risk even after 9-months:

Loss of Income and Livelihood

Parents in daily-wage labor, self-employment, working in informal economies and in local small-scale industries lost jobs and livelihoods resulting in tremendous stress on their meagre or non-existent savings. Families with pre-existing debt or medical conditions were further pushed into extreme poverty putting children's health, safety, nutrition and ability to stay in schools at risk. As we enter the new year as schools reopen, if livelihoods are not secured, many children will drop-out of education because parents will not be able to afford the school-fees and other incidental costs.

Reverse Migration

The lockdowns in India saw 'barefoot migration' consisting of around 500,000 to 600,000 people making their way back to their villages. While some managed to reach their villages, however a

majority of them were stuck at state borders and had to move into temporary camps in less-than-humane conditions. The emotional impact of this on children will be manifold and long-term. Moreover, with no sign of improvement in their livelihoods, many have decided to stay back in their villages, further impacting children's education in the long-term, including dropping out of formal education.

High levels of Anxiety

The uncertainty and the constantly changing situations on the ground have left many children anxious. Students are anxious about examinations, examination results, their future and how that would impact their education. For some students who could not take their examinations, there were instances of prolonged anxiety around whether they would have to take examinations when schools re-open or repeat an entire year. Questions like, 'Will I be promoted to the next grade or will I have to continue in the same grade for another year?' became paramount.

Forced to become Adults

In many families, with the loss of livelihoods, parents are overwhelmed resulting in a sense of helplessness and paralyses. In such circumstances, children have had to play adult roles — taking care of their younger siblings, managing household chores, organizing food and taking decisions on behalf of the family. Children, although unprepared to play these roles, have had to grow into them in this unprecedented time.

Confusion and Misinformation

With very little and often contradictory information available about the pandemic, spurred on by widespread fake news and rumors floating around, children experienced tremendous stress and confusion. Children are asking 'What will happen to me and my family? Will my parents die? What happens to me if I lose my parents?'

Heightened Violence and Abuse

Schools and Community Centers have been safe spaces and have kept children away from violence and abuse that is often prevalent at homes and neighborhoods. In months after the pandemic, those safe spaces were no longer accessible. The Childline India helpline received more than 92,000 SOS calls asking for protection from abuse and violence in 11 days, a somber indication that the lockdown has turned into extended captivity, not just for many women, but also for children trapped with their abusers at home. In fact, as per the National Commission for Women between March 25 and May 31 of 2020, around 1,477 complaints of domestic violence were made by women - this period recorded more complaints than those received between March and May in the previous 10 years.

Gendered Impact

The impact of all the issues listed above will be severe on girls as they move into becoming primary caregivers for their families. They are performing more adult roles in their families, bearing the brunt of hunger since in many contexts' men/boys are fed first, their education is likely to be deprioritized compared to boys, and they are more likely to face domestic violence and abuse at home. We are likely to see a larger dropout of girls from the education system due

to the underlying factors around the pandemic. According to UNICEF, India has the dubious distinction of being the 4th country in South Asia in terms of child marriage prevalence. It is therefore no wonder that one in three of the world's child brides live in India and the pandemic induced lockdown has surely exacerbated this problem further.

Loss of Dignity, Confidence and Self-esteem

The biggest fallout of this crisis has been the loss of dignity amongst individuals and families from marginalized communities; being treated like second class citizens in their own country as they lose their livelihoods, homes and access to food. As they are further pushed to the margins of society because of their caste, class or religion and are being blamed for spreading a crisis that was NOT their doing. This has severely impacted children's sense of self, dignity, confidence and self-esteem and possibly will also drive many children to self-harm and suicide.

Loss of Learning

In addition to all these socio-emotional factors, there is also the loss of learning due to extended school closures. Being marginalized also means that the inequities in education have been enhanced because of lack of access to digital resources and tools. While it is heartening to see the volume of digital content, toolkits and resources that have suddenly become available, much of the population will not have access to it. A <u>recent report</u> by the Digital Empowerment Foundation indicates that 30% of our population lags on basic literacy and thrice that for digital literacy. Even if parents have a smartphone, they do not have the money to buy data packs and broadband bandwidth. Parents remain unaware of how to use some of the digital tools on offer and honestly, this will be the least of their worries when they are grappling with more urgent priorities such as

hunger and livelihoods. As per the 2020 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2020 Wave 1) only one third of the children had access to online learning, while 11% had access to live online classes. Furthermore, the survey also revealed that around 24.3% of children had not received learning material because they didn't have a smartphone. Anxiety emerging from being left behind spawned by lack of digital infrastructure haunts children across the country.

Impact of Trauma resulting in Failure to Thrive

The <u>news</u> of a 35-year-old migrant laborer who committed suicide because he could not provide for his family (aged parents, wife and four children) sent shockwaves across the country. Multiple stories of young boys and girls dying by suicide because they could not access their online classes and felt helpless have brought home the truth around systemic inequities in society. One can only imagine the long-term emotional and mental trauma children are going to grow up with. All such challenges faced by children/young people can and will cause significant trauma — mental, emotional and psychological. It is known that sustained trauma in early-years (0–10 years) results in stunting and <u>failure to thrive</u> and the impact of failure to thrive can be seen for life. Children are going to carry this trauma into schools, and it is going to impact their ability to access content, engage in learning and build healthy relationships. The bigger question looming large is - how equipped are school systems to cope with large populations of children coming back to school with sustained and deeply entrenched trauma?

The Need for a Pause

At Dream a Dream, we took a pause. To breathe and take a moment of stillness before we respond because in that moment new insights could emerge to move away from panic towards clarity thereby offering a whole new response, something different, unique, and

contextual to the current crisis. This led to the launch of a global movement called #WhatIf. We were overwhelmed to see the response where hundreds of young people, artists, teachers, parents, educationists, individuals and dozens of national and international organizations joined us on the journey to re-imagine the future. The question was simple What is the #WhatIf we wish to invite into our imagination to transform education for all our children?

As we went into our own exploration and listened to people and voices around us, some patterns emerged.

First was the acknowledgement the toll this crisis has taken on our emotional and mental health, especially children. We asked what role school and teachers could play in helping children overcome the impact of this pandemic on their mental health. For a system that traditionally focused only on academic achievement of children, this pause, felt like a breath of fresh air. Not one person we spoke to asked why we should focus on emotional and mental health in school. The question had moved to how this needs to be integrated.

Second was the recognition that learning doesn't always happen in 'schools. As parents and family members took on the role of teachers, suddenly, a new paradigm of learning was possible. It would now only be a limitation of our imagination if we do not take this insight into the post-COVID-19 world. Could learning be a community-initiative, led by the school but held by everyone in the child's life?

Third, the realization that it is not the future that is uncertain anymore. It is the present. Not only do we not know what the jobs of the future are, we also cannot predict the global challenges that await our next generation. With the economic and political fallouts of this pandemic, and the exploding dangers of climate change, the skills our children will require to navigate our interconnected,

complex, globalized world are fundamentally different than what we needed. So, are we doing enough to prepare them?

Lastly, the crisis had its share of casualties within the education system. It is unclear how many children, especially girls will return to formal schooling as schools reopen. The worst hit are the children we have lost, and will continue to lose, to child labor and child trafficking as parents deal with the economic collapse due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. Additionally, a notional idea of inequity, turned into a living breathing monster in the form of 'online learning'.

Globally, the pandemic invoked a racial reckoning as protests erupted across the world against systemic racism. Closer to home, we started the year with pictures of the protestors at Shaheen Bagh standing up against the new citizenship laws and are closing the year with videos of peacefully protesting farmers (against the new farm laws) being shot at with water cannons and tear-gas grabbing national headlines.

What does all this then mean as we move from #WhatIf to #WhatNext? The pause gave us an opportunity to see things differently, forced us to explore what else was possible. And to acknowledge the magnitude of the challenges that our young people are currently facing and will face in the future and our role in preparing them for it. However, converting these insights into tangible actions that can impact the lives of millions of children, has only become harder. As systemic inequities get further exacerbated, more children are going to get left behind despite the many innovations developed along the way. So seriously, what next?

We asked the question to ourselves and to everyone - What is our most compassionate offer to our children?

For us, the last year has meant a renewed focus on a complete mindset shift on the purpose of education and the role of society in that shift. We are embarking on a journey to re-purpose education to ensure a thriving life for every child. The pandemic has shown us that this is a 2-way street, where we embark upon a journey that ensures every child is responsible, happy and resilient, while also breaking down the systemic barriers stopping them from reaching their potential. It is a journey to develop the life-skills that children need, to overcome adversity and prepare for an uncertain future, while also dismantling the intersectional and deeply entrenched discrimination that marginalized children face.

Of course, this will only be possible if we are able to face up to our own biases of gender, caste, sexual orientation, and abilities on the road to empowerment. If we wish to empower children to seek their desired future, it will require us to role-model speaking truth to power. We will need to repurpose our mission towards dismantling the systems of inequalities and indignities that continue to intensify, especially during times of crisis. Only then, can every child **Thrive**.

This is our #whatnext. We are ready to move forward from the pause, from the #WhatIf Global Movement to #WhatNext. Again, we invite you to join us. Because our belief has only been strengthened that we are all willing and able to come together for our children and solve massive complex issues collaboratively, with trust, empathy, love, care and courage.

Suchetha Bhat is CEO of Dream a Dream. An Electronics and Communication engineer, she worked with several technology companies. She then obtained a degree in counseling and joined Dream a Dream, helping to scale the organization from 3,000 to one million children. approach. My strengths include understanding child-adversity, organization culture building, and impact assessment of life-skills programs. My passion is to advocate for the urgency and criticality of preparing young people from adversity, for the new world.

Vishal Talreja is Co-Founder of Dream a Dream. A former investment banker and venture capitalist, Vishal Talreja has built a network of volunteers that offer vulnerable children opportunities to increase their chances for normal childhood development. He is an Ashoka Fellow, an Eisenhower Fellow and was a Founder Director of United India and Board Member of India Cares Foundation

Leadership during the pandemic

Magdalena Brier

The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has severely hit the education sector. Overnight, the world was forced to close schools, leaving – at the peak of the crisis- over 1.2 billion students without classes in 143 countries and affecting 9 million teachers[30]. The halt of in-class education not only affected students, who suddenly saw their futures in jeopardy, and teachers, who were not fully prepared to provide remote schooling, it also impacted the educational community as a whole.

Governments and institutions working in the education sector, including ProFuturo, have had to respond as swiftly as possible to the challenges posed by this new and uncertain reality. At ProFuturo, we have done our best to provide the educational community with our experience in digital education and in working with vulnerable communities around the world. To do this, we have had to rethink what we do and how we do it, adjusting our approach to remote learning and this had an important impact on how we have been implementing our program so far.

ProFuturo was created in 2016 by Telefónica Foundation and "la Caixa" Foundation to reduce the educational gap in the world by providing quality digital education for girls and boys living in vulnerable environments. To do so, we use technology, which allows us to reach more people in less time, as well as innovative teaching-learning methodologies to equip teachers and students with the skills needed for the digital era. These tools have enabled us to train over 500,000 teachers and to help improve the education of 15 million

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[30] UNESCO, *COVID-19 Impact on Education*
https://en.unesco.org/COVID-19/educationresponse

children in 40 countries of Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia[31].

The transforming power of digital education

During these four years we have championed digital education in the firm belief that it helps to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This year, the pandemic has further demonstrated the need to advance towards educational models that are adapted to the 21st century digital society, making our efforts more relevant and significant than ever.

It has also demonstrated that digital education is much more than the technology that makes it possible. At ProFuturo we have incorporated innovative non-linear teaching methodologies that give students an active role in their learning process, as opposed to memory-based learning. We have seen how this enhances critical thinking, participation and collaborative work, resulting in greater motivation.

In addition, the teachers that are in our program can monitor the work and progress of each student and personalize learning. We are also able to measure and assess the progress, scope and impact of our work continuously, helping us to detect improvement opportunities.

From the very start of the crisis, at ProFuturo we realized we could play an important role in contributing to the continuity of education in all environments. We had the experience, the means and a presence in 40 countries worldwide. Digital education, the cornerstone of our project since 2016, had now become a great ally

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[31] Figures for 2020 pending audit.

to safely provide teachers and students with the training and learning needed to continue their work from home.

In March, when the health and educational crisis began to spread around world, we started to design a contingency strategy based on four elements: opening our digital educational resources, free of charge, to the world, sharing our content with governments and institutions to reach more people, adapting our work to reach the unconnected, and strengthening support for our implementing partners in the field.

It was clear to us that our priority was education and that through our program we could contribute to the continuity of teaching and learning. However, we were also aware that we needed to rethink the way we were used to working given that our program is mostly implemented with in person visits to schools, where we provide technological equipment and access to a digital learning platform that works offline and offers educational resources that cover most elementary education subjects.

School closures forced us to take our activity beyond the classroom walls. To this end, we opened our content to teachers, students and families around the world so they could access, free of charge, ProFuturo´s educational resources. In addition, given the increasing demand, we also made available our teacher training courses. In total, we provided, free of charge, 160 teacher training courses and 1,800 hours of elementary education level lessons in language, mathematics, science, technology and life skills, in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.[32]

To reach more countries and beneficiaries, we shared this content with governments and educational institutions so they could use it

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[32] ProFuturo, *Resources*
https://profuturo.education/en/resources/

on their own training platforms. In Peru, for instance, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, we developed an online platform - *Aula Digital en Casa* – that, in addition to offering educational resources, enables communication between teachers, students and families through messaging systems and discussion forums. By mid-September, 113,000 children had benefited from this project.

We also worked with international institutions such UNESCO, UNHCR, the World Bank, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization of Ibero-American States and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), to ensure that our resources reached even more people.

Opening our educational resources was a huge challenge. At a technical level, among other aspects, we had to triple the size of our infrastructure in order to increase capacity, allow for large scale content sharing and enhance user experience. In addition, we had to strengthen our support services to deal with the potential technical difficulties posed by a growing number of teachers and pupils accessing the system. As part of this process, we are currently working to define a "Policy of Open Access Resources" for ProFuturo.

The challenge of connecting the unconnected

The digital gap has become more evident during the pandemic, when many activities we used to do in the physical world went online. School closures highlighted the pre-crisis disparities in access to ICT and connectivity between the citizens of the world. The pandemic made educational opportunity more heavily dependent on digital opportunity, exacerbating inequalities.

ProFuturo works in all types of contexts, including remote areas with no Internet connectivity, and with vulnerable communities that do not own technological equipment. In order to connect the schools in these areas, we provide laptops and tablets and an internal network that enables accessing ProFuturo´s digital resources through these devices. When schools were closed due to the pandemic, it was impossible for ProFuturo to deliver technology to every household and provide access to its pedagogical methodology and digital education resources.

In an effort to ensure nobody was left behind, we had to come up with creative and innovative solutions to reach the unconnected communities which comprise such a large share of our regular beneficiaries. Over the last few months, we have turned our digital educational resources into workbooks that we have physically delivered to teachers and students, and we have produced podcasts and videos based on our educational content for radio and TV broadcast. For example, in Panama we have adapted our resources to broadcast lessons on national television, allowing 200,000 children to follow classes from home. In Brazil we provide five 22-minute lessons per week through various radio stations. In Spain, in an effort to ensure the connection of vulnerable families during the lockdown, we donated 10,000 tablets to the different Spanish regions, as well as to 32 social organizations.

In more remote areas we have tried to reach children through their teachers. In many cases, low tech digital communication platforms have allowed teachers to send links to activities and to communicate with their students, who could ask questions and send back their answers.

Digital teachers

Teachers have always been at the core of our program. They trigger the learning process and play a vital role in achieving a significant change in the quality of education. We support their professional development in order to enhance their teaching and digital skills, helping them to introduce technology into the classroom and provide the best education for their students.

Teacher training and support became even more necessary during the pandemic. On the one hand, teachers became key in reaching students and critical for the resilience of the education system. On the other hand, the crisis showed that they were not prepared to teach remotely as many lacked the necessary digital skills and were not familiar with the use of virtual platforms designed for this purpose.

For this reason, during these months we have reinforced the training of our local coaches, who are in turn responsible for training the teachers, and have provided free access to our teacher training courses in 4 languages through the ProFuturo website. The courses are designed to enhance their knowledge of educational innovation and ICT, their teaching and learning abilities and their digital skills. To date, over 1 million teachers have enrolled in our online training courses and around 350,000 have already completed at least one full course.

The pandemic presented an additional challenge for ProFuturo´s teacher training which, under normal circumstances, is provided both face-to-face and online (blended training). The situation forced us to adapt our resources to ensure that 100% of training could be provided remotely. To reach teachers with no Internet connection or computers we developed workbooks that were physically delivered to their homes and adapted lessons to other formats such

as radio podcasts and videos that could be shared using smartphones and downloaded barely using data.

For instance, in Nigeria, Liberia and Tanzania, the use of these alternative formats allowed us to train 15,100 teachers during the pandemic through a project we are developing in partnership with the Empieza por Educar Foundation and several members of the international Teach for All network.

United for education

The support of our partners was critical to meet all these challenges. At ProFuturo we have always worked through local and global partnerships. In the 40 countries in which we are present, we implement our projects with the help of different types of partners: from small religious congregations that run schools, through Education Ministries, foundations, educational associations and international institutions such as World Vision, Save the Children and the Entreculturas Foundation.

In the face of a global challenge on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration between institutions has become more important than ever. The crisis has underlined the value of education as a common good and a cornerstone for the development of societies, demanding collective leadership. In this regard, in March ProFuturo joined the Global Education Coalition set up by UNESCO to deal with the impact of the crisis on the education sector, and over the last few months we have actively participated in the global discussion on the future of education.

The pandemic has enhanced the value of collective action. In record time and under unprecedented circumstances, a large amount of know-how and innovation was developed to overcome obstacles

and ensure the continuity of education. This would not have been possible without the international cooperation we have witnessed and if the public and private sectors had not pulled so strongly in the same direction.

Leading a global team during the pandemic

As Managing Director of ProFuturo, during these months I have also had to face the challenges inherent to leading a team of professionals located in Madrid (our headquarters) and in the 40 countries in which we implement our program. Not only were we dealing with an unprecedented situation in terms of education, but this also posed an operational challenge given that most of our team worldwide had to stay at home and work remotely.

One of the first challenges we faced was dealing with the uncertainty and finding out what was going on in the various regions so we could provide an appropriate response to each situation and to the specific needs of the different contexts. It was hard to reach some of our local partners working in the most remote areas, but we finally managed to contact most of them. Our teams in the field awaited our instructions and, obviously, had many questions about how they would be personally affected by the closure of schools.

From the very start of the crisis, we kept in constant contact with our staff and local partners to get a better grasp of the situation in the field and ensure our teams felt supported. We decided that the project goals we had set at the beginning of the year had to be put on hold and that the priority was to ensure the continuity of education and the jobs of our local staff.

Perhaps the hardest thing during those first few months was dealing with the personal side to the crisis. Overnight we were quarantined,

each with our own personal circumstances, which obviously affected our work, but at the same time aware of what was at stake if education stopped. It was not easy to ask people who had maybe lost a relative to the coronavirus or who were responsible for the care of their children or elderly to make an additional effort to put our contingency strategy into action as quickly as possible.

The challenge was even greater in the field, where some of our teachers had lost their jobs and were concerned with mere survival. From ProFuturo, we provided all the means to stay in touch with them and support their work in such challenging conditions.

A crisis that became an opportunity

There is no doubt that the pandemic will mark a turning point in the education sector. We are still unable to measure the consequences and foresee how these months will affect learning outcomes around the world, how many children will not be returning to school after the pandemic, the number of teachers who will leave the teaching profession because they were forced to find other means of earning a living during the pandemic …. We cannot fully evaluate the dimension of the consequences right now, but it is clear that the pandemic has increased inequalities and widened the education gap in the world, especially for girls.

However, this crisis has also brought about opportunities for the sector. The pandemic has put in place that the right of education is no longer left behind and it has accelerated the long-due need to transform the education model, highlighting the need to digitalize teaching and to equip students and teachers with the skills required to live and work in the digital age.

The educational curriculum must be reviewed and updated. We need to educate for the future in a post-pandemic situation. Education must be made more participatory, more creative, more digital and

also more human. The interrelation and communication between the students, families, teachers and the schools need to be more effective than ever.

Students have started to return to school, but this is not back to school after the summer vacation. They have returned wounded, beaten, fearful and insecure after a very hard lockdown. It is perhaps a good time to introduce emotional education, which is so necessary to deal with life, with or without a pandemic.

There is also an opportunity to create a more inclusive education system. Digital education should no longer be a luxury; it should become a useful and necessary tool to help improve the quality of education for all. At ProFuturo we believe that, properly used, technology brings people together and can be a force for equity. This is why we have been championing digital education for four years now and will continue to do so until it becomes a reality in every corner of the planet. Technology not only makes it possible to personalize education, but it also tears down geographical and social barriers, enabling quality education to reach the remotest parts of the world.

The pandemic has opened the discussion on the model of education we want and need, placing education– for the first time in many years- at the center of the global agenda. This is an excellent opportunity to get together, share our knowledge and experience, exchange best practices and put forward creative solutions to build together the education we deserve. It is also the time for governments and institutions to provide more resources in order to carry out the necessary reforms. Having education in the spotlight will help, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the pandemic has left a huge crisis in many sectors and that funds are limited. We will need good leadership to secure the funding, and efficient management to make the most of the resources, ensuring that education obtains the utmost benefit.

From ProFuturo we will help to build this new educational model, putting our experience in digital education at the service of this transformation. The vision and mission of our program have been strengthened during this pandemic, which is why – with more enthusiasm and motivation than ever- we will work relentlessly to continue taking quality digital education to every corner of the planet, scaling up our program in order to reach, with the same rigor as up to now, 25 million children by 2030.

On the one hand, we will continue to develop new forms of implementing our program to be able to respond to the needs of the different areas and best adapt to the current mobility, healthcare and financial restrictions. On the other hand, we will reinforce our partnerships with governments and educational institutions to develop joint projects that share resources and allow more efficient action.

From the beginning, we have been working to ensure the sustainability of our program. So, we will continue to strengthen our public-private partnerships with governments, educational institutions and other stakeholders. This will allow to develop joint projects that share resources and guarantee more effective action over time. Only by working together will we be able to achieve our common goals and contribute to the design and implementation of effective innovative public policies in the field of education. The challenge is huge, but together we can make it happen.

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Changing the rules of the game: reevaluating learning in the face of a global pandemic

Dina Buchbinder

On March 16th, 2020 I returned home after three weeks abroad. I had recently spent a week in Jaisalmer, India, leading a "Change Team" to facilitate a play and movement workshop at the RoundGlass Learning Summit for Holistic Wellbeing. I had then spent two weeks in New Zealand to oversee our first ever Education for Sharing (E4S) implementation at Invercargill, at the south of the South Island. My husband Adrian, and I returned to Mexico on March 15th to pick-up our kids who had stayed with their courageous grandparents for the three weeks (bless them). We were there for 24 hours before returning to our home in New York City, only to find, a week later, that schools were closing. COVID-19 had become a more serious threat than we had imagined.

We spent the rest of March and until July in lockdown, working from home and watching over our 3-year-old and 11-month-old kids 24/7. Suddenly, I found myself cooking, cleaning, babysitting, and working, all under the same roof, all under this new, huge world crisis. Simultaneously, I had to take care of my E4S team. We had the newfound anxiety and fear of losing our jobs, which strained us all. We had to juggle work overload and reconfiguring our usual implementation, while trying to figure out how to deal with school closures. Most of our projects were put "on-hold", in the best-case scenario, while we worked to reinvent, reimagine, re-engineer, and move everything online while still pursuing our longstanding commitments. Needless to say, due to the huge economic impact, we had to furlough an important number of team members (57 of 121), which broke our hearts. As for the rest of the team, we all worked with reduced salaries. This was paradoxically unsettling:

there was a lot more work and responsibility, and lower economic compensation.

Because we found ourselves struggling in this new reality, we quickly understood that wellbeing—mental, emotional and physical health—was at dire risk due not only to confinement, but as an aftermath of uncertainty and financial insecurity. I confess that during these months I had trouble sleeping, thinking about what not going to school meant for millions of children, having to stay at home under far from stimulating environments, thinking of the violence some must have to bear, and the repercussions that these scars would have.

Prior to the pandemic, in E4S, we have historically been determined to work in person, because we claim there is no true virtual substitute for the profound connections that are interwoven in the flesh: being able to interact and to use all one's senses to "get" the other person is irreplaceable.

Teachers, for instance, have had to quickly learn how to migrate their classes online all, whilst simultaneously coping with what happens at home, whether they are mothers and have to play three or four roles at a time, or just managing with confinement and the toll it exerts on all of us. The kids themselves are overwhelmed. Many haven't seen their friends or spent so much time in front of a screen or been so exposed to domestic violence. It's hard for them to focus or pay full attention. It all soon becomes a vicious cycle.

Parents and teachers can get lost with the overwhelming number of online content options. At E4S we were determined not to create redundant content, but to make it meaningful, to better serve them at home during this time. So, we carried out a diagnostic survey via all the outlets we had at hand. We used Whatsapp, Facebook, phone calls and emails to learn what the people were struggling with to turn our in-person operation to an online and/or distance learning approach.

With this in mind, we built and donated the online "#AlsoAtHome Campaign" with E4S activities, tutorials, experiments and games to help teachers and parents create a home environment where they could also learn together with children. Especially during such stressful times, we wanted to open windows of possibility, to remind that there is so much to celebrate. We believe play- a fun, meaningful time to connect, discover, create, and share- is a phenomenal vehicle to make this evident.

In the midst of this campaign, we were struck by the contrasting power of digital reach. Over the past 13 years, we have been truly privileged to work hand in hand with 1.3 million beneficiaries, always in-person. With our #AlsoAtHome campaign we reached 3.6 million people in only a few months. There is, of course, a difference in depth, but the results are striking. Still, reaching communities without connectivity poses a different challenge. Previously we would be there physically, making sure everyone received their booklets, boxes or digital content. Nowadays, it is not so easy.

Another challenge was to translate very hands-on activities such as physical, cooperative games into their digital counterparts. This is ongoing, however, the most challenging aspect of leading in education now is the fact that we are educating children, teachers and parents everywhere to function in a *very* different daily life. The world itself has changed. In the face of having to move education online, we discovered we were not even fully aware of what we were teaching before the storm. We have needed to reassess what we teach, how we teach it, and why. To me, the single most important thing is re-prioritizing learning with a purpose. We can no longer afford a mindless education where we are merely recipients of information. We need to learn about our purpose in a meaningful way. Moreover, we can no longer afford to leave anyone behind while we are at it.

The first months of the pandemic were the toughest, due to the learning curve of so many adaptations, and I learned that before I take care of others, I also have to be well. At home, my husband and I struggled to create a routine to organize our work and our kids' needs. This was not straight forward: my work schedule is not fixed, rather I tend to evolve my project planning many times each week. Still, the imaginative and spontaneous aspects of play are not to be discarded as one grows up. On the contrary, play offers me/us a huge return on investment, as it gives me perspective, a cohesive structure from where to think, at home and together with my work team. At work, while we had to be extremely practical, my leadership was focused on our human essence, very close to E4S´s values and mission. I was touching base with the team constantly to understand where they and their families were at.

At first, I found myself wanting to do and try everything. I was overwhelming myself and my team at times, unable to find the right balance to take care of myself. Not to mention, as time elapsed, I sensed things were not simply going "back to normal". The fact that this pandemic has extended for so long is truly strenuous as well. At times, I had to make decisions fast and accurately, which involved planning or choosing how to use time and financial resources. I have struggled with understanding where others are, what their situation is. Then, dealing with my own emotions, how they come and go. How could I provide the best opportunities to my team with such little information? COVID-19 has also been a socially humbling experience in terms of inhabiting uncertainty.

Which brings me to one of the crucial aspects of the pandemic in terms of education: whether we will decide to focus on academic performance or mental and emotional health, considering support as a priority. Yes, we can expect that academic achievement will suffer. This is, however, not the full extent of the impact and consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic could bring about over the next years.

We expect to see changes in social interactions as a direct consequence of time spent in isolation, and online due to COVID-19. Moreover, many people will have been furloughed or laid off leading to economic hardship, and of course many millions are grieving the loss of a loved one. The economic impact will be enormous. Inequality will be exacerbated. So, unless we are willing to adapt our understanding of and programs in education, we will compromise meaningful learning.

Knowledge is not enough by itself. Academic learning can be recovered, but mental and emotional health are much more difficult to rebuild. They are not mutually exclusive, but actually, go hand in hand. Without good mental and emotional health, there is little to non-academic achievement that can happen either. We need to be better prepared for what lies ahead after the pandemic. More room for systems preparing and having different scenarios to implement in the light of the current crisis, and the ones to come will be crucial. If our greatest energies are funneled to prioritize agency, creativity, entrepreneurship skills, self-confidence, social meaningful interaction, then we might finally experience a highly positive shift in education systems.

In hindsight, and still in "the eye of the hurricane"—as we are still in transition and this is not "over" yet— as I write these words, I think about how I have recently dealt with these challenges at E4S. I realize it was precisely by focusing on our purpose, not the crisis, that we progressed.

One of the first measures I implemented during lockdown was a mindfulness course facilitated by family therapist Flora Auron Zaltzman, PhD and a teacher Cecilia Jinich, to all my team. This allowed me to better understand that some of them were already in a burn out phase.

Similar to what we promote in schools, I asked the team to brainstorm different initiatives to adapt our programs. This brought a lot of motivation to the team, they felt needed, creative, useful and a shared responsibility. Several amazing ideas and initiatives, triumphs from the E4S team emerged during this pandemic of pandemics, I want to highlight five:

1) The aforementioned #AlsoAtHome campaign.

2) We offered a "gift" to the Ministry of Education in Mexico in the form of games to help implement health protocols while raising children's agency from home and preparing them for whenever they returned to schools. These games appear on the Ministry's main webpage https://aprendeencasa.sep.gob.mx

3) We launched, alongside the Mexican President's office and the Ministry of Education, and STEAM Movement, the first book to translate the Sustainable Development Goals, 2030 Agenda, for all 6th graders across Mexico. Millions of children will receive this gift, which was fully shaped by the E4S methodology. https://conaliteg.sep.gob.mx/cuadernillo_ODS.pdf

4) A huge milestone for our organization was receiving the WISE Awards from the Qatar Foundation in October 2020. This provided us with additional motivation to continue adapting our education systems and aiming for wider global reach.

5) We had planned on launching our first Global Advisory Board in September 2020 and had been working on it for 6 months. But we decided we would bring forward the launch of our Global Advisory board in June 2020. 32 extraordinary people from every continent and from the most extraordinarily diverse backgrounds came on board to support our mission.

Under ordinary conditions my style of leadership is very horizontal, and I make it a priority to listen and include the team's perspectives. This time I added a huge dose of flexibility, trying to envision and feel what I couldn't see or touch. I am positive that we were able to

continue working because we have been nurturing our organizational culture and practice for a long time. I honestly don't think we could have reacted this way were it not for this solid platform of values that have informed our actions in the past almost 14 years. When we have complex, tough conversations and situations, we share the same ideals. We trust each other. We listen to and support each other.

Trust and support are at the core of E4S because they are guiding principles of play. Over the years, we have advocated that play brings communities together in shared activities and challenges that invite them to participate as equals, to reflect about their situation from a refreshing perspective, and to respond to their needs from a collaborative approach. Yet, while play is found within curricula as a desirable component to facilitate learning, it is not common in most classrooms, and even less so in "home learning" activities.

This does not mean that children are not playing, but that they do it (mostly) without an explicit educational planned purpose, whether from teachers or family.

For a long time, the concept of play has been underestimated as a tool for learning and has been conceived as a reward for academic achievement. In the COVID-19 context where we have limited contact, ludic strategies become even more useful to bond with children, opening up spaces for expression where they share their emotions and develop self-confidence.

A survey of parents in Mexico by Valora, an education consultancy, recently reported there has been little progress in our children's learning, which really makes me wonder, is this possible? It is more likely that there are countless forms of learnings that have not yet been accounted for and that require teachers, families, and other educators to be recognized and named. And as E4S has helped to prove, play is a most powerful vehicle to build school communities

where flexibility, democracy, active participation, practice of values, and the development of social competencies are the norm. All these are essential to face present and future crises.

After almost 14 years of running E4S, my team and I are more convinced than ever that play is a key ally to develop at least five fundamental skills for the future of learning in order to have better education systems and more resourceful societies:

1. Shifting mindsets, behaviors, and practices to create new possibilities.

2. Managing risks.

3. Dealing positively with the unexpected.

4. Navigating with resilience a time defined by the lack of information (and this, in particular, could not be timelier).

5. Unfolding the notion and practice of personalized learning, because in every mind and heart there is a universe with different learning styles.

Furthermore, we have discovered that thoughtfully designing play opportunities for kids (of all ages) contributes to students' cognitive, social, physical, and emotional wellbeing— not to mention their learning and their ability to problem-solve. If we fail to incorporate play in our everyday, we may miss a golden opportunity to best nurture our children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

During these trying times, the most important thing that has kept me afloat has been a sense of shared purpose within E4S, which is quite simply to form better global citizens through play, making sure we leave no one behind while we are at it. And knowing we are never alone. I have the inspiration of my spectacular team, the guidance of our advisors and board members, the support of the communities we belong to, such as Ashoka, LEGO Foundation, BMW

Responsible Leaders, as well as my professors and friends from Harvard, MIT, and ITAM University.

No matter how challenging the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be, my hope is that we transform this global suffering into momentum that changes the narrative, to focus on solutions, to be "antifragile" in the face of present and future challenges. My hope is that our senses awaken. Our goal right now should be to refine our focus and collective impact, on leaving a healthy, kind, empathetic world for the most valuable asset we have: our children.

Dina Buchbinder is a social entrepreneur passionate about children and their potential. In 2007, she founded Education for Sharing, a cutting-edge, action-oriented, international organization that forms better global citizens using the power of play.

Dina is an Ashoka Fellow, an Edmund Hillary Fellow, a Schusterman Fellow, a Vital Voices Lead Fellow, and a World Economic Forum Global Shaper.

She is also a Hubert Humphrey Fellow in Urban Planning at MIT and holds a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School. https://educacionparacompartir.org/en/

Leadership in Development Education through the Covid-19 Pandemic

Peter Campling and Tim Howarth

United World Schools (UWS) is an international educational, not-for-profit organization which develops community schools for out-of-school children in remote and extremely poor regions of Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal.

The UWS mission is to transform through education the life opportunities of children living in some of the world's poorest communities. To date, UWS has developed almost 250 free-to-attend schools, enabling around 40,000 students to go to school. Our modus operandi is to deliver low-cost education by being pragmatic and innovative, rapidly scaling and replicating successful ideas.

Introduction

Manufacturing soap, promoting 'the length of a cow', using 'banana selling' loudspeakers & producing radio programs – these were not things we had envisaged doing at the start of 2020!

The pandemic that ensued in March 2020 generated many challenges and completely changed our carefully laid out plans for the year. In retrospect we can draw some important lessons about what worked well, what we could have done better and how we were still able to make progress. Four key themes, which will be explored in more depth in this article, emerge:

1. leadership challenges
2. operational model
3. organizational values and driving progress
4. maintaining a growth mindset

Leadership challenges presented by the pandemic

Balanced, devolved and diverse leadership drives the UWS mission. The quality of leadership, at all levels, has been critical. Local leadership and stakeholder engagement have been particularly important to successful implementation during periods of travel restrictions and lockdown. We have looked for opportunities to devolve leadership – often in the face of local cultural norms – and to generate a sense of collective responsibility. This has paid rich dividends through the pandemic.

At the start of the pandemic there was widespread fear and uncertainty. For UWS this was not just about the issue of health, but of our whole operation, our programs and our finances. We were faced with the option of either closing things down, playing safe and waiting for the crisis to pass (an approach understandably taken by many INGOs), or adjusting to and engaging with the new challenges – in other words, taking responsibility for embracing and managing the uncertainty and fear.

We chose the latter and 2020 became a successful year. Our approach enabled us to drive our mission forwards and engaged our partners and supporters directly with our plans. We were able to overcome the fear and uncertainty that could easily have destabilized us. In the process we also helped to build trust across the organization and within the communities with which we work.

We deliver the UWS mission by working in partnership with communities and the education authorities, to build schools and

provide relevant, quality-assured, inclusive education. We began 2020 with a confident schedule of improving our current schools, building new schools, and transitioning our more developed schools to the community and the state (a key part of our model which ensures the long-term sustainability of the schools and enables the organization to keep extending its reach).

By March 2020 we were faced with a situation where all 226 of our schools were closed, transport (both in-country and international) was restricted, affecting the movement of the 1000+ UWS staff, as well as the distribution of materials and resources. Our building program, communication with partner organizations and government administrations, our own global training programs and schedule of school support and our systems for monitoring and evaluating progress and impact, had all effectively ground to a halt.

We were determined to do all we could to support the communities through the health crisis whilst also keeping some form of educational provision going. Our aim is to 'teach the unreached' and having started the fragile process of introducing education to communities where previously there was none, we were determined not to lose it. We effectively switched our focus – in a matter of weeks – from building and running schools, to providing remote learning and health support.

To do this, there were of course significant practical challenges to overcome: deployment of people, transport, communication, and resources. This is where the 'modus operandi' we pride ourselves on in 'normal' times came to the fore, with our staff at all levels rising to the challenge – taking on collective responsibility and showing pragmatism, flexibility, and innovation to overcome whatever problems arose.

Operational Model, and the challenge of directly confronting the pandemic

We needed to maintain our discipline in keeping to our core model. The UWS model is simple and clear: low cost, high impact, inclusive, relevant quality and sustainable. This helps cut through the complexity of the pandemic. This is a challenge of leadership - particularly in a time of crisis - and crucial to our operational success, as it safeguards new initiatives from compromising other areas of the mission and ensures that all we do, we do well.

At each level of leadership, we sought strong compliance with our 'modus operandi', our core model, our values, and our mission. Trust in these and in each other, is ultimately what determines our success.

i)   At global / executive level

Our first challenge was of 'organizational flexibility', not just working with our in-country teams to adapt and re-focus their work in the 'field', but also to convince our UK based programs, funding and administrative teams, our Board, and our current and potential supporters – private, corporate and institutional – of the need for and value in doing this.

Through proactive communication and co-ordination, we were able to quickly re-align the organization towards confronting the challenges the pandemic presented. We kept this simple: our three key 'COVID-19 Campaigns'.

- Upgrading the water supply and handwashing/sanitation ('WaSH') facilities in our schools and opening these up for community use.

- Running COVID-19 'health and awareness' campaigns in the communities, both for safe avoidance of the virus and for how to respond should it arrive.

- Ensuring some form of remote learning was provided in each community, throughout the period of school closure

All of these initiatives needed to fall within the remit of our core model and thus our areas of expertise. In these times of crisis there was a strong temptation to go beyond this, but we resisted. For example, we upgraded our water supplies and WaSH facilities in schools and opened them up to community use – but we did not attempt to provide new water / WaSH facilities in the villages.

Despite some pressure to do so, we did not support the communities in ways 'new' to us, such as providing food or medical provisions. It is unlikely we would have done them very well and it would certainly have limited our impact in delivering what we are good at - our core model.

Given the change in our focus, it was important to carry into the crisis period the good practice and principles we had previously developed. A key one of these was to ensure effective monitoring, evaluation & learning (MEL) of all our initiatives to measure progress, supported by good internal communication. This enabled us to support and hold to account our teams, and to be able to provide evidence of impact to donors.

ii)   At national / senior level

A significant challenge at national level, faced by all our programs, is that of managing the shifting sands of local and national policy. The COVID-19 impact in each country exacerbated things considerably, with school opening and closing schedules, school safety regulations,

travel restrictions, and access to resources sometimes changing by the week. With uncertainty becoming normalized, the importance of collective responsibility, of keeping to the simplicity of our core model and of being flexible and pragmatic became more evident. There were many examples of our 'modus operandi' resulting in problem solving innovations:

- Opening school WaSH facilities to the community might sound simple, but a lot of effort was spent in ensuring appropriate and safe standards, at low cost. For example, the cost of providing enough soap was going to be prohibitive, so our teams began manufacturing their own soap, sharing techniques, and using local ingredients.
- Our COVID-19 Awareness Campaign was also complicated by having to be effective across multiple languages and cultures. For example, promoting 'social distancing' or even '2 meters apart' did not translate, so when one of our teams came up with 'the distance of a cow', this quickly caught on across all our programs.
- Perhaps most innovative were the range of approaches that our team's developed for remote learning – 'take away' projects, forest classrooms, use of phones and even loudspeakers (previously used for selling bananas!) were all effectively utilized.
- In Nepal we set up a series of lessons for our students through local radio broadcasts – phones / phone signals being hard to come by in the remote Himalayas. These attracted the admiration of the authorities and we are now broadcasting regularly to a far larger group of children than are enrolled in our schools.

Our leadership philosophy helped accelerate our plans to devolve decision making across the organization. We intentionally assumed a professional culture of trust, which enabled people and teams to be creative, to share problems and solutions, to take risks and, at times, to fail – without fear of repercussions.

iii)   At local community level

One of the key factors behind the success of our programs in general and particularly during this period, is our emphasis on developing quality local leadership and stakeholder engagement. We set up and train a School Support Committee. We also employ and train community teachers – local people who speak both the local and national language and understand local culture. We thus have trusted actors able to implement projects quickly and effectively. When the pandemic struck and many other teachers and development projects had to stop work, our School Support Committees and community teachers became key players in rolling out our initiatives.

Organizational values & driving progress; our achievements during the pandemic

Our values are our 'modus operandi'. Working in remote and marginalized communities across varied regions in three countries, requires a certain approach / way of working to meet the many challenges that arise. Whilst the pandemic has presented deeper and more urgent challenges, the way we have met these remains the same - through being pragmatic, flexible, nimble and innovative - working together to 'get the job done'.

Whilst the pandemic has presented many challenges, it has also provided the chance to develop in a range of areas, including - policy, procedures, and planning; monitoring and evaluation; communication; people development and partnerships.

We have learnt a great deal through 2020. The key themes we present here are from a retrospective position. For UWS they are all areas of on-going development and we certainly have no room for complacency. Our success in 2020 has been driven by the quality of our leaders and our approach to leadership, as well as reflecting our core model of discipline and our 'modus operandi'. This gave us a

platform to focus on our third key theme: exploiting opportunities that arise through the crisis, to progress in key areas.

We certainly did this in 2020, whether through things like the enhanced use of technology and improving communication, or through sheer hard work and the determination to maximize any gained time that came our way through not being able to commute, fly, visit schools and so on.

We did not just confront the challenge of the pandemic, we sought to take advantage of the opportunities it presented, for example:

- Following an audit and upgrade program (and appeal) in 2020, all UWS schools now have an adequate water supply and WHO standard WaSH facilities, which are open to the community at times of school closure.
- The two stage 'COVID-19 Awareness Campaign' has been delivered by our community teachers in all our communities. Rather than being directed from our headquarters, this campaign was designed and led by our UWS Country Director in Myanmar.
- Some form of primary education provision has continued in all our communities. 73% of our students (over 15,000 children) have engaged with these programmes. In Nepal an additional 20,000+ children who do not attend a UWS school, have also been learning through our lessons on the radio. We estimate that over 85% of our students in Nepal and Cambodia, have returned to school so far, post initial school closures.
- Despite being locked down for most of the year, an additional 31 UWS schools and community learning sites were opened in 2020, in remote areas where previously no formal education was available.
- A (first) cohort of five schools in Cambodia, seven in Myanmar and one in Nepal have transitioned in 2020 to local

community control, within the government sector. In 2020 our advocacy work accelerated and five-year schedules (2021 – 2025) for transition were agreed and MOUs signed with the authorities in each country.

- A new UWS 'MEL' plan was produced in 2020, which includes establishing a new School Information Management System, a new Reconnaissance Report and a new School Development Report. Two major new UWS Policies were created and implemented, on inclusion in our schools and on our environmental practices.

- Despite the charity sector suffering significantly reduced income due to the pandemic, UWS generated c.$3.5m in funding in 2020, with several areas of income generation increasing on the previous year.

In addition, in 2020 UWS won several prestigious international awards for our work in the development education sector, as well as developing greater trust and collaboration with highly regarded peer organizations.

Growth mindset & leadership within our sphere of influence during the pandemic

Growth is in our DNA. UWS has not just coped and survived through the pandemic; we have grown and made significant progress in these important areas. Whilst we are immensely proud of our teams for all the above achievements, the pandemic has been difficult, challenging and emotionally draining on school and educational leaders. Like almost all organizations, our leadership has been placed under great strain – and we have learnt much about ourselves and our organization as a result. Here are some of the lessons learned.

In 2020, with the support of the UWS Board and advice from trusted colleagues around the world, UWS's leadership group has made many decisions, very quickly and, as should be expected, not all of

them have been correct. For example, we should have prioritized our approach to supporting staff wellbeing much earlier in the year. We could have been even bolder in fast tracking devolved leadership across the organization. We can also positively reflect on some key themes that enabled us to lead within our sphere of influence.

(i) **Taking rapid, collective action** (with a focus on collective responsibility *and* personal accountability).

As a leadership group, we have been prepared to change plans, and swiftly. In the same way, as we plan for 2021-23, our plans are regarded as a guide, rather than a 'static' plan. We anticipate the need to change and to iteratively develop plans.

Our global leadership team, or a subset of this as the situation requires, represent the 'rapid response' group who may need to move quickly. As we move, we deliver our duty of care to keep colleagues and stakeholders informed as decision are made, and leverage partnership opportunities where appropriate.

(ii) **Prioritize staff wellbeing**

We became acutely aware that staff morale, mental health and wellbeing are key considerations for managing the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 successfully. We increasingly understood the importance of signposting wellbeing resources, regular check-ins (both informal and formal) and, where feasible and relevant, factoring professional support into team planning. We needed to nurture an environment where colleagues feel authentically connected; regular internal virtual communication and, wherever possible, face to face communication is prioritized for 2021.

This vital investment also requires time, so we implemented monthly 'wellbeing' days where colleagues are asked to take a working day away from their day jobs to invest in themselves and their wellbeing.

Anecdotally, both overall productivity and trust in leadership increased as a result; asking people *not* to just 'plough on', but to ensure they are investing in themselves, was a wise investment in the organization's overall health and wellbeing.

(iii) **Maintain a growth mind-set** and growth planning - as 'pragmatic optimists'.

In Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal, we have maintained our commitment to, and articulation of, sustainable and ambitious growth in 2021 and beyond. Much like viruses, positivity is infectious and has far reaching impacts, both internally and externally. We have intentionally been upbeat and positive about what we can achieve.

More than ever before, we are also looking to collaborate and co-construct plans. As we look ahead, partnership investment is vital to leverage the capability and capacity of peer organizations, whilst de-risking some elements of planned growth. In peer conversations, we notice the appetite for this – perhaps the multi-sectoral impact of CV19 has given a commonality of challenge that has brought us closer to some of our most trusted partners.

(iv) **Double down on simplicity** and clarity of our operational model

In highly uncertain times, we can lead by having and demonstrating complete confidence in our model, whilst being disciplined to remove complexity from our operations wherever possible. Simplicity has many benefits; for example, it enables clear communication – so crucial during periods of lockdown – and therefore good decision making and rapid action.

Simplicity can facilitate organizational agility that remains mission focused. For example, in 2020, as discussed in section 3, we doubled down on our strategic approach to transitioning our maturing community schools into the government systems in which we operate. Decisions can then be made - on a devolved basis - to move

schools towards this vital milestone, locking in sustainable impact for generations to come.

Concluding remarks:

The educational consequences of the pandemic in the next five years are both significant, and almost certainly, not yet fully understood. We are looking at a steep mountain to climb.

The pandemic will almost certainly move us backwards in our global progress towards many of the sustainable development goals, and perhaps SDG4 in particular. We fear the widening of the educational gap, compounded by the enhanced challenges of managing educational inclusion, and supporting student and staff wellbeing. With economic downturns and fiscal tightening, funding for education projects globally – both from government and philanthropy – will be limited.

And yet, as 2020 has demonstrated for UWS, there are many reasons to maintain a positive outlook in the education sector. With a robust core operational model, senior leaders can trust their teams and colleagues to deliver inspiring results. With investment in mental wellbeing, teachers and school leaders can manage extraordinary challenges. When aligned to a clear, simple mission, social entrepreneurs will continue to find ways to deliver, from which we can all learn. With flexibility and adaptability, ideas can be implemented quickly and effectively.

This is a vital decade for human development. As we approach 2030, we can – and must – do everything within our power to deliver SDG4 (universal access to quality education). We should expect future crises and will use what we have learnt from COVID-19 to successfully lead through them and manage them. As a development

education organization, we constantly strive to improve - and to deliver for our students and their communities.

Peter Campling is Global Programs Director of United World Schools, working closely with teams in Cambodia, Myanmar and Nepal to deliver a high-quality education to all of the children UWS supports. With Degrees and master's in international development and in teaching he has worked in the UK education system for the past 25 years. After seven years as Headteacher of an inner-London secondary school, Peter established himself as a leadership specialist, coach and trainer. He has worked for a range of schools across the primary and secondary sectors, as well as for leading national organizations such as the Association of School and College Leaders, Ambition School Leadership, the Cooperative College and Oxfam Education.

Tim Howarth is the Chief Executive Officer of United World Schools. Under his leadership, UWS has reached over 36,000 previously out-of-schoolchildren through education with a network of over 220 UWS Community Schools in remote regions of South East Asia. Tim is a trained teacher. Prior to his time at UWS, he has worked in a number of schools and educational organizations in the UK and Australia, responsible for staff performance, development and training. As an educational consultant, Tim has also worked with headteachers and school leaders to develop teaching and leadership capacity in UK schools. Since 2011, Tim increasingly devoted his time to growing and scaling the work of UWS, a charity that his family founded in 2009. He became Chief Operating Officer in 2012, and Chief Executive in 2015. Tim is a Fellow of the RSA and since 2019 has been listed on the UK Social Entrepreneur Index, which recognizes the UK's most influential social entrepreneurs.

Establishing a new global education organization amidst a once a century health crisis

Nick Canning

How we got here

Before the COVID-19 crisis was the learning crisis. 268 million children were already out of school before the pandemic struck[33]. By the age of 10, 90% of children in low-income countries are not able to read with comprehension, compared with 9% in high-income countries[34]. One third of the working age population in low- and middle-income countries lacks the basic skills required to get quality jobs[35]. The world is also changing, and most schools are not able to develop the broader knowledge, skills and values that children - and societies - need to thrive in the 21st century [36].

I have been grappling with these issues for nearly two decades of working in global education from different vantage points: first, working for the UK government, then helping to build the international NGO Teach For All to develop educational leadership in more than 50 countries.

Although there are a number of causes of this learning crisis, I came to the conclusion that one fundamental problem is that most schools in lower-resourced contexts are not designed for

[33] http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth

[34] Azevedo et al. 2019

[35] World Bank

[36] Insights on the value of whole child development, Porticus and ACER

the job we need them to do today. Teachers are often expected to cover the textbook, rather than teach each child at the level they have reached. Rote learning is pervasive. Curriculum requirements tend to be unrealistic and not reflective of the current needs of children and society. Assessments usually focus on memorization rather than deeper levels of conceptual understanding, critical thinking and problem solving, let alone non-cognitive skills. Schools are rarely held responsible for pupil safety and wellbeing, nor do they provide additional support to address the consequences of the adversity many children arrive at school with. Wider school systems tend to promote accountability for process compliance, not learning.

Of course, there are many exceptions to this bleak picture. But much more needs to be done to support innovation in core models of schooling in developing countries and_to spread effective approaches. In 2018 I launched a new NGO to do just that.

Kizazi works with local NGOs and government partners to test, codify and spread new models for schools. We work in partnership with local educational systems, helping them to diagnose issues with their schools, support them to develop and implement better models, and then scale them to reach more children. Kizazi's approach brings together the ability of outside organizations to innovate, with the capacity of public systems to enable real change at scale. It also combines the potential of global networks to spread learning rapidly, with the need for solutions that are designed and rooted in their local context.

In 2019, we launched projects in India, Armenia, Ghana and had work in development in Nigeria. Then the pandemic hit. The most immediate consequence for Kizazi was the closure

of schools in all our partner countries. More than 1.5 billion children globally saw their schools close, with at least a third of those not experiencing any form of remote learning[37]. Aside from the consequences for learning and physical health, lockdowns have had serious impacts on family livelihoods, mental health, and in some cases, resulted in hunger, hardship and rising risks of exploitation, violence and abuse for children[38]. Some of the countries that Kizazi works in have had to face unimaginable challenges on top of the virus. Armenia has faced a devastating war during the pandemic, and outrage over institutionalized police brutality has risen to the fore in Nigeria.

These issues raised profound issues for Kizazi and our local partners. How could we best respond to both the rising education crisis and wider challenges in the communities we are working in? To what extent should we pivot to focus on the immediate crisis, or stay focused on our long-term mission? How long will the crisis last? How widespread will its impacts be?

In addition, how could we, as a global organization, contribute to addressing these critical challenges when international travel to our partners is impossible? How could we maintain growth in an environment of huge uncertainty for schools, governments and funders? It has certainly not been the most straightforward time to be attempting to establish a new global education organization, but it has been a moment when the importance of our work has felt strikingly clear.

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[37] UNICEF

[38] https://www.unicef.org/thailand/press-releases/8-10-youth-worried-about-their-family-income-due-covid-19

Responding to the challenges of the pandemic

Before we can expect children to learn, we have to attend to their basic needs – food, shelter and health. This was not a given during lockdown in many of the communities where our partners work, and so the first priority for many was to step into the breach in areas where these fundamentals were lacking. Akanksha, one of our early partners in India, launched a task force to provide essential food supplies to the vulnerable families of their 9,000+ children in Mumbai and Pune who had previously relied on school meals. As well as providing distance learning opportunities, Akansha's inspirational teachers are also supporting their children's safety and emotional wellbeing through video counselling and arts activities.

The next challenge was maintaining continuity of learning. Recreating school on zoom is not an option in many communities in lower income countries, given lack of access to devices or bandwidth or sometimes electricity. Nor can we expect parents to have the capacity to replace the teacher. But that doesn't mean giving up on sharing engaging, self-directed learning activities with children. We supported our partner Simple Education Foundation in Delhi, India in developing No Curfew For Education[39] – a repository of broad-ranging activities for parents, students and teachers, which they have been sharing on WhatsApp. We were impressed that three-quarters of their students enrolled in this online learning program, despite the challenging context, and students successfully mastered on average 50% of the content.

As schools reopened in some countries, they had to respond to children's varied experiences in lockdown. For many the challenge had been boredom and learning loss, while others had faced more serious trauma and adversity. We worked with

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[39] https://bit.ly/SEFtoolkit

our partners at Teach For Armenia to ensure that their first "Seroond School", which in spite of everything opened as planned this September, was started with a full diagnosis of children's and teachers' academic and socio-emotional needs. The need for trauma-sensitive approaches to education became even more real as the country was plunged into war in the autumn with many families in the school directly affected.

As a global organization with staff and board members in four continents, the Kizazi team was already familiar with the delights of spending much of our life on zoom! Remote support was not a leap into the unknown. However, we were not clear if it would be possible to effectively sustain our work with local partners with the absence of any of the on-the-ground in-person support that had traditionally felt so critical. As a pilot, we ran a fully virtual support model for a cohort of African school operators with our partners at African Leadership Academy. We have been very encouraged by the results, with 100% of participants rating the program 9 or 10 out of 10.

Finally, most social entrepreneurs will tell you that what keeps them awake at night is funding. This has been an uncertain year, with many funders focusing on supporting their existing portfolio or on addressing the immediate health consequences of the pandemic. But I am pleased we have been able to sustain our operations thanks to a lot of persistence and support from committed new and existing donors, including Vitol Foundation, the Peter Cundill Foundation and Rockdale Foundation.

Lessons learned

This has been a difficult year, with many missteps. But when I think of where we've been most successful in our response, a number of lessons come to mind.

First and foremost, focus on the mission not the plan. As for everyone else, 2020 has not been the year we imagined. We had plans to support the launch of new schools in Ghana and Nigeria, expand work in India and implement new learning models in the schools we were working with. None of these have happened - while we've worked to support children through school closures and (in some cases) reopening. But throughout we have remained centered on our mission of developing breakthrough school models and this has helped us to choose to remain more focused on the long-term questions arising from the pandemic rather than some of the pressing immediate relief efforts.

Secondly, let those closest to the people affected lead the response. In a crisis, speed and flexibility are critical, as is understanding the limitations of your perspective. As a global NGO, we were not well placed to understand and respond to the immediate needs of communities, so we tried to keep out of the way of our partners' vital efforts in this area, while providing support on the longer-term implications for the design of their programs.

Third: balance enterprise with stability and patience. As a new NGO you should be regularly adjusting your operating model and theory of change, but with the uncertainty of 2020 the temptation to constantly shift course could be overwhelming. Through regular reflective discussions with our team, board and partners on what we were learning this year, we tried to distinguish real obstacles (this won't work) from bumps in the road (this isn't working yet).

What next for global education?

Let's start with the negatives. We will clearly be living with the consequences of the pandemic on children's lives for many years to come. Approximately 800 million children have still not returned to school[40]. In India alone, 200 million elementary and middle school children have been out of school since March. Despite all the encouraging innovations in remote learning, they are only reaching a fraction of these already disadvantaged children. The situation will not be changing soon. Significant vaccine coverage is not projected to reach most developing countries until 2022 and most of these countries will continue to feel the need to prioritize keeping the economy open over schools.

With that bleak starting point, there are some positive developments in education that I hope to see emerging from the crisis.

To begin with, while the pandemic has reminded us of the critical importance of schools as institutions, it has also reminded us of the importance of learning outside school. Even in a normal year, children only spend between 10 and 20% of their waking hours in schools[41]. This year has further increased the imperative on schools to support students to be able to learn independently in or out of school. Simple Education Foundation are planning to integrate their new virtual learning platform into their core school model when schools reopen in order to support learning outside of school, in the holidays and in the event of future closures.

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[40] Center for Global Development
[41] https://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluations/how-leverage-time-children-spend-out-school-learning

This brings me to a key benefit we need to see from the increases in online learning - the potential for greater individualization. School leaders tell me that they see some children (though by no means the majority) who have found remote learning more motivating, with fewer distractions. There is a lot for us to learn here. It appears that where it has been effective it is where we haven't just tried to replicate offline learning online. In particular, technology can be helpful in providing activities that meet children at their current level of development and attainment[42]. Some of the most well evidenced approaches in education, including mastery learning, formative assessment and Teaching At The Right Level[43], demonstrate the importance of adjusting teaching to meet the pupil where they are. This is likely to be even more necessary as teachers seek to address gaps in learning due to COVID-19. Integrating adaptive learning technologies into mainstream education could be part of the answer to raising learning levels in developing countries. Furthermore, we should grasp this opportunity to rethink assessments. Many countries have been forced to abandon exams in 2020, while others have pressed on regardless.

Policymakers were right to have realized that continuing with exams as normal this year would be unfair to candidates, but the discussion is also highlighting wider issues with the current system. High-stakes exams are used in many developing countries to ration access to secondary and higher education - giving an advantage to students from richer families who have

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[42] https://daisychristodoulou.com/2020/03/remote-learning-why-hasnt-it-worked-before-and-what-can-we-do-to-change-that/

[43] https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/disrupting-education-experimental-evidence-technology-aided-instruction-india

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/generate/?u=https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/toolkit/?id=156&t=Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Toolkit&e=156&s=
https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/evidence/

attended better-resourced schools, had more conducive home environments and sometimes private tuition[44]. More broadly, examination systems are increasingly being criticized for their failure to capture wider capabilities and dispositions, such as creativity, collaborative problem solving, verbal communication and practical/ applied learning[45].

Finally, the crisis has reminded us that the contexts facing schools in adversity are different[46]. We have seen that the same supports, approaches and models that work for children in well-resourced contexts are not sufficient in every context. Basic needs - like food and safety - need to be met first. Supportive relationships need to be present. Socio-emotional skills like self-regulation need to be built before any academic learning is possible[47]. Everything, from curriculum and pedagogy to the culture and approaches for supporting student engagement and behavior, needs to take account of the experience pupils are bringing to school. We should not lower expectations for students but raise expectations and resources for what schools in challenging contexts provide. One silver lining of the pandemic is the golden opportunity it offers to evolve the design of our schools to address such issues.

The most challenging situations in the world have historically often forced the most innovative solutions to emerge. I have so much admiration for the way the education sector has

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[44] https://www.cgdev.org/blog/case-abolishing-high-stakes-exams-year-and-every-year

[45] https://rethinkingassessment.com/assessment-around-the-world-ra/

[46] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yIMUULwpc9NvDpSMuS5ZMfvXNm6LxSXv/view

[47] https://turnaroundusa.org/what-we-do/tools/building-blocks/

responded to the crisis with purpose, enterprise, and compassion. If we can continue in the challenging years ahead, the future can be bright for children.

Nick Canning *is the founder and CEO of Kizazi. Prior to founding Kizazi, Nick spent over eight years as the Chief Operating Officer at Teach For All, the global network developing leadership in education in 50 countries. Prior to joining Teach For All in 2010, Nick was a Deputy Director and Head of the Education team in the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. He has also worked at the UK Treasury as a Senior Education Adviser, was the economist for the Britain in Europe campaign. He holds a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford. Nick is on the Board of Literacy Pirates.*

The Future is now: lessons from a pandemic

Felipe Correa-Jaramillo

At Envoys, we create educational programs that empower, challenge, and inspire students to become better citizens of the world. On the first day of 2020, our team had multiple reasons to be celebrating a new year. We had doubled the number of partner schools with whom we were running programs, tripled the number of students, and had already confirmed participants for our most recent innovation; a summer program where a group of passionate young students would circumnavigate the entire planet investigating complex and interrelated issues of global significance. Furthermore, we had doubled the number of full-time positions in the US, began the expansion in Canada by staffing an office in Toronto, and significantly expanded our network of small locally owned businesses and organizations with whom we partner in over 32 different countries around the world. The next leap change of our company was meant to happen within 365 days.

On January 10, I received a call from our Senior Director of Business Development in North America inviting me to join a call with the Head of School of one of our partner schools. A decision needed to be made around canceling, postponing, or modifying a program with 14 students scheduled to begin in China on February 11. Little did I know that this would be the first of many conversations with school administrators where we would discuss the same topic. During January, the issue seemed to be focused on the escalating situation in Asia. We made plans to shift most programs to a different destination and reschedule others for a later time of the year. By the end of the month, operations in Asia had been halted for the semester while thousands of students, faculty, and Envoys instructors began programs in Africa, Europe, South America, and the Caribbean. Most were cut short. On March 22, our team was able to bring the last group of students back home safely, and our

program operations calendar for the remainder of the year was utterly wiped out. The World Health Organization declared a pandemic.

Throughout my tenure as CEO, I had designed detailed plans for a wide range of scenarios. A pandemic was not one of them. April was the most challenging month of my professional career yet. I had to let go 74% of our full-time team members and 92 field staff educators who counted on the work Envoys provided for their spring and summer season income. One hundred and sixty-three small-locally owned providers with which we partner across 26 countries were scrambling (to say the least) to keep their businesses open and support their families. Furthermore, as an organization, Envoys lost all its business in the short and long term, as expected for a travel education company. The future was murky.

Yet, our biggest challenge remained ahead. Envoys is an organization created by and for educators. We work with innovative schools and teachers to expand the boundaries of possibility for global education programming. However, schools and teachers were overwhelmed. Day after day, we received loud and clear messages that there was little room for the school community to think about anything other than ending the school year remotely. A good intention that, for many, did not end well. Our most precious partners in the design and facilitation of our global experiences did not have the bandwidth to work with us anymore. We needed to find rapidly alternative ways to continue being relevant.

After long ideation meetings with the core team (the name we used for the remaining employees of the organization), we pushed forward with the creation of Basecamp. A suite of free virtual resources for students and schools to enjoy. Through webinars, workshops, and digital resources, we aimed at keeping our community connected during the COVID-19 crisis through our shared passion for global education. Basecamp not only allowed us

to continue being relevant for educators by offering high-quality learning opportunities. It also allowed us to begin listening and understanding where we could add value given the ongoing circumstances. As a consequence, EnvoysX was born.

As I write these pages, already three thousand participants have joined the EnvoysX program, either in the form of a thematic experience, virtual exchange, summit, micro-credential program, or the Becoming a Global Leader asynchronous course. Each program is framed under the belief that virtual learning is not just a temporary state but a new arena for designing and implementing innovative learning experiences. We strongly believe that global education skills and attitudes have never been more valuable: resiliency, cooperation, critical thinking, and empathy. Therefore, they could not be placed on hold while the pandemic unfolded.

In the process, we have faced countless challenges and learned important lessons at different levels and junctures that are relevant for educators both during and beyond the pandemic. There are three in particular that I would like to expand upon.

1. Teaching and learning tools were not designed to facilitate virtual experiences.

    Envoys was founded as a blended model of online preparatory courses and targeted international travel experiences. Every student had to take an online preparatory course to ready them to engage with the specific program curriculum before arriving on site. In a sense, we were blessed to have done remote teaching and learning pre-pandemic. However, the truth is that most of our toolkit had been designed for in-person instruction.

In adapting the existing toolkit and the design of new learning artifacts, we made sure that learning outcomes were at the center of the design, above all else. As a team, we were explicit in agreeing that all our pedagogical design would include:

- *Student Growth:* A coherent vision of skill development. All programs need to be designed to facilitate the investigation of globally significant issues and develop transferable skills.

- *Pedagogy Driven:* Designing a focused, research-based curriculum. Every lesson and every activity needed to be intentional. The program's flexibility would respond to the educational needs of each group of students.

- *Iteration:* An ethos of innovation for success. Our educational offering is an iterative process that runs under the assumption that today's ceiling must be tomorrow's floor.

- *Prove Value:* Evaluate the outcomes. As educators, we were taught that teaching for understanding requires a demonstration of that learning. Evaluations are necessary to prove a program's worth to all stakeholders. Furthermore, global education programs need to be held to the same, or higher, standard of traditional classroom education.

A specific example of a teaching and learning tool we created is the OneDoc Protocol. A protocol that facilitates online learning and exercises the muscle by which we collaborate and grow. Learning is part of a collective and collaborative process, where we are reliant on hearing from others to make meaning of what we are encountering. This requires us to get comfortable voicing 'half-baked' ideas, making guesses about

what we are seeing, and sharing our own learning experiences.

To help do this, we create a shared google document (example on image on the next page) with previously curated semi-structured content, prompts, meaning building activities, and thinking routines. Simultaneously, during the program, we invite participants to think differently about taking notes and sharing their thoughts. The OneDoc allows participants to get a glimpse into each other's minds, putting raw, unfiltered thinking out in the open for discussion. Seeing people's thoughts emerge at the same time is a powerful, shared experience. Students walk away with not just content knowledge but a better sense of who they are as learners.

EnvoysX Virtual Programming: Race in America

Object of Inquiry: Jesus Colon's story: "Little Things Are Big"
Source: Facing History and Ourselves
Thinking Routine: Think, Feel, Care

THINKING ROUTINE
Think, Feel, Care
- What do they **think**? How does this person understand this system and their role within it?
- What do they **feel**? What is this person's emotional response to the system and to their position within it?
- What do they **care** about? What are this person's values, priorities, or motivations with regard to the system? What is important to this person?

Think	Feel	Care
• He understands that white women have been conditioned to fear people who look like him 🌿 • He understands that law enforcement will not care or believe his true intentions should the woman scream (Amy Cooper!) • He is forced to reconsider his first impulse, which is to help the white woman • He thinks that he might be perceived as dangerous • He knows there is not enough trust in a place like NYC for him to take the risk to asking to help • He thinks he will be able to always do what he thinks is good, regardless of the consequences. 🦋🤚 • Jesus knows that his position as a person of color at that moment was dangerous. The risks of him approaching the lady were higher vs. not doing it. He knows he's in a disadvantaged position. 👓🤚 • Thinks a white woman will not accept his help, instead, she will consider it a threat. • He rationalizes that the truth of his intentions doesn't matter if it's	• Feels he is a threat to a white woman • Feels frustrated that he cannot act on his kind impulse without fear of retribution ⚠️ • Feels scared • Scared, reluctant to take chances knowing it might lead him to very bad results. He might feel powerless during the moment he's making the decision, and later on feel disappointed at his own actions. | • Feels guilty 🦋 ** 🤚👓 • Is hard on himself for not helping, despite the fact that the reasons why it was a hard decision are completely beyond his control and harm him more deeply • He feels disappointed in himself because he let the potential of prejudice get in the way of him acting as he thought was right 🧑 • Feelings of fear wrestled with feelings of courteous behavior--Felt paralyzed, then fear took over (Flight) • He feels a desire to help but feels unable to be of service because it might be	• Cares about doing the right thing--Wants to help, and also doesn't want to frighten the whtie woman. ⚠️ • The values of his family as a Puerto Rican are really important to him, I would imagine that courtesy is a key value 🤚🥨 • He cares about staying true to his values and his positive impulses - he wants to help but lets prejudice get in the way and that makes him feel like a failure 🧑 • Cares about other human beings • Cares about himself and what others think about him • Cares about staying "out of trouble" • One of his priorities was to keep himself safe, to literally survive • It seems that his priority, while he's on the train, is safety. He's trying to decide whether to help her or not because he's concerned about the children's safety, but later makes a decision of keeping himself safe first. ⚠️ • He noticed the woman and her struggle and felt inclined to be of service rather than to be a passive individual on the train. •

Students had not been taught how to collaborate effectively in a remote setting.

The majority of schools and educational programs had been operating under the reality of placing students face to face with their peers and their instructors. This created invaluable opportunities to boost learning effectiveness. The pandemic changed it radically and, likely, for good.

The truth is that the work of the future will be done by small teams working collaboratively across geographic and temporal boundaries. Collaborating effectively and building a productive work community has become vital to successful work, especially in a digital space. The pandemic ended up being an opportunity to prepare students for the future.

The foundation of collaboration is defined by how we prepare for, show up to, and execute work as individuals and teams. To guide students in this process, we modeled and taught in all our programs five principles of effective collaboration in a digital space that would provide them with a meaningful foundation for success. Most of these came from our internal expertise in working across geographic, temporal, and cultural boundaries to design successful and impactful experiences. In the next able I present the five principles, their key components, and their underlying values:

Principle	Key Components	Underlying values
Make work visible and document everything.	Do work using live tools. Record all decisions, tasks, and notes and circle back to them at the beginning of each meeting.	Transparency & Accountability
Remove our tendency only to show the final products.	Allow for and celebrate half-baked ideas.	Showing Vulnerability & Bravery Failing Forward
Work hard at work worth doing.	We can do hard things together if we commit to perpetually learning.	Seeking Excellence & Embracing Challenges
Brainstorm together using digital tools.	Better ideas come from brainstorming together.	Creativity and Collaboration
Show up for each other.	Videos and microphones on, always. Close other tabs and put phones down. Participate actively.	Respectful Contributions and Trust

2. Delivering high-quality global education programming is possible, even remotely.

At Envoys, global education has never been only about travel. We have always seen travel as one of the many tools for achieving the learning outcomes of a robust global education.

However, the 2020 anthropause allowed us to revisit the way we meet its objectives.

Unsurprisingly, we found that we can still meet the objectives intended for global educational travel through virtual programming. And better yet, we can increase access exponentially for students that have not had yet the opportunity to travel because of one reason or another.

The image below illustrates how we believe key learning objectives compare between Envoys' current virtual programs and the global travel programs that will come back one day.

CONSIDERATIONS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES	VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING	GLOBAL TRAVEL PROGRAMMING
Accessibility and participation by students of all socioeconomic levels	●●●●○	●○○○○
Ability to document learning and create artifacts of learning for future use	●●●●●	●●●○○
Sense of responsibility for making positive contributions to society	●●●●●	●●●●○
Readiness to take initiative and lead a group if there is a need	●●○○○	●●●●●
Ability to travel safely and responsibly in new places	●○○○○	●●●●●
Understanding of the destination's history and culture	●●●●○	●●●●○
Sense of humility toward the complexity of the world	●●●●○	●●●●○
Ability to learn from people who have different cultural backgrounds	●●●●●	●●●●●
Awareness of the dynamics of personal and structural privilege	●●●●○	●●●●●
Disposition and capacity to understand and take action on issues of global significance	●●●●●	●●●●●

As an educator, I never imagined we would face so many critical challenges in such a short period. Decisions on what worked and evaluating how it worked were being made quickly and with minimal certainty. At times, it felt like we were throwing spaghetti at the wall and following the path of whatever stuck. Throughout 2020, education history was rewritten at a swift pace. It will most likely continue to be the case in 2021. This was an intrinsic motivation that kept my teammates and I going. We will not rest or give up until the pandemic is over, and a new, improved normal is well established.

From a leadership perspective, my attention has been placed primarily on the well-being of my core team. Without their full attention and disposition, I knew that the organization would not be able to survive. I did this at three different levels. On the first one, and most basic level, I made sure that everyone knew and felt that the stability of their position within the company was intact. There

were months when reaffirming this certainty was far from easy. Our bank balance was often close to $0.

Furthermore, I communicated that work schedules would be as flexible and adaptable as needed to everyone's circumstances. Several members on our team had been personally infected by COVID-19 or had someone close to them that was. Others had babies and children at their homes without any childcare. Others, including myself, were locked down abroad for several months. We needed to make sure the organization could adapt to each of those realities as much as possible, not the other way around. I called this level the leadership of empathy and unconditional support.

On a second level, I made sure that we intentionally created spaces for the team to maximize creativity and collaboration. We did not re-invent the wheel here. Instead, we used some high-level concepts of complex systems theory allowing for new solutions to emerge. We were in an emerging ecosystem. Recognizing and using in our favor the concepts of nonlinearity, spontaneous order, adaptation, and feedback loops were essential in the process. We needed to acknowledge that a better idea comes from individuals' collaboration rather than from one particular person. As Aristotle said, "The whole is more than the sum of its parts". For this to be effective, I needed to guarantee everyone felt respected. That we all felt equally valued in these spaces, and that we built upon everyone's ideas. I called this level the leadership in solving complex problems.

On a third level, I made sure that we brought our sixth organizational principle to the driver's seat: 'Do not fear failure'. We recognize that our goals can only be reached through vigorous action. There is no other route to success. Under so much stress at a personal and professional level, you want to get it right, right away. However, the team needed to acknowledge that under these circumstances, the only way out was to be willing to fail, let go, and try again until we could come up with what worked. We needed to feel comfortable

with failure and foster a safe space to throw spaghetti at the wall. I called this level the leadership of resilience.

Reflecting on what has been the most challenging part of this journey, it unsurprisingly has been the ability to cope with uncertainty. Working, creating, and collaborating under that scenario was, and will continue to be the main challenge.

As educators, we have been used to planning long term. There has always been a long-term plan for what an educational process should look like. The pandemic wiped out the traditional roadmap and required us to build bridges that could close the educational gap that opened overnight. As we continue building high-quality educational programming, we can rest assured that we are also shaping the pillars of a more robust system and community, capable of adapting and rising from this historic moment. Therefore, we continue to say that the future is now. Envoys is now.

Felipe Correa-Jaramillo is a co-founder and CEO of Envoys where he has served in key strategic and management roles that have led to a well-founded and highly functioning educational organization. Previous to Envoys, he co-founded Off Bound Adventures, worked as a consultant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, and was a 6th-grade classroom teacher. Felipe holds an advanced degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, was trained as a psychologist at the University of the Andes, and serves in different boards of directors of schools, education, and sports organizations.

Education Resilience

Rana Dajani

The impact of COVID-19 on education systems has highlighted even more how education systems are failing us. Schools and universities and all education systems across the globe from developed to developing to humanitarian contexts have stopped and are scrambling to create an alternative education system through trial and error and very little experience and guidance. A true experiment in creating new education approaches and mechanisms. COVID-19 has showed us the hard way what really withstands the test of challenges and what does not. In that sense COVID-19 has become a litmus test for system resilience. This has allowed us to realize two things:

1. The need to reimagine education because the approach we have been using does not allow us to reach the goal. There were already loud hints to this effect in the past.
2. COVID-19 has given us an excuse to go rebuild everything from scratch. In the past the excuse was that it was thought to be impossible to rebuild the existing education systems because of multiple reasons such as bureaucracy, reluctance of implementors, cost etc. COVID-19 has proved that all these excuses are surmountable and new creative innovative mechanisms can be introduced and are welcomed.

What COVID-19 has made painfully clear is that we need to look for root causes of our failures and pivotal points to enable system change to achieve the goals of education. Such approaches necessitate taking a nontraditional approach, a bird's eye view with a true sense of freedom to think outside the box and to do what is needed regardless of obstacles. What is needed is changing the whole framework harking back to how we evolved as a species. Focusing on motivation, apprenticeship/experience, trial and error as learning mechanisms. These approaches have been given fancy names such

as human centered design, ideation, the scientific method etc. These are innate practices that are part of what made us human and allowed us to survive. Ultimately it is motivating a child to want to pursue learning because they want to not because they have to. I call this education resilience so that the child becomes a lifelong learner following his or her curiosity beyond the wall and timeline of the classroom to make the world his or her learning environment.

The challenges in achieving the sustainable development goals SDGs in time is not only providing the practical solutions and the policies and regulations but more importantly is how do we motivate people to care enough to be motivated enough to become the changemakers themselves rather than waiting for someone or some entity to save them. If we can address this issue, we will be hitting on a pivotal point to enable system change across sectors. This is the education goal we are seeking. The question is how do we instill motivation? In other words, how do we build resilience? how do we foster curiosity and confidence to be bold to refuse the status quo and go out of our comfort zone? Answering these questions will help shift frameworks across sectors to reimagine a new world. Starting with education the question that we need to explore is how we foster education resilience focusing on motivation putting the horse before the cart instead of the opposite as it was in the past. Adopting this approach is going back to nature and how we survived as a species.

This approach will require other changes in areas such as how we measure achievement. Measurement will take a new path all together that is not standardized because humans are diverse and therefore cannot be measured with one measuring stick. As the famous cartoon depicts a male sitting at a table with animals lined up to be assessed whether they can climb a tree. Measurement has been based on a competitive framework pitching people against each other. We need to reimagine a collaborative framework where every person has an advantage and something unique to contribute to society. We need to learn how to work together so that the addition of our efforts goes beyond 1 +1 = 2.

Humanity is going through an identity crisis. People no longer have the patience to listen to learn or to pause to interact in order to learn. This impacts our mental health as everything is moving too fast. COVID-19 has given us an excuse to pause and listen, to take a breather to slow down. In Arabic we call it "Itikaf". A period of time once a year when one takes time off to reflect. We are undergoing a global "Itikaf" as Professor Timothy Winter from University of Cambridge says. When technology advances the whole world will reap the benefits. Therefore, while it is important to keep up with STEM advances, we must simultaneously focus on the humanities to maintain a healthy balance drawing from the rich culture of eastern civilizations to serve as a guide through ethics and values how to move forward to save and maintain our planet for future generations. Such an approach necessitates rethinking not only the role of the teacher in the education system but go further to reimagine who is the teacher. Flipping the system where every parent is a teacher, and every home is a school. Adopting a bottom-up approach in learning. Such an example can be seen in home grown grassroots community programs such as We Love Reading.

COVID-19 has laid bare the discrepancies in technology services available to the masses across the globe. We realized that technology is not available for all in terms of devices or connectivity. Even with funding and advances in technology, not every child will have access to internet and devices as well as an environment that supports digital learning. Therefore, even as we seek to increase connectivity, develop cheaper devices etc. we still need to go beyond the traditional system of education and reimagine a whole new system/framework and not just create band aids to patch up an old unworthy system.

This new framework will require imagining teachers in a whole new light which will be reflected in what kind of training they will require. This brings up the question that has been knocking the doors of education for the past decade which is with all information at the fingertips of our children on the internet what is the purpose of the

teacher? This is where the research by Charles Nelson at Harvard University and others on the importance of human interaction for healthy social and emotional brain development is critical. No digital technology can replace the 'eye to eye' contact the 'in person' interaction that was part of how we evolved as humans. We cannot chuck this mechanism outside the window. Healthy human brain development requires human to human interaction. That is why there is a specified period in a human being's development that requires other members of the species to help out and guide. This extended period is unique to primates and more so to humans. As Lisa Feldman Barret describes in her book "7 and a half lessons about the brain" caregivers play a critical role in the wiring of the neurons in the brain. The wiring not only depends on the genetic background but on the interaction with the outside environment both physical (touch, sound and smell) and social (cuddling, facial expressions). The processes of tuning and pruning of the neuron networks are continuously happening as the human infant is growing. This is learning in the raw. That we will do good to emulate if we want to develop a better education system in the future. The learning acquired by the infant stays with her/him and is passed to the next generation through the collective interaction with humans in the circle. Not to mention the huge gap between the rich and the rest of the world in terms of better health for humanity. This social economic gap can be closed through education. But what low-cost programming can allow for bridging the gap. One such bridge is fostering love of reading by training parents and caregivers to read aloud to their children. Research by Dima Amso at Brown university now Columbia University has shown that the social economic gap that impacts education and later the economy can be bridged in an act as simple as parents reading aloud to their children. This mirrors research done in the 1970s that showcased how reading by parents can help minimize the gap between children of parents on welfare and children of highly educated parents.

We need to go back to the drawing table and rethink how education systems should be designed drawing from local knowledge and expertise. Encouraging and empowering parents, communities to

create their own education systems drawing from the rich resources available through technology online and from philosophies of education that are deeply woven into wisdom of various traditions all around the world. Hints from human evolution for education ideas are abundant such as honing of motor skills as Michael Kingsley outlined in his recent book 'Shop class as soul craft'. Storytelling, apprenticeship as a formal kind of skill-building process etc. ideas that fit a COVID-19 era and beyond. With the increase in technology, unemployment is increasing. What I see is freeing up of parents to pay more attention to their children and be involved in their children's education actively and in their local communities which in the past was impossible because of their workload. COVID-19 has given us a glimpse of how this is possible with more and more parents working from home. Forcing us to rethink the whole framework of society not only the education systems but frameworks of the work place itself.

We Love Reading Case Study

We Love Reading (WLR)'s approach is bottom up by creating a social movement to support literacy from the grassroots. Changing mindsets through reading to create changemakers. The basis of this system change is the We Love Reading model. This model is based on human centered design and rigorous academic research and third-party credibility. The model constitutes training online or face to face in multiple languages to local volunteer women, men and youth (WLR ambassadors) from ages 16 to 100 on how to read aloud in the native language and how to start reading aloud sessions in their local neighborhood in a public space or home to children ages 0 to 12 children's books in the native language stories from the local culture (to boost their identity and feeling of belonging) that may have themes to change behavior and attitudes towards certain issues such as health, nutrition, disabilities, environment, bullying, gender, nonviolence. The children take the books back home (exchange system) and ask their parents to read to them and/or they start reading to their siblings and friends. This boosts the human-to-

human interaction which is important for healthy brain development including executive functions and socioemotional growth early on in the child's life. The children fall in love with reading and therefore learning and are motivated to want to learn because they want to not because they have to and discover their inner potential and the world around them. The volunteer adults discover their voice literally and figuratively becoming leaders and social entrepreneurs in their communities solving their own problems. This also boosts their resilience and mental health.

Organizations need hierarchs but movements need causes, shared values, common goals to pull them together and give them a purpose, reading is the means, but the cause is to get young children to realize they can and should think for themselves. The model is formulated in a way that each person can tailor the model to fit their culture, their needs while maintaining the essence of the model, aiding in building ownership to the project and sustainability.

WLR is effective because the local people can read aloud to the children in their native tongue, maintaining local culture. The program's low cost does not require paying people and is sustainable even after the project is done. WLR is achieving impact at scale because WLR is a simple effective product that appeals to its market and depends on networks of youth and women and men who already resemble a movement to bring about social change through reading. WLR aims to develop long term cultural change. WLR isn't delivering services which need support systems, it's creating capabilities in hundreds of local youth, women and men enabling them to be creative for themselves.

One of the results will be a network of people at the neighborhood level around the world. This network is a virtual community from people all over the world (WLR ambassadors) connected through a mobile application and digital management system that allows data

collection for Monitoring and Evaluation. It allows pushing out of messages to ensure sustainability, quality and wellbeing.

The WLR model can be an add on to any existing Program to create agency and build resilience.

WLR was developed locally by Dr Dajani. Through trial and error (over a period of three years) more like human centered design, she was able to reduce the model to the bare minimum and yet it worked. The process resembled natural evolution. The Program is still evolving with feedback from the local volunteers. The WLR training incorporates feedback into the new iteration of the Program on a continuous basis. The elements that allowed WLR to spread successfully are:

1.it is a simple model that only requires a local person to read in their native language stories from their culture in a public space of their choice.   There is no sophisticated training or prerequisite characteristics.

2. it is adaptable to any culture or context. The WLR ambassador is in full control and uses their own language and culture. They choose the place, the time and schedule that is fitting and suitable for the community.

3. It gives agency and ownership to the WLR ambassador. She or he are the leaders of the Program in their community and get all the credit and have the freedom to quit whenever they want.

Following are highlights how this approach will solve the challenges raised during COVID-19 and beyond:

1. no proper education system to keep children engaged with learning. This is an issue that is becoming more important in how the future of education will look like. The important

point thinking from a systems change approach is how to motivate children to want to learn.

2. The importance of early childhood development especially with parents spending more time at home with their children. One important aspect of ECD is the human-to-human interaction that is essential for the child brain development

3. The COVID-19 crisis has escalated the potential of mental health challenges from increased stress and more. Research has shown that to reduce the stress human interaction between a parent/caregiver is a simple way to prevent the escalation.

4. The adults reading to the children in their neighborhood creates from them social entrepreneurs who go on to solve their own challenges within their community. The feeling of responsibility and agency boosts resilience and mental health.

5. The majority of volunteers are women boosting and empowering women through this approach.

6. Themes of health, nutrition, disabilities, environment, bullying, etc. can be introduced through the children's books read to the children

7. Reading is in the native language to boost identity and culture and creativity

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She developed a community-based model "We love reading" to encourage children to read for pleasure, for which she has received multiple awards.

She is the author of the book: Five scarves, Doing the impossible: If we can reverse cell fate why can't we redefine succes

Leadership in a Pandemic: A Test of Resilience in Turning Crisis into Opportunity

Manjula Dissanayake

One of the most significant revelations of the COVID-19 pandemic was how inequitable the implications of the Pandemic were across and within countries and communities. It exposed the most foundational imbalances and inequalities of our society - both in terms of the direct impact of the Pandemic as well as its predictable aftermath and responses. The world-order that brought us to this reality requires an urgent paradigm shift.

This very need and urgency for a paradigm shift is also what offers one of the greatest of opportunities for humankind. This is our once in a lifetime moment to reset the world-order for a kinder, sustainable, and equitable future. Yet, it is not so obvious or clear to many what principle or force could propel such a drastic fundamental shift from our status quo.

Education as the Panacea

As a leader and an education entrepreneur, it is my firm belief that such a revolutionary worldwide transformation in mindsets, values, and social contracts is only possible through an education that serves a purpose that is fundamentally different from what it served in the past. This offers an unparalleled opportunity for educational leaders to be the champions of that change - by turning one of the biggest crises of our lifetimes into a silver lining.

Yet, this opportunity comes with great responsibility as well as leadership challenges. As the founder of the non-profit social

enterprise - <u>Educate Lanka</u> - my educational leadership challenges during the Pandemic have been both common to that of others in the industry while also unique in terms of personal circumstances, context, and organization-specific culture and decision-making.

A Tragic Beginning

Personally, my leadership challenges got off to a catastrophic start just as I had begun to contemplate on potential Pandemic-specific challenges for our organization and efforts. At midnight on March 12th, 2020, my mother - my biggest inspiration and the <u>inspiration behind the founding of Educate Lanka</u> - passed away back home in Sri Lanka.

Within seconds, my entire world shattered.

Amid the chaos and uncertainty of the Pandemic, I was fortunate to somehow make the trip from Washington DC to Sri Lanka to pay respects to her in person and then to make what seemed an almost impossible return trip to my family back in DC.

After almost a month of psychological and physical rollercoaster, I needed to put my focus and energy on our work and organization. As the COVID-19 was spreading at speed and each country was taking its own measures and responses, the urgency to act to preserve the fate of our organization and its community started to weigh heavily on my mind. Thankfully, I took the two-week self-isolation back at home in DC as a time to practice mindfulness and to process my grief. It helped me develop clarity and strengthen my resilience to take the critical next steps. I was extremely fortunate to have a supporting family at home and a dedicated team back in Sri Lanka who took on the duties in my absence. It gave me just enough time

to pause, reflect, and to step back up to my leadership responsibilities.

Familiar Challenges. Different Magnitude

Most of the organizational-level leadership challenges we faced during the early part of the Pandemic were quite universal to other organizations in our position. These include sustainability-related challenges in terms of depleting fundraising options, macro implications of the overall global economic downturn, suspended partnerships, and predictable psychological impacts on our team and community functioning under turbulent and unpredictable circumstances.

I distinctly recall an earliest of warnings for our organization right after I returned to DC in early April from one of my mentors. She warned me to *"prepare to cease to exist [operationally] at the end of this Pandemic."* I was grateful to her for that early warning and dose of reality, and I put that thought in the back of the mind without letting it fully cloud my judgment or decision-making.

Then there were operational and program-level challenges due to the very strict lockdown protocols carried out by Sri Lanka during the early part of the Pandemic. These posed the greatest of challenges to the communities we serve as they were almost all daily wage-earning families. Their livelihoods were shattered and were left struggling to make ends meet, and we knew we had a responsibility to intervene. Yet, the lockdowns and restrictions posed severe logistical hurdles for our staff and volunteers to even access our communities.

Although we have experienced similar hurdles and setbacks in the past, especially relating to disasters and emergencies (e.g., 2019 Easter Attacks), the challenges during the Pandemic were

multidimensional and global in nature, and thus, the implications were of greater magnitude. It posed significant levels of uncertainty given the unprecedented and unforeseeable nature of COVID-19 and the chaotic and disoriented responses from around the world. It made decision-making extremely difficult and ambiguous.

The Greatest Test of Leadership and Character

The year 2020 was the litmus test of my leadership as well as character in my decade-long journey as a social entrepreneur. It pushed me to the fringes and challenged my own values, ethos, and purpose in life as well as those of the organization.

For me, leadership is about service and responsibility. It is about having a sense of purpose that is shaped by the interests of the larger community we serve and not just by that of my own. Over the years, this purpose has been shaped and guided by key foundational values that I have embraced in my life and in our work: empathy, equity, and justice - values that were instilled in me by my parents as well as realized through my life experiences and circumstances.

Values as the Guiding Light

When I resumed work after returning to DC in early April at the peak of uncertainty and ambiguity of the Pandemic, I knew I needed to center my leadership decisions on larger guiding principles at such a critical juncture. As in the case with previous pivotal decisions in life, I looked inward to my own values and ethos to provide me with that guiding light.

In late April, I drafted an email to myself with a long list of talking points for an all-hands staff call to set out Educate Lanka's plan and direction for the rest of the year and through the Pandemic.

They revolved mainly around three key leadership decisions and objectives:

1) *Looking inward for reflection and putting our own challenges into perspective.*

The magnitude of the challenges of a crisis such as COVID-19 can easily move leaders and organizations to make irrational choices and hasty decisions against their best interests. I wanted to ensure that we avoided such a plight, and that we as a team, took the time to pause, reflect, and put our own individual and collective struggles and privileges into perspective before taking critical decisions. We committed to introspect and reevaluate our values and priorities in practicing gratitude and building empathy for our community and stakeholders. We reflected on how fortunate we are to be alive, employed, and have food on the table and the comfort of our loved-one when thousands of others each day were not so fortunate. We discussed the greater responsibility that comes with such privilege and fortune and how our decisions should ensure that we deliver on our duty not only as a representation of our organization, but also as fellow human beings.

2) *Reevaluating priorities to maximize the short-term needs and the survival of our communities.*

The strict measures taken to handle the short-term health risk of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka - where daily-wage earners and informal employment accounting for a significant portion of its labor force - had already disproportionately impacted a majority of Sri Lankans, including the communities we serve. Therefore, we committed to put the wellbeing, security, and interest of these communities — our beneficiaries and their families, our community-based liaisons, our staff and volunteers, and our partners - before our own, individually. It was decided that the organization's resources would be prioritized

to serve the needs of our communities and stakeholders first, then that of the rest of our staff in Sri Lanka, and finally that of myself based in the United States. With the United States, relative to Sri Lanka, offering meaningful emergency stimulus relief both at organizational and employment level, it appeared both a morally righteous and a strategically rational decision.

3) *Strategy for the organization's short-term survival and long-term success.*

Turning adversity into opportunity has been a defining characteristic of our organization's journey since its inception. We knew that it is also this resilience in us as individuals, and collectively as an organization, that will determine how we respond and recover from this crisis. The strategy we adopted - *optimistic for the best (in the long-term), preparing for the worst (in the short-term), and not to be surprised or distracted by anything in between* - reflected the same spirit of resilience and was further enriched by an unwavering resolve, tenacity, and agility. As we focused on emergency relief, contingencies, and bootstrapped resources for our short-term survival, we also made sure not to lose sight of the long-term opportunities or the larger picture of a world that yearns for change from its status quo.

With Change, Comes Opportunity (and Responsibility)

Having perceived the significant role education would play in this change that the world envisions and having been working toward those changes already for over a decade, we realized that greater opportunities and resources would be awaiting us if we could make it through the Pandemic. We also realized that it is also our responsibility to step up to this challenge and join others to collectively lead this road to recovery, helping to ensure that our *"new normal"* won't be shaped by the same mistakes of our *"old normal."*

In May 2020, we turned these realizations and decisions we collectively took as a team into a public commitment and shared with the world as _Educate Lanka's Promise to its Community and to a Post-COVID-19 Future._

Building upon this commitment, we started to accelerate our efforts that aligned with the perceived changes in education, while also adapting and evolving through innovation and improvisation that would serve as blueprints for the future. For example, with restrictions to physical movement and gatherings, we partnered with a national commercial banking network to digitize the micro scholarship disbursements to our students as we also extend financial and digital inclusion to our communities. We introduced a _virtual fellowship program_ to tap into the massive global talent pool left without internships and job placements. We introduced _"walk-in distributions"_ to expedite emergency scholarship payments and set up _"remote technology spaces"_ to conduct learning and training programs virtually. On the global stage, we continued to share and speak about our mission and innovations, including at the _Global Talent Summit, UNESCO Futures of Education Initiative, HundrED Innovation Summit,_ and at the _High-Level Forums of the United Nations General Assembly._

In retrospect, these decisions and measures I led, and we collectively took during the past nine months positioned us well and gave us an advantage going into the year 2021 - the year of hope and recovery. There were also certain underlying elements that ensured the success and effectiveness when executing these strategies. For example, it was critical that we as a team kept our optimism and saw the larger picture to proactively pursue new opportunities and innovations. We made a conscious effort to seek collaboration and partnerships. We reached out to and checked in on our communities and circles of fellow social entrepreneurs, education stakeholders, and global partners to share, listen, and learn from each other's challenges and solutions. We created space and time for the physical and emotional health of our team to ensure self-care and personal wellbeing was a priority.

New Normal. Old Challenges

Despite us finding mechanisms and strategy to cope with the challenges of a pandemic, we soon learned that we also still have to overcome the usual hurdles of life and work. Within just six months into the Pandemic, three of our staff members of our small team each lost an immediate family member. We saw a significant international grant taken away from us at the last minute due to the narrow ideology and interests of an individual stakeholder. We had to navigate and cope with the political turmoils, social injustices, and volatilities and tensions unique to each country - Sri Lanka and the United States - in which we operate.

These setbacks and impediments tested our character, resolve, and ethos of the organizational culture to the core, but our guiding principles and the stern commitment and conviction to our larger purpose held us together and kept us focused.

The Futures of Education

While the aspirations for the ultimate changes to the education we have been envisioning could seem a moonshot, the urgency for such transformational change was further reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. As an education entrepreneur committed to leading action to bring these changes, I hope and expect to see the world begin to embrace following five changes within the next five years - marking some meaningful strides toward our moonshot.

1) Reforms that shift education's fundamental purpose away from the current focus on narrow academic outcomes and acquisition of knowledge - toward a more holistic purpose of maximizing the wellbeing and happiness of the whole person - preparing

learners to succeed and contribute as global citizens in a thriving world.

2) Integration of values-based competencies and social emotional learning and life skills to be at the center of all forms of learning, around which learners would be able to build and deepen their technical skills and expertise - positioning them to thrive and succeed not just in school and work, but in life as well.

3) Adoption of hybrid learning pedagogies, curriculums, and cultures - fueled by technological advancements - that would shift education away from physical learning spaces such as classrooms and school buildings to ubiquitous learning possibilities that are not dependent on or restricted to a specific space, resource, or an environment.

4) Emergence of education models that provide learner-centered and personalized learning journeys, as opposed to mass-produced education, that would allow learners to discover and rediscover themselves and prepare them to leave the education system equipped with a purpose that serves the real-world.

5) Increased resources to be allocated and innovation to be focused on making *the universal right to education* a reality so that quality learning becomes truly inclusive and equitable regardless of one's resources, circumstances, or background.

These objectives are difficult for a single leader, organization, or even a nation to attain alone, especially at a time of a global leadership divide exacerbated by increased polarization of interests and beliefs. Nevertheless, we must strive. Our future demands a worldwide transformation through a collective movement with vision, purpose, and speed - strengthened and embraced by global solidarity.

Just as past pandemics and crises have led to substantial positive changes in society and social contracts, this is our opportunity to reimagine and reshape the world that serves a collective purpose for the entire living planet and generations to follow. The unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with an unprecedented silver lining. We need to seize it; seize it together; and seize it quickly.

Manjula Dissanayake *is an investment banker turned social entrepreneur and founder of* <u>*Educate Lanka Foundation*</u> *- a non-profit social enterprise with a mission of democratizing access to quality and relevant learning opportunities for the marginalized.*

Manjula is a stern advocate for inclusion, equity, and relevance in education and speaks frequently on these themes globally. His TEDx Talk is titled "Talent is universal. Opportunity is not." He's also a founding steering committee member of <u>*Karanga*</u> *- The Global Alliance for Social Emotional Learning. Manjula holds a bachelor's in finance from the University of Maryland and a master's in social innovation and entrepreneurship from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. Manjula is based in Washington DC and splits his time between the U.S. and Sri Lanka.*

Supporting Early Childhood in Ghana during the pandemic

Susan Place Everhart

As we close the 2020 year, on this night of December 31ˢᵗ, I reflect upon the challenging year this has been, and the leadership that has been required to navigate it, not only at Sabre Education but at organizations globally as we worked to respond effectively to COVID and its impacts on our programmatic missions and on our organizations.

In Ghana where Sabre Education works to ensure that all young girls and boys receive a quality pre-school education towards SDG 4.2, schools across the country closed in mid-March due to the pandemic and have yet to re-open. While some older children have returned to class, primary schools - including kindergartens - have remained closed until at least January. When you consider the critical importance of early childhood education in a child's development and its proven impacts on lifelong achievement, health and wellbeing, the fact that nearly an entire year will have passed without children receiving this vital stimulation is a tragedy. Thousands of children in Ghana – and indeed worldwide - will move into their primary school years in 2021 without having had access to quality early childhood educational programs at a critical time in their brain development.

During this time of school closure, children in Ghana - as in many countries - have remained home without the benefit of virtual schooling. They are in home environments where parents often understand little about early childhood development nor have the training or educational resources to step easily into the teachers' shoes.

Sabre Education is an award-winning international NGO promoting early childhood education, advocating for increased investment in play-based kindergarten curriculum, building transformational pre-school environments, and delivering innovative teacher training for kindergarten teachers in Ghana.

Sabre's vital teacher training programs, delivered in partnership with the Ghana Education Service (GES) arm of the government, focus on experiential in-person training workshops for kindergarten teachers, and follow-up classroom coaching and mentoring for those teachers at school. With schools closed, and in-person gatherings severely restricted, Sabre needed to quickly assess how it could continue to fulfill its mission of ensuring that children receive a quality play-based kindergarten education. Sabre has always worked directly with teachers, head teachers and schools. We have not interacted directly with children or their parents – and yet during the pandemic the only schooling taking place was at home. We had to develop curriculum for kindergarten children and programs to support their parents and determine how best to deliver these. In short, our programs needed to pivot.

Most children in Ghana live in rural settings with limited technology. We knew we had to consider access and inclusion issues to ensure support for those families and children most at risk of being left behind. Television programming in English, or programs only available over the internet, would have limited impact in the regions where we work. Ultimately Sabre made the decision that using radio broadcasts would be the most effective way to reach large numbers of children. Working with a radio consultant, our early-education curriculum team developed age-appropriate stories to be read over broadcasts three times a week that integrated literacy, numeracy and creative arts' activities. To further increase access, we translated the stories into the local languages of Fante and Akuapem Twi.

To further extend our reach we broadcast our radio programs through the "COMPAS" system – the community public address system loudspeakers set up in most communities. This allowed children whose parents did not have a radio to gather in the community space, around the public address system, to listen to the stories and activities together as a group. Additionally, our Sabre team collaborated with local teachers to set up WhatsApp groups and encouraged parents to take photos of their children's work and submit them for feedback.

Given the important new role of parents in their children's early years' education, Sabre also made the decision to engage parents directly for the first time. We developed weekly call-in radio programs for parents on early childhood topics, such as how children learn, brain research related to child development, positive behavior management skills, and how to encourage the development of early literacy and numeracy skills at home. We established teams of district-level education officers and kindergarten teachers to serve as experts on the live radio panels. We also worked closely with the Ghana Education Service to encourage teachers to call their students' families, to check on the children's welfare and to provide valuable support and guidance to parents who had suddenly found themselves in the new role of educators. Sabre Education was invited to apply for, and we received, a generous grant from UKAid Direct to support this COVID response work.

Meanwhile, this autumn, as Ghana began to prepare for a January school opening, we were able to re-start our training workshops for kindergarten teachers through a combination of virtual Zoom delivery and some in-person events. This required some re-design of training curriculum for virtual, digital or blended-delivery, and the training of our staff to effectively deliver instruction virtually. Sabre had never delivered virtual training before and - as so many other training organizations around the world have also discovered - there were growing pains for both our staff and the participants. We came to understand the optimal length of virtual sessions, learned how to

support teacher-participants who had limited or inconsistent internet access at home, and considered how to translate experiential activities to a virtual world.

While the Sabre leadership and staff team had many successes during the year, our journey predictably also included missteps, missed opportunities and mid-stream adjustments. We needed to learn and adapt quickly as we entered new modes of program delivery.

Indeed, the events of 2020 tested leadership on multiple fronts. The pandemic forced NGOs to respond quickly not only on the programmatic side but also in many cases to focus on organizational survival. I have heard many peer CEOs express concerns about their organization's financial health during the most turbulent economic times we have ever experienced. Leaders around the world have worked diligently this year to keep their organizations – not only their programs – healthy and viable.

At Sabre our team focused early in the pandemic on the organization and our staff's transition, and also on our relations with funders and partners. Positive donor relations were critical as programs became delayed, re-prioritized, or changed again and again as school closures continued. Our team reached out to communicate quickly and transparently with our donors to give reassurance where we could and updates as the situation unfolded throughout the year.

Many of Sabre's donors were incredible this year - true partners in our work. A number of our committed funders increased their financial support to ensure that Sabre could remain focused on its mission during these challenging times. There has truly been a sense of shared purpose in a difficult year.

An interesting additional complication for Sabre was that it was undergoing a planned CEO transition and recruitment during the spring and summer months of 2020. I came on board as the new

CEO on July 1st, having participated in the final interview for the role in early April, just two weeks after the world locked down with COVID. In fact, Sabre had earlier in the year hired a new leader for our Ghana team, Tony Dzidzinyo Kwesi Dogbe. Tony led the Ghana team skillfully through the many program adjustments and innovations of the year and supported our large Ghana-based staff team in the transition to remote working, while our former CEO Dominic Bond led the organization strategically through the pivotal early months of the pandemic. I was fortunate to be able to join an organization with much positive forward momentum and could set to work on the unique COVID challenge of building relationships with my new team despite never having met my Ghana colleagues in person (still to this day).

Sabre did many things right during this year of challenge. Our leadership team in both Ghana and the UK brought a number of capabilities to the task: bold creativity, out of the box thinking, strong relationship skills and a lot of hard work. They listened to the staff in terms of what was possible and what was not, and flexibly supported the team through a year of uncertainty.

The lessons that Sabre learned this year in terms of remote delivery of educational programs - through radio and Whatsapp platforms, and digital and/or blended solutions – have set Sabre up for our next stage of growth. We are well placed to continue to expand our digital offerings and virtual programs, and not be constrained by geography. This dovetails nicely with our new three-year strategic plan that focuses on scaling our innovative early education programs both within and beyond Ghana.

It is critical that we now support the Government of Ghana to successfully open schools again in January, to implement school readiness training for teachers and staff, and especially to support the children whose education has been so tragically interrupted.

And, while many of us in the education sector did take significant steps forward into the world of virtual delivery and digitization of content, it is critical that we do not leave behind those most vulnerable as education moves forward with technology-enhanced content. We must ensure that those with limited resources can participate in this next stage of education innovation. We must find solutions that are appropriate to the context and work collaboratively to ensure true access and inclusion for all children.

As we enter 2021, we have a lot of work to do. But with light at the end of the tunnel on the pandemic, and a return to schools for millions of children, hope for a better year is palpable.

Susan Place Everhart is the CEO of Sabre Education since July of 2020, an award-winning international NGO at the forefront of innovative play-based early childhood education in Ghana. Susan is an experienced global leader in the international development sector. She has a strong passion for education, women and girls' issues and community-led social norms change. In her career she has developed innovative experiential education programs for adult learners, has served on educational boards, has led education and health system strengthening initiatives in Haiti, and more recently has worked collaboratively on gender-based community development projects in East and West Africa. A graduate of Cornell University with a degree in Economics, Susan has also taught executive education courses at the Industrial Relations Center of the California Institute of Technology.

Compassion in the storm

Emanuel Garza Fishburn

As I started to entertain some first thoughts and feelings around my dear Professor Reimer's kind invitation to share some personal insights into the challenges for educational leadership in these times, I was immediately taken to my memories of spending long hours in my childhood enjoying the beautiful and yet provocative paintings by Norman Rockwell. Among the many books, music records, family relics and many other available treasures in my parent's library, by far one of my favorite items was a very complete compilation of Rockwell´s artwork, which I found to be quite inspiring, not only for its elegant and subtle humor but especially for the way in which it depicted many of the social dynamics of its times.

As I recalled those beautiful moments enjoying this compilation, there was a particular masterpiece that came to my mind. By the title "The Problem We All Live With" (1964), this painting depicts the real-life image of a young African American girl, that is being escorted to her school on her very first day by four United States Marshals. As many of our dear readers may recall, this is the depiction of Ruby Bridges as she was on her way to her newly assigned school, one of the all-white public schools where desegregation was initially implemented. As you may clearly see in the image of this piece of artwork included in these pages, behind the US Marshalls that are fulfilling their duty to protect the young girl in her walk, there are fresh reminders of the social tensions that were present by this newly enforced measure, in the shape of the rotten tomatoes that had been thrown at Ruby by angry protesters that were present at that moment.
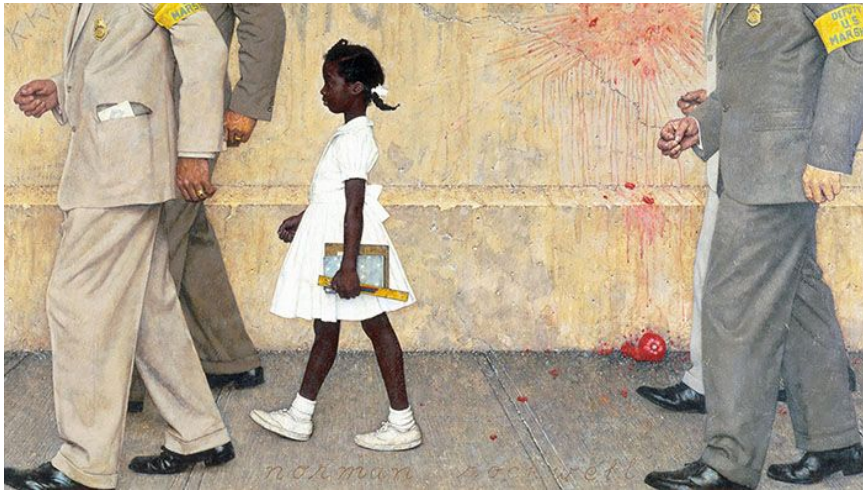
"The Problem We All Live With" by Norman Rockwell (1964)

*Oil on Canvas - Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts*

I bring attention to this splendid art contribution (which by the way found temporary exhibit in the White House during the Obama administration), because I find that many of the current challenges we face in upholding the right to education can also be symbolically described through it.

At first hand, allow me to take our attention towards the problem, depicted here in the shape of the exploded tomatoes, the racial slurs written in the wall and in the outrageous need to have a child protected by governmental agents in the simple task of going to school. Expanding from the specific social challenges of the time depicted in Rockwell's piece, there are many ways in which we, as a human species, have continued to fall short in our actions to ensure a bright future for all our children.

Surely, it is no simple task to ensure a harmonious environment for all, given the enormous complexities of the social, economic and environmental systems that we are part of, but for many not so

enlightened reasons we have many times behaved as a collective, either knowingly or unknowingly, in a way in which we have put our own lives, and those of many fellow life forms with which we share this world, in jeopardy.

The current pandemic, disruptive as it is, has made us much more aware of a series of underlying challenges that we have not been able to adequately tackle and that represent much larger problems to our sustainability. As the image included below shows, many of these challenges are lined up in the form of simultaneous ocean waves that clearly represent a major threat to humanity as a whole.
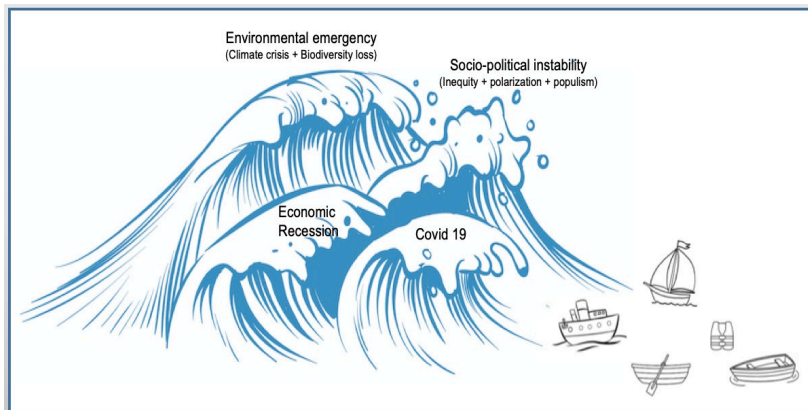
The perfect storm: Four waves currently affecting humanity and our world.

The COVID 19 pandemic, depicted here as the smallest wave in the image, is surely one of these threats and it has already and most unfortunately caused a series of negative effects in our health, our economy and in our educational system, among many other of our personal and collective realms. As we have continued to expand the limits of our civilization into the ever-decreasing areas of untouched wilderness, we have been exposing ourselves to new biological agents that we are not genetically prepared for, such as in the case of the virus currently putting our world on its knees.

But clearly, as the image indicates, the pandemic is not our only global concern. The economic recession caused by our health crisis, the socio-political instability that is currently present in many countries and that is fueled primarily by inequity and social polarization, and the environmental emergency that we are facing with our climate crisis and biodiversity loss (what I consider the mother of all battles) are just a sample of the gigantic obstacles that we have imposed upon ourselves and that, as the tomatoes thrown at Ruby Bridges, are tarnishing the prospects of a fulfilling life for all in this precious planet that we share.

Considering a complementary angle, and as the ocean-waves image indicates, humanity as a whole is surely trying to navigate and survive in this global storm but unfortunately, we are not all riding the same boat. Some are not even on a vessel of any sort and are left to swim by their own means. Some just have a life jacket to support them, some may have a small canoe or light boat while others seem to be going through the storm in a state-of-the-art yacht or cruise ship. The way in which we have caused and sustained systemic inequity in our world is clearly causing many to suffer unfairly in light of these challenges.

So now let me take you back to the portion of this reality that I personally face. As you might have swiftly noticed in the beginning of this writing, I have the amazing privilege of being born into a loving, bicultural, family in Saltillo, Mexico, where I was nurtured and stimulated into being an active and committed member of my community. In this journey, I have had access to the best education possible, to marrying my high-school sweetheart and to have formed a precious family with her, our four children and our two dogs. I have also had the great privilege of working closely with many dear friends, my family and colleagues with whom we have created, grown and sustained many educational, social and environmental conservation institutions, primarily serving under-privileged sectors of our population.

One of these institutions is Universidad Carolina, a social enterprise that is passionately expanding access to educational opportunity to more than 3,300 young men and women that currently are part of our educational community. With just six years since its launch in 2014, Universidad Carolina has become one the fastest growing and most recognized higher-education institutions in our region, and for this we are proud and very grateful. I must say that with all this initial success, institutional development, and impact that we had accomplished by February 2020, I felt very confident about my personal leadership contributions and with a sense that we had everything under a reasonable level of control.

But then COVID-19 came. In a matter of days, we had to shut down all face-to-face educational experiences and managerial contact, shift towards remote learning and began to face a massive fall in our student's capacities to cover their tuition, due to the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. After a couple of weeks adjusting to this new reality our Mexican Holy Week came in and with this, some time to stop and reflect upon what was happening. The general feeling was as if we had just been hit by a tsunami and, all-of-a-sudden, that sense of control that I had felt previously had significantly vanished. In addition to feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and vulnerable in the face of sudden uncertainty, I started to feel deeply humbled by the experience and to grieve upon the losses that we would surely be living through as an educational community and as society as a whole.

With these feelings, many questions also began to arise within me: How can we secure the livelihood of the more than 300 families of our faculty and management team that depend upon the income they receive from the university? How can we best ensure an adequate educational experience for our students considering that most do not have sufficient internet access or equipment to undertake their online learning? How will we be able to provide certainty to our students and colleagues regarding the adequate sanitary measures when our federal government was not in line with international

recommendations? After sitting with these and many more questions for a few days, and in close deliberation with my team, we designed and implemented a series of measures that have allowed us to constantly improve our educational outreach to all our students, in spite of the digital gap that they faced, to ensure a basic income for all our staff while tuition payments recovered and to navigate the ever-changing waters of the pandemic with increased certainty of what we could do for the safety of our students and staff. Although there are still many areas in which we can improve, we are extremely grateful to see the way in which the extraordinary commitment and solidarity from our team, students and families has allowed our educational community to become stronger and to continue to grow and prosper, even in the midst of these rapidly shifting waters.

Considering these challenges brought by the pandemic, there are clearly three sub-sets that are worth identifying: In the first place, I would definitely place those related to our relationship with ourselves. This pandemic has provided space for each of us to stop and take a much-needed look inside. Many times, the first issues to appear as we start to stroll within our much-neglected inner garden are the toughest ones. Issues that we did not grieve adequately for, our fears, our scars or open wounds. Many of these could have been lurking inside for many years but had not been faced before due to the fast-pacing lives that we had led before the pandemic. As we started taking that look within, we also may have found unanswered questions that were also having a toll in our personal balance: Why am I doing what I am doing? Am I in the right relationships? Why have I not done this or that is of such importance in my life? And many more. But taking this look inside is also an opportunity to begin to heal many of the difficult issues and to identify many of our personal assets that are of relevance as we continue to navigate these stormy waters. This has surely been one of the most relevant areas of growth for me in these challenging times.

A second sub-set of challenges that I have identified is around our relationship with others. As tensions, uncertainty and significant

losses have risen in the months since the pandemic began, these and many more factors have contributed to also rising levels of friction within families, organizations and communities. It is clear to me that these tensions have also caused new ruptures within our social fabric or the deepening of some divides that we already there. Unfortunately, in Mexico we have seen a significant rise in domestic and gender violence, which was already high in pre-COVID-19 times. The way in which we have also seen increased tensions around issues of race and other forms of inequity around the world, as well as the increased loss in interpersonal trust that are also a clear manifestation of the person-to-person challenges that we face. These challenges have also been present in our national educational system as both students and teachers have found themselves in need to connect and work together from a distance while dealing with increased tensions, frictions and distractions within their own households.

A third block of challenges that we have clearly identified is around our relationship with public leaders and institutions. As we have observed in the way in which some countries have been more successful in addressing the pandemic, there is definitely a big difference in favor of such countries when there is strong, science-based leadership, and high public trust towards their leaders and institutions. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in Mexico where federal public leaders and many state-level and local leaders have not been up to the challenge, causing not only low compliance of most of our population regarding safety measures but also one of the highest COVID-19-related mortality rates in the world.

In light of these challenges, I must say that the foundational elements of what I have learned and how I try to show up in such testing times are those of trust, collaboration and compassion.

I would first like to refer to trust. As I deepen in my understanding that there is not much I can really control in the grand scheme of

things, I have also deepened in my conviction that trusting in the capacity, vision and commitment of others, especially my colleagues in the various efforts that I am part of, is one of the most valuable elements of our successful journey together.

I have also become a more fervent believer that trust leads to collaboration, and that it is only through building the bridges needed for increased communication and work towards common goals that we can collectively tackle the challenges we face. This has been true in the way in which we have overcome this pandemic in our educational institutions and in community-wide efforts to assist those that have been hit the hardest in these times.

Lastly, I have been primarily moved by the power of compassion. As each one of us faces the hardships brought by the pandemic and the other waves that are currently affecting us as a whole, having the clear intent of connecting with myself and with others in loving compassion has given me both the awareness that I need and the possibility to make myself present in a more generative and nurturing way with those around me. This shift has already started to have positive impacts within me, within my family and in many other of my relationships within wider circles of interaction.

These three elements of trust, collaboration and compassion are, without doubt, what I consider to be among the most valuable attributes that we must foster as we reflect upon how this pandemic has given us an opportunity to re-think our ways and re-define our educational priorities towards the future.

To start closing these lines, I gladly invite you to join me in taking our thoughts back to our dear Ruby Bridges, as she is depicted by Norman Rockwell in her courageous walk towards a long-sought integration of schools in the U.S. Let us find in her untarnished white dress, in her confident pace and posture, in the support she received,

in her desire to learn and strive, a strong symbol of hope and of what we can continue to work for as fellow educators around the world. We are truly connected in one of the most sacred and urgent endeavors of our time.

Emanuel Garza Fishburn is an educator with special interest in the fields of education for democratic citizenship, participatory community building and environmental conservation. He is currently the President of Universidad Carolina, fellow of the Synergos Institute and the Academy for Systems Change and graduated from the IEP program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Legal Education at Justice Defenders in The Era of Covid-19 Pandemic

Pascal Kakuru

I work in the legal education department of a UK based and registered charity organization – Justice Defenders, working in defenseless communities in Africa including prisons in Uganda and Kenya. In collaboration with the University of London we teach law to inmates and staff at a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree level. We therefore equip them to become defenders of justice to themselves and their peers. We believe that it is strategic to see injustice and defend justice through eyes that have cried as a result of injustices experienced and suffered.

During the corona virus pandemic, scaling education in the communities we work in has been very challenging. We suffered and experienced challenges ranging from limited knowledge and skills in information communication technology, difficulties in mobilization of funds to run education programs given the economic and financial hardships suffered by most institutions in the world, to restricted and/or limited movements due to total or partial lockdowns, hence constraining our endeavors to coordinate and mobilize for education activities, among others.

And in particular, given that access to internet in Africa is still minimal and restricted particularly in prisons which are sensitive security institutions, it was hard in the initial stages of the pandemic to continue having access to most of our students who are incarcerated and conduct the normal teaching activities including tutorials, extracurricular activities like mock and moot courts and assessments and feedback. We almost lost touch with students who are under incarceration until we negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Uganda Prisons Service. More so,

access to internet is not yet fully acknowledged and embraced as a human right and therefore has limited coverage in most parts of the country and government institutions in Uganda. Even where it is, its bandwidth strength is mostly low and doesn't favor full connectivity and an uninterrupted communication. So, during this time of the pandemic our education activities were not exceptional to these internet barriers which hampered our progress in empowering our clients with legal knowledge and skills to defend justice in their defenseless communities. Even though the teaching team had opportunity to meet using online platforms like zoom, google hangouts, Microsoft meetings and WebEx, the above internet challenges still affected our optimal communication and implementation of resolutions and points of action.

Most of our students and stakeholders, and even some members of the teaching, team lack ICT skills and given that we had to access each other via internet and computer connectivity, it was challenging to conduct online tutorials, departmental meetings, internal assessments and feedback and examinations. Sometimes, there would be delays connecting, or complete failure to connect, and difficulties in operating the electronic devices during such sessions. Other delays and failures to connect to online educational activities/events were basically institutional in nature within the prisons settings that do not allow inmate students to be freely available when needed, including daily counts – called 'Lock-Ups' of inmates, plus other activities of the institution taking precedence over education.

Given that, as a charity, we depend on donor funds to operate, during this time of the pandemic all donor agencies suffered economic turndowns and therefore limited their funding to our activities including education of inmates which seemed not a priority given the global health needs at hand. This situation limited our funding making it hard to do all the planned activities of the period.

As if that was not enough, the general national lockdowns and restrictions limited the general leadership of the program. Activities like delivery of tangible reading materials to students in the prisons were difficult given that public and private transport for non-essential services was not allowed. This involved stringent observation of the ministry of health covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), that is, social distancing, sanitizing/washing of hands at every point of entry in any institution and wearing face masks.

However, the above-mentioned challenges we have experienced during the pandemic are different from those we normally face. In normal conditions, though there are also funding limitations, limited knowledge to ICT by teachers, students and stakeholders, there is free movement of personnel and resources to find solutions and answers to these challenges and questions. Also, education quality control standards and requirements under normal conditions can be easily monitored and maintained, unlike during the pandemic when teaching and assessment is mostly online with its associated challenges. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of education in terms of research is expensive given the additional costs of internet data in developing countries where internet is still expensive. There have also been some efficiency gains. In our programs one tutor normally teaches a few clustered students in different prisons, thereby necessitating considerable resources in form of time and transport fares, during this pandemic, as we rely on E-education, one tutor is now able to teach all the clustered classes in different prisons in Uganda and Kenya at the same time.

Facing these challenges, as an organization and as a department of legal education, we tackled them using the following ways: First of all, where it became difficult and impossible to access certain areas of our operations where our students and stakeholders are located due to lockdown restrictions, more especially in the prisons, we delegated our prison based staff who double as students as well, and coordinators, to act as our conduits to deliver and receive

information and other deliverables to and from our students and/or management as well as other stakeholders whom we could not easily access. Under normal circumstances, our own staff teams would be directly reaching out to such beneficiaries and stakeholders for it's the reason they are paid thereby minimizing risks of delegation.

Secondly, negotiation and collaboration with partners and stakeholders was used as mechanism to sustain the education of our law students despite the change of circumstances. For example, we had to approach the University of London and the Uganda National Examinations Board to negotiate with them to allow our students to take offline examinations under the supervision of the prisons education team because they were unable to do online examinations due to prohibited use of internet in the Uganda prisons coupled with the students' limited computer knowledge and skills and restricted access to the prisons by outsiders. Under normal conditions this would not have been the case because the examinations would have been conducted in person under the supervision of the national examinations board working directly with the University of London

As mentioned above, it was a practice that both inmate, prison staff and non-inmate students, all participated in all our education programs and activities.   But with the advent of this pandemic, we had to bend and be flexible to disallow inmates from participating in some of our extracurricular activities. For example, they did not participate in the 29th Africa Human Rights Moot Competition 2020 organized by the University of Pretoria of South Africa and this time being hosted in Dakar Senegal in West Africa, contrary to what had been initially planned. We had to be flexible to deploy non-inmate students to participate in this competition. The legal education team made this decision in consultation with the organization's senior management team.

Since our organization is a charity, and therefore entirely depending on donor funds, given the world economic downturn resulting from

the pandemic, the funds of the organization dwindled and wouldn't fully fund the budget as planned. It was therefore necessary, though painful, to restructure the organization and render some staff redundant including the legal education department. This was necessary to keep a few and manageable members of staff in order be able to sustain the education of students. Had it not been because of the pandemic, such a tough and painful decision would not have been taken.

Amidst this pandemic, I have built on openness to learn new and better ideas and ways of doing things from my supervisors, subordinates and even my own students especially in the world of information and communication technology, in order to keep up-to-date and relevant to the team and as an administrator. I was not ashamed of admitting that I did not know something when this was the case. This opened a way for me to research, learn and improve for better results. Consequently, I was able to get new and better knowledge and skills in information communication technology. This kept me relevant and moving forward in the legal education department during the times of the pandemic.

Secondly, I worked hard to make sure we delivered to the expectations of the organization in the legal education department. I had to work beyond the official working hours. My example posed a challenge to my colleagues to also work selflessly to their assignments and tasks in the unprecedented times to meet our objectives and the goal and/or mission of the organization.

Thirdly I ensured effective communication involving listening to and responding promptly to the team's concerns most times. I maintained consistent reporting to my supervisors, making constant consultations where necessary in order to remain on the same page with everyone in the team. I did this using the different channels of communication; including, emails, WhatsApp, slack, direct

telephone calls and physical meetings where social distancing was possible.

Patience was also very helpful during these challenging times. Patience at vertical and horizontal levels in the organization, that is, with management, supervisors, students and colleagues. I was patient with delayed responses, assignments and homework and other group tasks. This was from appreciating that we were operating under completely new circumstances where it was really necessary to bear with one another, not to break people's hearts, especially our students' who were badly hit by the pandemic given that they were not allowed any visitors from their families, relatives and friends, who are always a source of material supplies to supplement what the prisons management offer. This kept the team and students in harmony without any divisions resulting from outbursts of impatience from the teaching team. And this led to better performance in our final examinations contrary to the students' worries when we temporarily lost touch with them when the pandemic had broken out in the country and there was total lockdown.

Leading and trying to influence people remotely without having direct contact with them hence limiting the rate of execution and implementation of resolutions and action points. This was worsened by limited information communication technology skills by team members and incarcerated students and coordinators. This called for unending reminders of the agreed things to be done. This was because people were not used to do the daily work using emails and other internet platforms. This often led to time wasted and slowing down the rate at which work progressed to meet the deadlines.

In my opinion, in the next five years there will be both positive and negative consequences of the pandemic to the education sector in both developed and developing countries.

Positively, there will be:

➢ There will be vigorous adaptation to E-education and a substantial shift from offline to online education coupled with increased digitalization of the education programs in areas where it had not been fully embraced. Modern technology will be used in the delivery of education more than before the advent of covid-19.

➢ Increased access to a diversity of education programs from different geo-political locations due to online access that will be the norm of dispensing knowledge under the 'new normal'; and

➢ There will also be a change in the curriculum to adapt to and reflect the changing socio-economic and technological environment of the education sector. For example, most learners at all levels of education journey especially in the developing world who did not continue with their studies in the periods of the total and partial lock downs, either the schools were closed down, or learning was being done using print, electronic or social media and those learners could not afford any of those, they missed out and registered a dead year with no promotions to next level. I strongly believe that this will continue haunting the education sector for at least five years and the situation won't remain the same even after the pandemic has concluded. So, the curriculums have to be changed to reflect such anomalies in the long run.

Negatively, there will be:

➢ Technological unemployment when few teachers will be required to teach many learners using the online resources hence leaving out many for lack of vacancies in the education institutions or rendering redundant those who cannot afford and are not able to deliver, facilitate and teach using modem technology.

➢ A high rate of school dropouts more so in the developing countries given that a large number of learners/parents and guardians will not be able afford to facilitate online education

for their children and /or dependents give its associated challenges including financial capacity and technical know-how; and

➢ High cost of education involving high demand for research to improve on the level of creativity and innovations in order to improve and be able to use and apply modern information technology in the circumstances of the 'new normal'. This will greatly affect young and growing economies of the world and individuals who cannot easily adopt and afford to use and apply this technology.

In a nutshell, the coronavirus pandemic has come to stay for an unpredictable time with its challenges and effects to all sectors of the economy of the world, including education. As educators, the only way to go is to be flexible, act creatively and innovatively in order to adapt to the realities of the 'new normal'. Change is a fact of life.

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RE-IMAGINE. RE-WIRE. RE-COMMIT

Shifting Powers to Proximate Leaders & Engaging the Private Sector

Rehmah Kasule

COVID-19: The early days

A Senior Fellow at the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative, I had launched the **Plus+Africa Linkubator**. This 'future of work' venture has the audacious goal of creating safe, dignified, and rewarding employment pathways for 1 million young women in Africa by 2030. A holistic and innovative model, skills, links, and engages young women to transition from school into work successfully. The Plus+Africa Linkubator collaborates with strategic partners in the private sector and works with governments to strengthen the employment and entrepreneurship eco-systems in Africa.

On March 5, 2020, I received deflating news: the Harvard Business School Social Enterprise Conference (SECON), where I was scheduled to speak, had been canceled. SECON had presented an excellent opportunity to raise visibility, expose my social venture to global funders and partners, and leverage the Boston social innovation eco-systems. When I received the cancellation email, I was meeting with the UNDP Director for Africa, who had traveled from New York to attend my presentation. As we digested the news, a potential partner I had invited from Germany called me after checking into his hotel in Boston. For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to say to someone.

The rest of the month was a blur. My meetings in Washington DC with the U.S. Department of State, Vital Voices Global Partnership and FHI 360 were all canceled. Harvard sent students home as classes went virtual. The start of the month of Ramadan in April brought some hope. The Harvard Muslim Society created a sense of community that helped lift the dark shadow through Dr. Khalil Abdur-Rashid's daily preaching.

My mother used to say . . .

"Never ask why something happened, instead focus on what you should do to navigate it." Nusula Kasule

I took action. I studied the trends and the potential impact of COVID-19, past pandemics, and global economic crises. By mid-March, Massachusetts, with 6+ million people, had about 20,000+ cases, and Uganda, with 50 million people, had less than 3 reported COVID-19 cases. Communicating the urgency for a strategic planning meeting with my **CEDA International** team in Uganda seemed like a far-fetched reaction. We had five scenario planning sessions focusing on people, pathways, and partnerships for our programs. Key questions were: How will our team remain safe and have an income? How can we pivot our programming to ensure continuity? What strategies will keep the organization sustainable? What strategic partners shall we engage to support our work?

In Uganda, the announcement of a nationwide lockdown on March 19 shocked the country, and many considered it a political gimmick by the ruling party. Overnight, people lost their livelihoods, social mobility, and schools closed. On social media, the mistrust manifested in the widely shared phrase: "Do you know anyone who knows anyone who knows anyone with COVID-19?"

With the education system already struggling due to inadequate funding, the money has shifted to strengthening the army due to

Uganda's presidential elections on January 14, 2021. Although the Government is trying to implement virtual learning through radio and television for the most vulnerable and needy children, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 78% of such homes have no access to electricity.

Our Work in Education-to-work

CEDA International's flagship project in Uganda, the **Rising Stars Mentoring Program**, empowers young women to stay in school, develops their social and leadership skills, and provides them with tools to strengthen their ability to become active players in transforming their lives. The project has inspired 52,000+ young women to find the best in themselves, get a voice to navigate gender and cultural impediments, and lead change in their communities. The project works through girls mentoring clubs, community dialogues, teachers' empowerment, edutainment, and sets up school-based businesses. Providing young women with 21st-century skills, mentorship, and career planning enhances their educational achievement and potential to excel in life to gain economic independence, social mobility, and active citizenship.

Although we had crafted risk and crisis mitigation plans for projects before, nothing prepared us for a global pandemic. With no playbook, we turned the stumbling blocks into stepping-stones and built formidable foundations to insulate us from closing doors to the young women and communities we serve. Leading diverse teams working remotely meant using disruptive solutions. This reminded me of Harvard Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book: Think Outside the Building, to make transformational changes. While the world was shifting to online program delivery, we didn't have that luxury. Most of the communities we serve have no personal computers, reliable electricity, or Internet connectivity.

Because we rely on existing education systems, the schools' closure significantly disrupted our work, especially in the refugee camps. Schools are considered a safe place for children. That is where the young women in our program interact with positive role models, get balanced meals, sanitary towels, learning materials, and emotional learning.

The complex interplay of gender and the pandemic have had diverse effects on young women. Even before the pandemic, 1 in 3 women experienced gender-based violence (UN-Women). The misogynistic systems and mobility restrictions have greatly affected female teachers and mentors, impeding their ability to support young women in their communities. With broken social support networks and extreme economic hardships, domestic violence has become more prevalent, with children bearing the brunt of their parents' stress and conflicts. Paradoxically, the parents' unemployment has also increased young women's vulnerability to exploitative labor. Girls are particularly vulnerable when schools close for long periods. In Uganda, UNICEF reports 1,519 teenage pregnancies in one district alone, and 128 school-age girls were married off in four districts (Global G.L.O.W.). A recent Malala Fund says 10 million secondary school-age girls could be out of school after the global COVID-19 crisis.

Leading with Courage, Compassion, and Fierceness

The crisis disrupted the gender belief that "girls should be caring, and boys should be courageous." As a leader, I needed to be both. Dealing with multi-faceted impediments to girls' education required agility, thoughtfulness, and local networks. The gender-based violence, child marriages, early pregnancies, and school dropouts are very alarming. My roles changed overnight from mentor, pathfinder, and innovator to preventer, protector, and prosecutor. I formed strategic partnerships with other organizations such as the police and

legal-aid services to prosecute the perpetrators of domestic violence, child marriages, and sexual exploitation.

We knew that the safety and well-being of our stakeholders - teachers, mentors, community leaders, and our girls come first. One of the most critical actions I took was to secure income for my team. A donor gave us an emergency fund for nine months - with or without working. Knowing that they had guaranteed income, my employees and volunteers gained mental stability, focus, and a renewed commitment to service.

I believe in the power of relationships, and the pandemic has affirmed that belief. This crisis has strengthened my organization's relationships with our donors, partners, and hundreds of volunteers. Everyone did their part without expecting pay, recognition, or reward. We provided smartphones, Internet, and laptops for the employees and partners to work at home. The schools provided mentors and supervisors for the girls, and parents offered their homes as training spaces. We refused to stand by and let broken systems break our children's dreams and future.

Staff conversations have shifted during our weekly meetings. We start with a five-minute meditation followed by a non-denominational convocation, which has built strong bonds for the team. I share the little expertise in mental health and wellness acquired from serving on the board of Strong Minds. Now, more than ever, I am aware of the personal struggles all of us are going through. Supporting my employees to deal with family struggles during this crisis has been one of the most rewarding things I have done as a leader. I can listen more intently without judgment and biases. I enjoy small conversations with the team without thinking about targets and deadlines. I am more a 'human being' than a 'human doing.'

Despite the darkness, we didn't wait for the storm to pass. We turned the shadows into rays of hope. As people speak about the 'new normal,' I wonder, is it really a 'new normal'? Maybe to some people, but for the girls that have become pregnant, and the educators that have lost jobs. . . it will never be a 'new normal.' Their trajectories shifted, and it's our job to repair those dreams...one life at a time.

Re-imagining the Future

The knowledge from Ambassador Samantha Power's Harvard course - Making change when change is difficult, facilitated CEDA International pivot with innovative levers for change. These enabled us to re-imagine the future and co-create new collaborative initiatives in education-to-work. We made quick, encapsulated decisions with global awareness, systems thinking, and bridging leadership.

Our first strategy was to **shift power and build capacities of** proximate leadership by empowering them to take ownership of the program. Funding grassroots leaders near the systemic challenges the young women face is where change lies. We established a network of 80+ champions, or ambassadors, to be mentors and role models in the communities.

We created **strategic partnerships with** other nonprofit organizations and development agencies working in sexual and reproductive education, vocational skills, livelihood, and entrepreneurship to complement our work.

To create **new narratives and** shape positive conversations that build hope and resilience, I co-authored a children's book, 'Sheroes of COVID-19' - Women leading in the crisis (Kasule, R. & Shah, P., Pangea Publishing). With the foreword by Ambassador Melanne Verveer, the book profiled stories of women leaders from around

the world doing extra-ordinary work during this crisis. It gives children a mirror to reflect on what's going on and identify women role models in their communities. It also gives them an opportunity to learn about other countries and appreciate global interconnectedness.

As part of our **Let Girls Learn at Home campaign**, we distributed 385 books and over 4,000 past examination papers to primary and secondary school students. We facilitated training for 35 community volunteers, supporting children to continue learning at home, and provided seed capital to ten teachers who lost their jobs to create income-generating activities to support their families.

The shrinking funding sources, donor fatigue, and shifting focus from long-term investment to COVID-19 response made us re-examine our public narrative, value proposition, and competitive advantage. We started a **capacity-building consultancy**, which facilitates nonprofit organizations to revamp their strategic plans and develop leadership and organizational capacities to manage innovative solutions at scale. The consultancy has emerged as a critical revenue stream for CEDA International.

Connecting the dots & building workforce pipelines: The Future of Education and Work

This December, Dubai Cares organized the RewirEDX Education virtual conference to reflect on key global educational stakeholders' experiences. I spoke about the role of the private sector in addressing education and work challenges and the need to overhaul strategies in Africa. Formal education alone does not empower girls to enter the labor force. Even with a university degree, young women may fail to get a job paying more than US$2.5 per day. We have to build a better working world by developing outstanding leaders, especially young people facing barriers to entering the labor market for secure, safe,

and fulfilling employment. Employers must engage the untapped young talent by providing paid work experience placements and skillset development for future employability.

The private sector has a significant role in catalyzing, rewiring, and reshaping education and work for young people worldwide. Several corporations have become innovative and pivoted their corporate social responsibility funding to cater for impact and sustainability investment in education and work. However, these are short-term uncoordinated initiatives that will not have sustainable outcomes.

There is a need for a mindset shift from short-term to long-term investment in education and work. To build an eco-system where young people will survive and thrive, the public-private partnerships should commit to the shared-value and build coalitions for collective systemic transformation (Generation Unlimited). The private sector will have to invest in bankable at scale solutions by governments, development partners, and civil society organizations. Specifically, there is a need to put capital in the hands of women, young people, and proximate leaders at grassroots levels. The private sector should also invest in technology infrastructure to bridge the information and knowledge gaps and the limited access to the Internet for marginalized communities.

The private sector must shift from being consumers of labor to an active player in education reform and workforce development. There is a need for investment in innovative education-to-work programs: vocational skill development, entrepreneurship education, business incubation, apprenticeship, and internships. This will mitigate skills-mismatch and create skilled, values-based, and productive employees for businesses. The private sector and philanthropists, especially in Africa, should support locally led initiatives with innovative, at-scale solutions that create work for young people.

Refocusing My True North - Future Leadership Roles

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn"—Alvin Toffler

I have done deep learning, unlearning, and relearning in the past nine months. I have translated each learning into strategies that have galvanized my contribution to the education and future of work for young women in Africa. I dream of a world where all girls receive a quality education, supported by 21st-century skills and tools to learn, take charge of their lives, get out of poverty, prosper, and lead change in their communities.

The intersectionalities between education and work require a global practice to mainstream gender and promote diversity and social inclusion. Moving forward, I have taken on the leadership roles of a knowledge broker, mobilizer, and convener for other nonprofit organizations. My work has expanded to deepen economic justice, racial equality, diversity, social inclusion, and belonging. I am leading strategic efforts with organizations such as the Mastercard Foundation and the African Development Bank to mainstream gender and co-create high-impact gender-transformative programs to catalyze reliable work for young women in Africa.

My life story and professional trajectory is a testimony that education breaks intergenerational cycles of poverty. I believe access to quality education is the best enabler of positive transformation. Education is a pathway out of poverty. It opens young women opportunities to get dignified, safe, and rewarding employment, get voice and agency to make life choices, and become active citizens.

As I continue to assess current global practices to tailor solutions for Africa's education, leadership, and employment challenges, my work

will contribute to gender equality at scale through policy, programs, and practice. I am developing technology and data-driven platform, PLUS+AFRICA, that will connect youth to information, mentors, training, employment, global networks, and funding opportunities. I am committed to working with development partners to support local organizations to manage education and employment solutions at scale. Leveraging my 12+ years of nonprofit management expertise, I will tap my passion for capacity building to support other nonprofits to cultivate essential leadership, strengthen their revenue streams, board management, communication, leadership, and talent development.

"Walk alone to go fast, take others to go far." - African proverb

COVID-19 has presented opportunities to recommit, re-imagine, reform, and rewire education systems globally. We must shift mindsets and redesign systems that provide equitable opportunities to all children regardless of backgrounds, race, religion, color, or gender.

As we enter 2021, it's imperative to galvanize long-term investment efforts in proximate leaders and young people to prepare them for the world. We can't navigate these unprecedented moments with trepidation. We need to move from thought to action, from advocacy to empowerment, from silos to collaborations, from panic to courage, from giving up to hope. We need to practice gratitude, focus on shared value, and leverage the collective power of the private sector, social innovators, civil society leaders, development agencies, governments, and policymakers.

"The night sky is never lit by one bright star, but by the billions of stars that come together." - African proverb.

A great woman leader Eleanor Roosevelt said: *"The future belongs to those that believe in the power of their dreams."* Let's dream for a better future and stand strong. We are strong together!

Rehmah Kasule is the Founder of CEDA International in Uganda and the USA, and a Senior Fellow of Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative focusing on the future of work in Africa. She is a civil society champion, social innovator, serial entrepreneur, a gender mainstreaming, and capacity building consultant. She serves as Judge for the MacArthur Foundation 100&Change, a $100 million competition to help solve a critical social problem. Her work at CEDA International has skilled and mentored 168,000+ youth and women across Africa and was recognized by President Barack Obama. Rehmah is a Let Girls Learn Global Ambassador, a winner of the Fortune-Goldman Sachs Global Women Leaders Award, and she was named one of Africa's Most Influential Women in Government and Civil Society in 2016. Born a village girl, she refused to become a village woman. Rehmah strongly believes that quality education breaks intergenerational cycles of poverty, and she is committed to changing trajectories - one life at a time.

Challenges for inclusive education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rodrigo Hübner Mendes[48]

"We will need all the help you can give us, because this subject is very complex and we do not know how to develop protocols for the returning of face-to-face classes", said to me on the phone Rossieli Soares da Silva, São Paulo State Secretary of Education, one Saturday morning, shortly after schools were closed in Brazil. As in all parts of the world, the covid-19 pandemic directly impacted the functioning of educational systems at all levels, imposing on children, adolescents, and young university students the limited experience of remote learning.

The Rodrigo Mendes Institute (RMI) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to collaborate so that every person with a disability has a first-rate education in a mainstream school. In recent years, the Rodrigo Mendes Institute has trained more than 100,000 educators from all over Brazil impacting more than 1,5 million students. For that reason, the Secretary trusted we could help with his request.

In order to help Secretary Rossieli's, and other public administrators in Brazil dealing with this new and complex situation, we scheduled a meeting of the leaders of the Institute and, on the same weekend, decided to invest in a study about protocols and actions that were already being taken by countries at a more advanced stage in the contamination curve of the new corona virus, where the reopening of schools was already being planned.

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[48] I would like to thank Luiza Andrade Corrêa for her collaboration in writing this essay.

We published <u>PROTOCOLS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: An Overview of 23 Countries and International Organizations</u>

the result of a study involving 23 countries and many international agencies, with the purpose of offering references for all public administrators, directors of educational institutions, educators and other professionals responsible for planning and implementing actions aimed at the educational assistance of people with disabilities during the covid-19 pandemic. This study ended up generating many useful findings and was widely disseminated. Therefore, although suggested by the Sao Paulo`s Secretary, the impacts of the study extended to the decisions made by managers of several different Brazilian education networks.

The study identified several good practices with remote instruction, implementation of sanitation protocols, including specific practices regarding students with disabilities. It also addressed the need to rethink teaching and learning practices once schools could reopen. One important message was that there is no necessary correlation between disability and risk of complications from covid-19, so students with disabilities have the right to return to mainstream schools in the same schedule as other students.

After the study was published, the Brazilian National Council of Education issued a regulation assuming that students with disabilities could not return in person to schools at the same moment as the rest. In our view, this guidance violated the human and fundamental rights of students with disabilities, as well as their right to education, as our global study of protocols had shown. Therefore, we organized a group of civil society organizations to advocate to reverse this decision with the National Council. After a series of meetings with decision makers, we negotiated a resolution, and they changed the guidelines to ensure that students with disabilities could return together with the others, following specific prevention and hygiene protocols for the needs of each one.

The Brazilian broad education context during the pandemic

The challenges in education in the national context proved to be very complex. We believe that distance learning might have potential to expand educational opportunities such as enabling universal design for learning and more individualized attention to the strengths, proficiencies and difficulties of each student. However, implemented in a sudden, mandatory and unplanned manner, distance learning ended up representing a serious challenge in terms of ensuring that no one was left behind. Distance learning amplified the necessity to promote quality communicational accessibility. Simply making a series of video classes available on the internet and expecting everyone to learn through them is the path to exclude many students. This model has serious limitations in terms of social interaction, the construction of affective bonds and the development of social skills beyond the transmission of information.

Many people and institutions were not yet ready for this transition (OECD, 2020)[49]. The sudden transformation has brought more severe impacts on the most socially vulnerable people and may end up deepening the already existing context of inequality. In Brazil, a great problem are the disparities in access to infrastructure for distance learning, such as computers, the internet, and assistive technologies. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Household survey showed that in 2018, among class C households, 43% had computers and Internet access and 33% only had an Internet connection but no devices. Most class D and E households (58% of them, which are the poorest Brazilians) had neither access to computers nor to the Internet. The scenario is quite different among the more affluent Brazilians. Among those in class A 98% have an internet connection and a computer, and 88% do so

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[49] OCDE. Learning remotely when schools close: How well are students and schools prepared? Insights from PISA. 2020. Available at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=127_127063-iiwm328658&title=Learning-remotely-when-schools-close . Accessed: December 16, 2020 at 3pm.

in class B[50]. These data show that many of the Brazilian households do not offer the basic conditions to work remotely or study using computers and the Internet, a problem most commonly present among the poor. This situation affects both students and teachers.

In addition to the challenges related to the lack of access resulting from access to infrastructure, there are also those specific to our target audience - students with disabilities. The pedagogical materials and activities provided to students are often not accessible nor prepared under a universal design for learning approach. We also face the challenge of offering complementary support to students with disabilities, the need for collaborative work by already overloaded specialists and class teachers, in addition to the issue of digital accessibility. In some cases, there is also the need for families to mediate the teaching and learning process, some of whom were often not available because they had to attend to their own work, essential to guaranteeing that they can provide for their family.

While some of these challenges preceded the pandemic, the sudden migration to distance learning augmented their severity. There have always been difficulties related to the preparation of classes that meet the needs of everyone, which requires using accessible pedagogical materials. But in online education, where the students are isolated in their families' environment, they are more susceptible to a process of exclusion which might be deepened if the school does not maintain constant communication with the students and their families. This scenario also increases the chances of these students dropping out of school.

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[50] BRAZILIAN NETWORK INFORMATION CENTER (NÚCLEO DE INFORMAÇÃO E COORDENAÇÃO DO PONTO). Survey on the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Brazilian Households, 2018, p. 224. Available at: https://cetic.br/media/docs/publicacoes/2/12225320191028-tic_dom_2018_livro_eletronico.pdf . Accessed: December 16, 2020 at 3pm.

The Rodrigo Mendes Institute adaptations for the new context

The Rodrigo Mendes Institute believes that the dissemination of best practices helps to influence others to improve their own ideas of how to include students with disabilities. Our internet portal <u>Diversa</u> advances this purpose disseminating case studies of exemplary practices of inclusive education, with reports and articles from Brazil and other countries around the world. Right after the beginning of the Pandemic, we launched a specific session on solutions adopted during the social isolation period in different contexts. This initiative has been helping teachers and school administrators to reflect and innovate regarding practical solutions for their realities.

We also created a series of webinars about inclusive education during the pandemic. The web series was divided into two cycles: the first focused on pedagogical strategies that promoted equity in online education due to the closing of schools. The second continued to discuss education for all during the remote period, emphasizing the challenges of hybrid education from the perspective of returning to classes in person. The webinars were attended by thousands of educators, public administrators, education specialists and students.

The Institute is also very known for its teaching training programs. The online asynchronous course we developed with UNICEF, called <u>Open Doors to Inclusion</u>, had many new enrolments as the Pandemic caused many people to migrate to distance learning options.

Our annual work plan foresaw two training courses for educators regarding the teaching of students with disabilities, these were supposed to have been in person in regular classrooms. Our goals were to support the collective construction of pedagogical strategies based on the concept of universal design for learning. One of these courses, for example, focused on teaching educators to produce their

own accessible teaching materials, usually developed in maker laboratories. The adaptation of these courses to the remote format was extremely difficult, given that one of the premises of such meetings was the preservation of an environment characterized by welcoming, privacy (the educators were revealing very intimate challenges in their practice) and trust. Distance relationships make the achievement of such environment more fragile and complex. In addition, the new reality demanded that we imagine alternatives for logistical aspects, such as the sending of materials and electronic components necessary for the construction of the aforementioned teaching activities.

Even though we faced these restrictions, we were able to explore the interaction resources offered by online meeting platforms as means to face such complexity and preserve the bonds which were essential for the success of the courses.

Also, during the isolation period, we continued with the plan to set up an advocacy area at the Institute, with the objective of leading actions in public policies related to inclusive education through networking with other institutions. Despite the physical distance, we were able to create strong bonds and relationships to pursue the objectives of the area and to preserve the rights of students with disabilities.

The Rodrigo Mendes Institute's work is developed through partnerships with education departments across Brazil. Bearing in mind that the secretariats are experiencing deep uncertainties in the face of a situation that has never been lived before, this context directly affects the maintenance of the rights of students with disabilities as a priority agenda. Such public managers were totally drained to deal with sanitary and health protection issues, significantly expanding the range of themes and challenges that needed to be addressed. Therefore, the Institute was responsive to its role of advocating for these rights.

The main example of our success in this area is that on September 30th of 2020 the Brazilian President issued a Decree instituting a public policy for the Special Education modality, in which the State finances and encourages the schooling of students with disabilities in special education institutions, in which students are segregated from other children, adolescents and young people in their community. Our advocacy area worked intensely in partnership with other organizations and coalitions to challenge this public policy, which represented a setback in the rights of students with disabilities and a diversion of resources from public to private institutions.

The Institute worked on three fronts: (1) communication, having been a reference for media reports and also creating collective impact strategies on social networks; (2) legislative strategies, talking to the congressmen and senators to repel the Decree; and (3) strategic litigation; working with parties and other organizations on a strategic litigation on the Brazilian Supreme Court. The dispute over the Decree 10.502/2020 ended up with the declaration of its unconstitutionality by the Brazilian Supreme Court on December 18th, 2020, which we consider a great victory. Apart from repealing the Decree, the mobilization around the subject created several new networks and coalitions of civil society organizations and also brought the matter to the conscience of many people who were not aware of the discussions concerning inclusion.

The main leadership challenges during the Pandemic

The Rodrigo Mendes Institute adopts a very horizontal management model with intense participation from all areas in the process of discussing the progress of programs and building solutions to new challenges. During the Pandemic, all employees started working from their homes, but we maintained constant contact and the collective, light, cheerful and collaborative construction that are the central feature of our culture. This clearly contributed to some activities being adapted and new actions developed.

We understand that dialogue, collective construction of solutions to practical problems, as well as empathy, are central skills for management in times of crisis. Therefore, we had to keep in mind at all times that we were all working under less-than-ideal conditions, subjected to social distancing, accumulating tasks and personal issues resulting from covid-19.

Furthermore, knowing that it would be necessary to maintain and strengthen personal relationships that, in general, are built in the gaps and intervals of the work in the face-to-face workplace on a daily basis, we reserved moments for interaction and integration, allowing informal conversations and the creation of personal bonds.

In addition, our mission and our values, which underpin our work, and also the impact it has on the lives of thousands of children and young people with disabilities, were the engines of engagement and motivation of the entire team.

In relation to the funding of our activities, the Institute completed 25 years of a history marked by the construction of solid relationships with relevant organizations from all sectors (government, private sector and civil society), which allowed the continuity of its projects and the creation of new actions at a time permeated by so many disruptions and dilemmas caused by the Pandemic.

Final considerations

The Pandemic of covid-19 will have an inevitable impact on the learning of the children submitted to social isolation. Several measures will be necessary to mitigate the consequences. Once we return to the schools in person, it will be important to assess what was effectively learned during the isolation. Then strategies for

recovery, reinforcement and reengagement must be put in place. It will also be essential to talk to children and young people about what happened in this long period of distancing, so that the Pandemic event becomes an important critical reflection on their lives and easier to deal with. In addition, more than ever it will be necessary to invest efforts in cultivating social skills and practical competences, opposed to focusing only on the transmission of information.

Another irreversible consequence is the incorporation of digital tools and resources for the diversification of activities and strategies based on the trend towards hybrid teaching models at all levels of education. This transformation can be very positive, especially in the inclusion of students with disabilities, if it is used to promote universal design and flexibility in the ways of teaching and learning.

In terms of management, we see that greater attention will be needed on emergency measures and health security protocols. This global crisis has taught us that it is always necessary to be prepared to present creative solutions in the face of emergency contexts. From now on, the possibility of new events like this will always be part of the collective imagination.

In the first years following the overcoming of the Pandemic, there is an enormous risk of increasing school dropout, both because many students may feel unmotivated by the losses and the expectation of impairment in their learning, and also by factors already known and discussed for years that are intrinsic to the teaching model in modern educational system. The traditional teaching methods are not attractive to these digital and connected generations which are very interactive and up to speed. In this sense, we believe that the transformation in the essence of what the school represents and performs and in its mode of operation needs to be accelerated.

The deep complexity of the challenges resulting from the Pandemic does not alter our social responsibility to do everything in our power to promote quality education for children and adolescents with disabilities. This duty moves us towards the constant mobilization of solutions, and it is also the factor that gives us resilience to continue even in the face of this huge world crisis. Collective and collaborative work is the engine of Rodrigo Mendes Institute, and this is also what guarantees the success of the programs and projects we carry out. In addition, solid partnerships and the building of relationships of respect, trust and competence with private and governmental organizations and other civil society institutions have guaranteed us the sustainability and stability necessary to navigate through seas like the current ones.

Rodrigo Hübner Mendes is the Founder and the CEO of the Rodrigo Mendes Institute, a non-profit organization whose mission is to guarantee that every child with disability has access to quality education. The institute develops research and teacher training programs in several countries aiming to transform the public education systems into environments that respect and value human diversity. Hübner Mendes began his career in 1998 as a business consultant at Accenture. In 2004, he decided to dedicate his efforts for the social sector, assuming the management of the Rodrigo Mendes Institute. He holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a master's degree in Human Diversity Management from the Getulio Vargas Foundation. Hübner Mendes is a Young Global Leader (World Economic Forum) and a fellow of Ashoka. He has received numerous awards and serves on the board of several Brazilian organizations. Since 2015, Rodrigo has been working as a consultant for UNESCO and for The Government of Angola.

Opportunity in Crisis: Making Education accessible and relevant for all Children

Roeland Monasch

Lessons from the past

During the 2014-2015 devastating Ebola outbreak in West Africa, I worked as the UNICEF Representative in Freetown, Sierra Leone and as one of the very few expats participated in the different national Ebola response fora right from the beginning of the outbreak. As the Coronavirus started to affect us around the globe so many memories of challenges, different considerations and shifting responses resurfaced.

Schools in Sierra Leone were closed to reduce Ebola transmission. Alternative distance learning approaches were established, including daily lessons via radio which had major quality issues. The most disadvantaged children were not accessing any alternative education. The biggest challenge we probably faced was agreeing on when to re-open schools. There was strong pressure to keep schools closed until the outbreak was officially announced over. While on the other side there was an urgent need to get children back to school and learn. In addition of being paces to study, schools are also safe spaces. Teenage pregnancies increased significantly during the Ebola period. Different interest groups put enormous pressure on decision makers to keep schools closed too long or to open too early.

The biggest lessons from the Ebola outbreak were that one has to be flexible, innovative, and be willing to make decisions in uncharted territories. Experts were flown in from international institutions across the globe. However, these global specialists had no idea what to do. They were mainly observing and taking notes. As national

decision makers we had to make our own plans and execute them. For example, in order to increase awareness about the deadly virus I proposed to the President of Sierra Leone to organize a three-day stay at home campaign in order to educate the population about the risks of Ebola. The international media highly criticized this initiative as a "lock down" which some described as violations of basic human rights[51]. My colleagues in UNICEF Headquarters in New York nearly conceded to the international pressure and I had to put my foot down to proceed with the national awareness campaign.

During my years in Sierra Leone, I realized that the country's education system was not preparing children to transition from child to adulthood successfully. Children and youth are not equipped for the shift from school to work life. So many young people do not complete their secondary education, do not get a job in the formal sector, but have to find a way to make a living without any tools/skills that help them to be successful in this transition. I realized that Sierra Leone was not unique and that education systems around the world need to urgently address this tremendous challenge.

Therefore, instead of pursuing my 20-year UN career, I decided to join Aflatoun, an international non-governmental organization providing social and financial education through an innovative scalable social franchise model. Its purpose is to empower and equip children and youth by developing their social and financial skills to create a better future for themselves and their communities. Local implementation partners execute the Aflatoun program. The Aflatoun Network is a rapidly growing global partnership Network consisting of 300 national and international NGO partners, education and finance ministries, international donors, academics,

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[51] https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/world/africa/sierra-leone-to-impose-widespread-ebola-quarantine.html?fbclid=IwAR0ADQCF9fpiRTvk_M36hV_BvBIK-A8iWd069evcnIc7yCaQfX2vpPn-PPo

the cooperative movement, banks and organisations from the corporate and social sectors. During 2019, over 10 million children and young people were reached with life skills and financial education.

As the Corona Pandemic spread around the world, Aflatoun partners were affected by their limited ability to operate in school settings to provide social and financial education. Closure of schools not only resulted in the inability to organize lessons, but also stalled research activities, including ongoing randomized control trials, capacity building of partners and teachers.

Understanding the problem

Building on the Ebola experience in Sierra Leone I realized there was a need for a practical evidence-based response. A first step was using the network of partners to do a rapid assessment of how education organizations were affected and how they were responding. In April 2020 within a period of 48 hours we received feedback from 113 partners from 67 countries providing a good snapshot of how education organizations were affected by COVID-19 across the globe.

All organisations had been negatively impacted by the crisis. The majority were working from home or were closed. Organisations reported a reduction in income, cash flow problems and the psycho-social wellbeing of staff was affected. Several organisations reported a reduction in salary for staff. More than two-thirds of the regular social & financial education programmes were carrying out less than 50% of their activities they were pre COVID-19 or they were offering no activities at all.

The large majority of social and financial education programmes that were ongoing were implemented through distance learning (75%). The survey provided essential information for developing distance learning approaches. Only a quarter continued to have direct face-to-face interaction. Most interaction with beneficiaries was via basic phone (63%), SMS (38%), and the use of smartphones (74%). Overall, four out of five beneficiaries (or their parents) had access to a simple (offline) phone (82%). More than two-thirds had access once every two days to the internet (68%). In sub-Saharan Africa this was 56%. In all other regions it was nearly 90%. Overall, only 17% had continuous internet access. This strategic information was widely circulated and used by other international agencies.

Being prepared for change

Aflatoun has a track-record in capacity strengthening of trainers and educators of education organizations who in turn help children learn essential life skills and financial education. Aflatoun uses an active teaching methodology which encourages "learning by doing"; through fun games, activities, and workbooks, children are encouraged to take an active role in the learning process. This includes school-wide savings clubs, financial and social enterprises and group activities within the community.

The model has been highly dependable on face-to-face training methods (cascading training system of global, regional and country-level master trainers). Over the years there had been a strong reluctance to use other training approaches than face-to-face methods due to concerns around quality assurance and lack of belief that a similar experience can be achieved through remotely facilitated trainings.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak Aflatoun's main training delivery model was not effective anymore. The global pandemic pushed

Aflatoun to fast track the development of new education delivery models – especially using digital learning opportunities.

Recognizing the broader reluctance and disinterest towards digital approaches within Aflatoun three years ago I formed a small dedicated 'digital team' with the task to develop digital educational content as well as digital training delivery models of Aflatoun's content preparing the organization for the future. Fortunately, we therefore were able to shift when COVID-19 stopped most face-to-face activities. With the newly developed digital material and delivery approaches – [in December 2019, pre-corona we already had 15 MOUs with EdTech start-ups] – we immediately reviewed and updated our organizational strategy towards distance learning using digital education approaches. It was an opportunity to make the anticipated shift for the entire organization to new education delivery models.

Demand for life skills, financial & entrepreneurship education

To our surprise the large majority of education organizations were asking as 'number one area of support' guidance on how to continue to reach children with essential social and financial education. They observed serious challenges in their communities as families were not able to cope with the economic impact of the crisis and expressed the need to intensify their activities to build resiliency among the next generation.

In order to continue to deliver education programmes in times of crisis it is important to be pragmatic and highly flexible. Fortunately, this is very much in the DNA of Aflatoun as the organization works with a very large and diverse group of education organizations across the globe where adjusting, localization and contextualization are important success factors. Building on a pilot which was conceived pre-COVID-19 a new digital platform was rolled-out by the 'digital

team' to facilitate for Aflatoun and its 300+ partners effective, scalable ways to communicate, share information and content, including a "do-it-yourself component" as part of the online course work. This new digital platform led to more cost-effective coordination and sharing of best practices among education organizations. The dynamic, bottom-up network of interconnected education organisations have been meeting on-line on a regular basis throughout the COVID-19 outbreak to share innovations, plan and strategize together. Using the new digital platform Aflatoun staff and regional master trainers facilitated a large number of trainings which have received very positive feedback from government ministries and education organizations from different regions around the world.

Shifting (revenue) models

Aflatoun operates on a shoe-string budget. While the social franchise model is scalable and sustainable it has been difficult to attract donors to fund our core operations (salaries, meetings, travel and rent). During the past four years I have been prioritizing the diversification of income streams to avoid dependency on only a few funders. This broadening led to six different types of income streams. An important funding source has been the implementation of research projects funded by donors and implemented jointly with selected Aflatoun partners. As these projects came to a halt due to the pandemic, salary for the Aflatoun staff in Amsterdam could not be booked to these projects. We had to adjust our revenue model to avoid lay-offs and dismantling part of our core expertise. By building on the positive experiences from the new distance training of trainers model we were able to 'sell' on-line training activities through consultancy services to different UN agencies and International NGOs who were in need of new approaches to continue their capacity building efforts. In the second half of 2020 we organized a large number of distance trainings of trainers in life skills and financial education for these organizations. The successful implementation of these distance training programmes further

opened up opportunities using our new distance teaching and learning approaches. For example, Aflatoun developed UNICEF's "Ready to Come Back: A Teacher Preparedness Training Package[52]". A tool for educators in the Middle East and North Africa that provides information about the impact of COVID-19 on daily teaching practices as well as tips and suggestions to improve safety, well-being and learning, with students in face-to-face or remote settings. It comes with an on-line training package.

Efficiencies

Aside from the Aflatoun Digital Platform improving coordination among the network the crisis has also resulted in a number of other significant efficiencies. For example, as CEO of the organization I frequently travel to countries to meet with partners and government authorities. A typical trip to one country in Asia or Latin America can take easily a week. With the new travel restrictions and acceptance of on-line meetings as the norm I have been able to more effectively use my time. It allows me to engage with many more partners around the world. For example, I recall a day in August where I spoke during a webinar in the morning organized by the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in Thailand, later that same morning I opened a regional online meeting of Aflatoun partners from 10 countries in West and Central Africa. Early afternoon I joined a meeting for education organizations in India specialized in children with disabilities. Late afternoon, I signed an MOU with the Minister of Education and President of Central Bank of Haiti on integrating financial education into their national curriculum and participated in the event from Amsterdam.

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[52] https://www.aflatoun.org/ready-to-come-back-teacher-preparedness-training-package/

Leading a dislocated team

The new working from home arrangement has been an adjustment for staff and supervisors at the Aflatoun secretariat in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The team consists of 30 staff with 22 different nationalities. The lock down has had a major impact on the psychological well-being of some of the team members. Because of the international character of the organization for many staff their colleagues are also their friends they meet outside work. The current restrictions to visit the office make them feel very isolated which is amplified by their inability to travel abroad to visit their families in their home countries. On the opposite side, for some it is difficult to work from home as their children cannot go to school resulting in anxiety and stress. Creating belonging and influencing motivation in the team has been a challenge and has required a much more individualized 'hands-on' coaching and guidance approach towards the team members.

Looking forward: Opportunity in Crisis

The school closures around the world have been impacting hundreds of millions of students and carry high social and economic costs for people across communities[53]. The impact is especially severe for the most vulnerable and marginalized boys and girls and their families. Exacerbating already existing disparities.

However, in the medium to long-term the pandemic might be the biggest opportunity in decades to improve many underperforming education systems. Most education systems can be described as conservative, traditional often reluctant to change[54]. As a result, quality and relevance of education remain serious issues in most

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[53] https://en.unesco.org/COVID-19/educationresponse
[54] http://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/GEIS2016-Background-document.pdf

countries. Furthermore, the number of children out of school has remained unchanged at unacceptable high levels[55]. These children were not accessing an education as it was generally accepted that these out of school children could not be reached.

Since the closure of schools to reduce exposure to COVID-19 suddenly many innovative promising alternative schooling approaches mushroomed. Following some innovative adjustments more affluent children are being reached through distance learning. This is not just because they have a reliable internet connection, but because their parents are able to demand an education for their children. There is no way back. Corona has shown that if there is real commitment, every child can be reached and can be educated even if they are not able to access a classroom.

There has also been a recognition that many families were not resilient to the economic crisis as result of COVID-19. Food handouts in developing as well as developed countries show how the economic shock has led children and families to destitute situations[56,57]. While we had expected that most government education systems would solely focus on reading, writing and maths during and after the school closures (and drop any extracurricular activities) we have actually received an increasing number of requests from education organizations and government authorities to join the Aflatoun Network. Despite the very challenging operating environment more organizations joined Aflatoun during the corona outbreak (2020) than the year before. There is a rapidly growing recognition that children need to develop social, financial and entrepreneurship skills as part of their education.

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[55] http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth
[56] https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/coronavirus-could-increase-hunger-over-40m-southern-africa
[57]
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/business/economy/coronavirus-food-banks.html

As the vaccines give hope to finally control the pandemic countries will need to start considering a 'health-check' of their education system. Aside from reviewing the delivery mechanisms, it should include a careful review of the curricula at different levels and assess if they are still relevant and of acceptable quality to reach all children.

The recent signing of MOUs between Aflatoun and Central Banks and Ministries of Education of the Governments of Haiti and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to integrate financial education into their national curricula are a clear indication that education systems are ready for change. There might be an enormous education opportunity laying ahead of us as a result of this crisis.

Roeland Monasch is the CEO of Aflatoun. A Social Franchise delivering Social, Financial & Entrepreneurial Education through a network of 300+ partner organizations (incl. 30 governments) in 100+ countries, reaching 10.4 million children and young people in 2019. He previously worked for 20 years with the UN, (assignments included UNICEF Representative in Sierra Leone, Georgia, and Zimbabwe). Roeland is from the Netherlands, holds a MA Sociology (University of Groningen) and has an additional degree in Development Economics.

Pandemic Response at Generation

Mona Mourshed

In a pandemic year with no precedent and no in-person classrooms, the global education and training community has worked tirelessly to find new solutions to support learners. For some organizations, this has meant leveraging online technologies while simultaneously finding ways to overcome access barriers. For others, it has meant supporting learner communities devastated by lost income, partnering with other organizations to offer well-being services ranging from food to cash transfers.

At Generation, both have been true as we have supported our learners and alumni across the world through the pandemic. Generation is a global employment nonprofit that trains and places unemployed youth and mid-career individuals in careers that would otherwise be beyond their reach. Since our launch six years ago, we have served ~40,000 learners across 14 countries and ~30 professions. Our graduates have an 83% job placement rate and typically earn 3-4 times more in income than what they earned previously.

While we are still the midst of navigating the many implications of COVID-19 on our work, more than ever, leading in this period has demanded active and ongoing listening and engagement with our learners, our alumni, and our communities. Building on that, three pivots have been important for us to date.

Serve our communities with our unique assets, even if it is a departure from core work

As COVID-19 began upending life around the world, we reflected on whether our organizational capabilities could be helpful to our communities beyond our 'train and place' employment programs.

In February and March 2020, we saw that the pandemic was placing unprecedented strain on healthcare systems. The result was many existing healthcare professionals who rapidly needed training to care for COVID-19 patients and to stay safe themselves. One of Generation's capabilities is to rapidly develop practical and activity-based curricula for a specific profession. As the pandemic began taking hold, we thought we could deploy our learning methodology to help existing frontline healthcare professionals -- including nurses, doctors, midwives, and technicians -- to learn COVID-19 essential skills. We were mindful that this was a significant departure from our core work of training and placing unemployed learners into careers – not only would we be engaging a completely different learner population, but this work involved offering only one component (training) of the usual seven components that our employment model delivers. But we also believed deeply that a time of crisis warranted such a departure, and that we could be of service to our community by doing so.

Our work began in Italy, which was one of the first epicenters of the pandemic. As we spoke with healthcare professionals, we heard that most of the existing training materials on COVID-19 care were in the form of manuals or power point slides (either as documents or read aloud on video). However, healthcare professionals wanted practical, demonstration-based, online modules that they could rapidly absorb and rewatch as needed. The topics of greatest interest included the donning and doffing of personal protective equipment (PPE), non-invasive ventilation, and stress management under emergency conditions. We also found that healthcare institutions

and associations were seeking content in local language, appropriate to local healthcare protocols, and consistent with local credentialing requirements. And most of all, healthcare institutions and professionals needed this content quickly.

Within three weeks, we mobilized a coalition of partners in Italy, marrying their medical expertise with our activity-based learning methodology to rapidly design and film the online modules for COVID-19 care. The coalition included leading medical and academic institutions, national healthcare professional associations, as well as a major financial institution and a production and media institution. The resulting online COVID0-19 modules received national accreditation, and then they were disseminated by the healthcare professional associations to their members.

Following our first experience in Italy, we rapidly replicated the same approach in India, Spain, France, and Kenya. We partnered with a wide range of medical, academic, and other partners to create and deliver country-specific curricula. This model ensured that in each country, the program was consistent with national healthcare regulations and credentialing guidelines. All the video modules featured local healthcare workers from the country, whom we worked with our coalition partners to identify and to prepare for the demonstration-based filming.

To date, we have reached more than 300,000 healthcare workers through these coalition-driven programs. For example, in Italy, we have reached over 100,000 healthcare workers, including 20% of all nurses in the country. We have an 83% course completion rate, with 80% of participating nurses saying that the course was immediately relevant to their work and 93% saying that the quality of the course was excellent or very good.

Due to our work with healthcare institutions through the COVID-19 program, we are now finding opportunities for our core employment program to train and place unemployed learners in healthcare roles. And so, we have come full circle.

Engage alumni to understand their needs and target mid-term interventions for them

While we had immediate access to the learners in our virtual classrooms, we needed to develop a fact base to inform how to best support our alumni in the wake of the pandemic. In Spring/Summer 2020, we conducted a global alumni survey (administered through text, email, and phone) to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. We surveyed ~12,000 alumni with a ~25% response rate across 12 countries; and, what we learned helped us to figure out what to do next.

For example, we learned that 11% of our alumni employed pre-crisis lost their jobs through June, and that a larger share (34% of employed alumni) experienced a reduction in wages and/or loss of hours. On average, our alumni fared similar or better than the general population in our respective countries, who experienced a 10-24% drop in employment. Targeted job placement support was the top intervention sought by unemployed alumni (57% rated it as 'most helpful') followed by access to job placement resources (56%). In response, Generation countries like India and Kenya are prioritizing placing our unemployed alums in newly identified job opportunities, with a focus on those towns to which our alums migrated in the wake of the pandemic.

One-third of alumni were highly impacted by challenges related to food security and housing, particularly in Kenya and India. And women faced more challenges than men on almost every dimension we tested. As a result, Generation countries engaged in multiple

partnerships to serve these well-being needs. For example, we partnered with Give Directly to support 5,000 alumni in Kenya to receive direct cash transfers; and we are now working with them to monitor the cash transfer impact to inform future interventions.

Accelerate delivery model shifts to meet the new environment created by the crisis

Prior to 2020, Generation's program delivery was typically fully in-person. We were moving towards blended online/in-person programs gradually and had running experiments in certain programs/cities. However, the pandemic compelled us to dramatically accelerate our plans to offer fully online programs.

Like many organizations, our immediate action was to teach online what we previously taught in class within days of lockdown. We simultaneously developed solutions for learner access issues – we found that lack of bandwidth or devices typically affected 15-25% of a given cohort – and for the digital fluency of our learners. During this time, we also created a range of toolkits to support our instructors to teach online effectively; and we also identified and rolled out an LMS, which now hosts much of our online content and serves as a "home base" for our learners while in our programs. Our results to date have been promising – our online cohorts that launched and graduated since April had an average attendance rate above 90%; and we found that our learner performance online is on par with in-person performance.

Our second evolution of moving online kicked off in late summer 2020 as we sought to identify and trial different online tools to support each of the seven steps of our methodology (from recruiting to curriculum to job-matching to mentorship). By January 2021, we will have launched five programs in tech and healthcare professions designed from the start to be fully online through a mix

of asynchronous and synchronous modules. For example, for curriculum, we curated existing online technical content for each tech profession, interwove it with our mindset and behavioral components, and then inserted Generation practicum sessions (job-specific activities that require learners to deploy a combination of technical, mindset, and behavioral skills). Along the way, we realized that few providers have a seamless solution for language translation. To meet the needs of our countries, we partnered with a global translation company to translate our sessions to each of our local languages. All of these changes position us and our graduates to be effective in a world that moved almost fully online—and won't ever return fully to pre-pandemic norms.

One of our six Generation organization values is 'Go Further, Together'. We are committed to learning across our countries and with other organizations as we continue our journey to navigate the pandemic and to be of greatest service to our learners and communities in 2021.

Mona Mourshed is the founding global CEO of Generation: You Employed, an employment nonprofit that trains and places unemployed/underemployed learners in jobs across 14 countries and ~30 professions. She has worked and written on K12, vocational, and higher education. She has a BA from Stanford and PhD. from MIT.

An Atypical Anniversary: Re-engineering Room to Read

Geetha Murali

2020 began with the promise of celebration. Room to Read's 1,600 staff members around the world were preparing to accomplish a major milestone – benefiting 20 million children during our 20th anniversary year. We eagerly anticipated honoring our history with a joyful reflection of the moments that built Room to Read into the organization it had become. We ended up momentously re-engineering Room to Read in ways we never imagined.

Room to Read[58] is a global international education organization focused on eradicating illiteracy and gender inequality, through education. Founded in 2000 on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children®, we have endeavored for two decades to reinforce the ideal that education must be provided to all children, as a universal human right. We are proud of our ability to deliver results at scale[59] and, in January 2020, based on our annual plan, our

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[58] Room to Read helps children in low-income communities develop literacy skills and a habit of reading and supports girls to build skills to succeed in secondary school and negotiate key life decisions. We collaborate with local communities, partner organizations and governments to test and implement innovative models that can be integrated into the education system to deliver positive outcomes for children at scale. The organization has published almost 1,700 titles in 43 languages and distributed 30.2 million books. Room to Read has worked across 20 countries, mostly across Asia and Africa, with more than 40,000 partner schools in public school systems and aims to benefit 40 million children by 2025.

[59] Children in Room to Read programs read 2 to 3 times faster than children in comparison schools, with greater comprehension. A survey of a recent sample of graduates from the Girls' Education Program, who are five years removed from Room to Read programming, showed 93%

teams enthusiastically set out to work in almost 10,000 schools, with 3.8 million children.

Most Room to Read staff work in an environment that, for many of the children we serve, is the only beacon of safety and stability in their lives – school. In early 2020, in a matter of weeks, the seriousness of the pandemic was acknowledged by most governments; and the central building block of Room to Read's work, the public school, became increasingly paralyzed and inaccessible to students. The very foundation of our programs sustained extreme cracks, without any assurance of repair. School closures threatened the learning of 1.6 billion students,[60] and we started hearing powerful voices proclaiming online learning as the solution. We knew that most of these children would not have the necessary resources or support to continue learning at home. How could they when they had not even had them at school?

We had to ask ourselves how Room to Read could deliver against our mission and keep children learning at home, while balancing our staff well-being. Balancing these two priorities would become the hallmark leadership challenge of the year. Added to this overarching concern were many other factors – the erratic opening and closing of school systems and varying degrees of denial about the seriousness of the pandemic by government actors, unequal access to technology solutions for our staff and the children they support, unpredictability of our funding given the impact of economic instability on our donors, the shutdown of large in-person events,[61]

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either enrolled in further education or found employment. Read more about our research, monitoring and evaluation work at https://www.roomtoread.org/media/rqjpld5d/rtr_global-rme-report_dec2020.pdf.

[60] UNICEF. 2020. Keeping the world's children learning through COVID-19. https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/keeping-worlds-children-learning-through-covid-19

[61] Room to Read runs eight fundraising galas across major financial markets, collectively raising US$10 million annually.

bushfires in Australia, impending Brexit fallout in the U.K., and social unrest in the U.S. and Hong Kong.[62] The list of significant threats was never ending, and Room to Read, like many other organizations, had never faced such intense external constraints.

People are said to reveal their true nature more clearly in times of strain, and organizations are no different. Room to Read is complex with 27 legal entities and branches, operating in 19 currencies. The economic and school shutdowns, social upheavals, and political maneuverings introduced immense pressure and risk. Pressure and risk can promote fear and create moments in which rash decisions are taken to insulate organizations. However, our calling as dedicated leaders of an education organization committed to social justice is to accelerate program delivery, particularly during times of crisis, and meet the growing demand. So, our executive and senior leadership teams worked with staff to redesign our programs and operations end to end, responding to children's needs in the countries where we work, changing our focus from the school to the home. We made more decisions on tighter timeframes, with shorter learning cycles and higher stakes; but achieving the outcomes we desired was essential. Children would have to continue learning if we were to ensure that a generation of students was not lost to the biggest education emergency in modern history.

With so much at stake, we leaned heavily on the values that are at the heart of Room to Read and serve as our guiding framework. During this crisis, our values manifested in ways we may not have seen before, grounding us, and helping us to prioritize and make difficult decisions. Room to Read frames our values around the acronym CARES. The section that follows provides a snapshot of how these values played a role in our pandemic response. They brought us together as leaders, educators, implementers, data

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[62] Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Hong Kong are four of Room to Read's major fundraising markets.

scientists, and fundraisers. They defined our sphere of control and illuminated areas where we could make positive change.

Collaboration: We value partnership.

Room to Read's success is deeply connected to our network of critical partners. We shut down almost 50 country and field office locations early in the year, in order to protect our teams from the spread of the virus; but we sought to transition to remote working without disconnecting with any of our external stakeholders – the communities we serve; government and corporate partners; vendors and service providers; donors; volunteer chapters; and global and regional boards. Our field staff prioritized connecting with all levels of government and the school communities we work with to assist them in reaching children through no-tech, low-tech and high-tech channels.[63] We worked with our government partners to develop and augment their solutions. For example, in Sri Lanka, where the Ministry of Education was unable to print and distribute the quantity of workbooks required, we partnered with them and provided workbooks to approximately 665,000 lower primary school children across the country. We worked virtually with authors and illustrators to provide broader access to high-quality and relevant children's book content.[64] We reinvented our galas for the virtual world and were uncomfortably dependent on new technologies and stable

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[63] Initiatives included hard copy materials distribution, phone, SMS and video calls to parents and young women on our programs, radio and television literacy and life skills broadcasts, virtual author and illustrator trainings, and remote mentoring sessions.

[64] Initiatives included redesigned story books on single story cards for cost-effectiveness and ease of hard copy distribution, read-alouds of children's books that could be accessed through our digital platform *Literacy Cloud (www.literacycloud.org)* and IVRS technology (i.e., using a toll free number on a mobile phone, a parent can have a story read to their child). We also developed signature series of children's books dealing with the most pressing issues of our time such as the pandemic, peace and equality and climate justice.

internet connections across multiple borders for their success. We knew we had to be daring and called on our entire network's collective intelligence to take smart and responsible action, amidst the inexhaustible questions for which we did not have clear answers.

<u>A</u>ction: We take ownership to achieve positive outcomes.

Room to Read generally works with stable Ministries of Education, predictable school calendars and budgets, standardized curriculum development and implementation, as well as regular access to school administrators, teachers, students and communities. During the pandemic, all these standard operating procedures were on hold, and we had to innovate and adapt constantly. The digital divide was exacerbated and caused incredible challenges to equitable, remote learning. In some cases, we relied on seemingly older solutions because of their technological simplicity, such as interactive audio instruction.[65] We also had to maintain the transparency and accountability that our partners and investors expect and trust. Consequently, we conducted executive leadership team meetings three times a week instead of on our usual bi-monthly schedule, held board meetings monthly rather than three annually, conducted 19 global financial audits remotely, projected revenue and expenses more frequently, and tightened internal audit controls given process changes. We had to re-engineer Room to Read and mitigate risks to children's education[66] however we could, even if our entire organization had to operate differently.

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[65] World Bank. 1997. Education and Technology Technical Notes Series. Interactive Radio: Twenty-Three Years of Improving Educational Quality.
http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/321401468782370378/pdf/multi-page.pdf
[66] Risks that Room to Read has highlighted are covered in these two links:
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/coronavirus-school-closures-child-marriage-a9608221.html

<u>R</u>espect: We find joy in celebrating accomplishments together.

Although our staff was not sharing physical spaces, we still valued and nurtured our relationships with each other. Transparent and compassionate leadership, management flexibility, supervisory training, clear safety protocols, and attention to well-being and joy, played key roles in keeping our teams healthy and connected.[67] We balanced strong alignment across the organization with seizing local opportunities, so that functional and local leaders could quickly and nimbly advance the solutions that would work best. All these evaluations occurred alongside the blurring of personal and professional boundaries for many of our colleagues, especially those who had to support their own children's care and schooling from home. Our staff-initiated wellness programs to collectively stay physically, mentally and emotionally fit. As a human capital-intensive organization, if we were to have the stamina to support our global community, our teams' faith in our decision-making and overall well-being were central to progress.[68] As a result of our teams guiding our actions, 99 percent of staff surveyed had a strong positive reaction to Room to Read's pandemic response.

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https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Girls%E2%80%99%20Education%20Risk%20Indicator.pdf

[67] Interestingly, the investments we made in safety protocols and technology tools to support our team also highlighted some areas of weakness like cybersecurity, data privacy, and remote access to financial documentation (e.g., global audits called for local staff to gain approvals to enter closed offices and provide scanned copies of paper documentation). These are issues for which we are now prioritizing solutions, as we prepare for Room to Read's future.

[68] I was overjoyed that the team was recognized with a special award from the Library of Congress for our pandemic response. They had worked hard to deliver against our mission. https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-20-058/library-of-congress-announces-winners-of-the-2020-literacy-awards/2020-09-10/

<u>E</u>ducation: We are a learning organization with a passion for education.

Room to Read has always been committed to putting data at the heart of our approach to evidenced-based program design and to continuously improving our programs in the best interests of the children we serve. Given the comprehensive changes to our program activities, our typical approaches to measurement and data collection were inapplicable. We had to design a new research, monitoring and evaluation (RM&E) strategy and framework that would emphasize efficiency and timeliness despite pandemic restrictions. Thus, we created a new set of indicators for our emergency education interventions and new ways to collect data remotely, such as staff, parent and student surveys via smartphones and voice calls.[69] Room to Read's long-term presence, pre-existing data systems, and trusted relationships with government institutions and communities helped us collect the data required to inform our program evolution.[70]

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[69] As examples, we incorporated data collection from new interventions such as radio and television-based life skills and literacy programming and learning material distribution via various channels. In our Girls' Education Program, we typically collect data that help us identify girls who are at risk of drop-out, such as missing three consecutive days of school. We pivoted to identify factors that might put girls at risk of never returning to school (e.g., loss of household income).

[70] While in the initial phase of our COVID-19 response, RM&E was focused on understanding how the pandemic was altering the context in which we work, our new program activities and our reach. We have now moved into the next phase of our strategy, to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of our new mixed modality programs. At present, we are developing a learning agenda that will include studies on how to improve the effectiveness of our remote learning interventions; create "blended" learning strategies that leverage virtual, home-based and classroom learning; support our government partners to understand the "state of learning" in their countries; and navigate the return to school-based learning.

Scale: We focus on benefiting the most children possible, as quickly as possible.

From a financial perspective, we were focused on the crucial question of how to allocate our limited resources effectively to maximize impact and reach. We were able to significantly increase the number of children benefited by directing more dollars towards projects that engaged large-scale government partnerships, scalable technology solutions, and third-party partners for learning content distribution. For example, in Bangladesh, we worked with the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education to develop videos on life skills sessions to broadcast on the national TV channel. In the state of Uttarakhand in India, our digital book platform, *Literacy Cloud*,[71] became a key resource for distance learning, with the state government issuing a directive to all teachers to use the platform with their students. As a partner on the USAID-funded Soma Umenye project in Rwanda, Room to Read supported the Rwandan Education Board's national remote learning program focused on Kinyarwanda reading for P1-P3 students, with production of curricula-aligned radio lessons, parent guidance and the development of SMS-based reading assessments.[72]

As CEO, my privilege is to deliver on Room to Read's promise of world change in a way that aligns with what we value as an organization and who I am as a leader. I aspire to courageously pursue activities of grave significance to our mission, the presence to be compassionate with myself and others in order to open up continuous learning and meaningful action, the integrity to act on a

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[71] *Literacy Cloud*, Room to Read's digital platform, can be accessed at www.literacycloud.org. To date the platform has more than 1500 titles in 24 languages and has been accessed from 143 countries. The books are also available to download for offline use.

[72] Room to Read pledged that we would integrate programs with government systems, as part of our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan. The systems looked and operated differently because of the pandemic, but our approach to system integration as a path to scale did not change.

foundation of ethics and transparency, and the conviction to create a just and equitable world -- because it is the right thing to do.

While I continue to strive to realize these ideals, and the pandemic has evoked all of them to varying degrees, the realities of 2020 mandated compassion towards myself and my colleagues, above all else. More specifically, leading during the pandemic has required *wise* compassion, because as much as teams looked to leaders to be present and concerned, they also depended upon us to fully grasp what inspires and protects them and how, in spite of their inconstant surroundings, they could execute their goals. They needed us to make hard decisions. We had to reduce headcount and salaries, freeze recruitment and reconfigure costs. We had to disappoint, and we had to do "hard things in a humane way".[73]

My personal values and leadership philosophy had to keep me balanced, as it was essential that my own fears and uncertainties did not curtail our ability to perform. This was particularly important because, in addition to all the other difficulties we faced in 2020, in late May, I was diagnosed with a rare spinal tumor that mandated emergency spinal surgery and several weeks of hospitalization and rehabilitation to walk again. Room to Read's executive and senior leadership teams, with incredible support from our board, drew upon the innumerable contingency plans we had laid out and the strong working relationships we had fostered prior to the emergency. They executed our response fearlessly without my day-to-day presence for several weeks. They showed incredible backbone, while mine was in repair.

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[73] This section builds on the concept of wise compassion as articulated in the following article: Hougaard, R., J. Carter and N. Hobson. 2020. Compassionate Leadership Is Necessary – but Not Sufficient. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2020/12/compassionate-leadership-is-necessary-but-not-sufficient

Room to Read did not have time to cultivate fear. We had to urgently keep education at the forefront of public consciousness and not allow it to become a footnote to the global health challenge. We had to optimize every innovation and resource in pursuit of our mission because Room to Read is only as successful as its ability to release the potential that lies within the world's children. Dr. Sanjay,[74] for instance, was a student on Room to Read's early literacy program in Nepal at risk of dropping out in the 4th grade due to financial strain. He is now a doctor treating patients on the front lines of the pandemic! We will depend upon many more changemakers like Sanjay if we are to realize a just and equitable world.

At the start of 2020, we envisioned our 20th Anniversary as a period to celebrate the impact we had achieved over the last two decades, but what we experienced was considerably more meaningful. We discovered that Room to Read's evolution has engrained in us immense grit and a resolve to persevere. We did persevere, through some of the most strenuous moments in our history – *because* of our history and with our values to guide us. As hard as it is for all of us to emerge from this arduous period, overcome our individual hurdles and curb our anxiety about the long-term consequences of the pandemic on education – a generation losing a year or more of learning, exacerbated economic and digital divides, reduced funding for education systems as a result of economic impact and healthcare needs – we have to press on, because we are acutely aware of the power of education and its ability to help every human being endure. And in a world that is constantly testing our physical, mental and emotional fortitude, seemingly threatening our sensibilities towards justice and equality, *it is our unassailable responsibility, as leaders in education, to fulfill our promise to safeguard the right to education and make certain that it endures this pandemic and far beyond.*

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[74] More about Dr. Sanjay at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgy62R5fYDg&feature=youtu.be.

Geetha Murali *is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Room to Read, an organization that believes World Change Starts with Educated Children. ® Room to Read envisions a world in which all children can pursue a quality education that enables them to reach their full potential and contribute to their communities and the world. As Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Geetha oversees Room to Read's global operations, which include programmatic work in 16 countries, a global network of investors and volunteer chapters, and a worldwide staff of more than 1,600 employees.*

Empowering young, marginalized women in Guatemala during the pandemic

Travis Ning and Norma Baján

MAIA unlocks and maximizes the potential of young women to lead transformational change and centers its direct services on young women born into situations of quadruple discrimination (poor, female, rural, Indigenous). MAIA operates the Impact School, Central America's only secondary school specifically designed to meet the needs of these young women. MAIA is among the few organizations in Guatemala that is designed, led, and run by women from the communities it serves.

The educational leadership challenges brought by the pandemic

The Pandemic is an accelerator. It exposes both strengths and weaknesses and does so in hyper speed. In the field of educational leadership, the Pandemic presented dynamic challenges, such as:

- **A very quick tumble down the hierarchy of needs:** MAIA's student body is composed entirely of first-generation secondary students from situations of multigenerational poverty. One hundred percent of families are engaged in the informal economy (largely as subsistence farmers). Guatemala's swift and strict measures restricting mobility came without advance warning and quickly put MAIA families into an economic crisis. With no mobility, work (and income) ceased indefinitely. For leadership, this was an overnight pivot from a development focus (education) to an emergency relief role (food scarcity). Leadership was compelled to suddenly view work through these two diametrically opposed lenses.

- **The indefinite nature of the challenge:** Designing and leading responses to an abrupt interruption of schooling is made significantly more difficult when there is no end in sight. In a context of suspended public transportation and homes bereft of internet access, creating a response to meet student needs requires tremendous creativity. Each of these responses have financial and staff costs. Decision-making in a crisis is hard enough; doing so without a clear finish line is a lot harder.

- **No precedent:** As a country with an abnormally high prevalence of natural disasters and political unrest, Guatemala is accustomed to sudden instability. During a crisis, there is almost always a precedent or case study with lessons that can be applied to the current context. In 2020, there was no existing map forward and no institutional experience or external thought-leadership to inspire ideas, provide frameworks, etc. We were all flying blind.

How were these challenges different from the challenges of leading in education under normal conditions?

Running a school is hard, even on a perfect day. The Pandemic made circumstances uniquely challenging for a variety of reasons:

- **The sheer volume of variables affecting every aspect of the organization:** Many of the everyday challenges of operating a school are confined to the walls of the school. Almost all of these variables were suddenly thrust across 45 rural villages and among hundreds of isolated homes. Most MAIA staff live in these villages as well, and as an in-person school, there was no infrastructure for working remotely. Original systems of communication were not designed to accommodate this disruption. Additionally, the Pandemic and the measures to limit its spread required MAIA to incorporate entirely new variables

such as food security and public information about COVID. MAIA had to remap its entire communication system with staff, students, and families to accommodate the context and the volume of conversations that needed to occur.

- **Redefining the word "school," and doing it overnight:** MAIA has always prided itself on bringing the school into the home of each Girl Pioneer. The Pandemic made this even more true (and difficult). MAIA's educational and social programs for each student required an immediate redesign and indefinite iterations with every new tidbit of information about restrictions and the Pandemic. The abrupt disruption in the local economy created an immediate and urgent risk of school abandonment. MAIA had to create and deploy a series of strategies related to socioemotional support to ensure school retention.

- **Disrupted systems of communication:** Even in normal circumstances, schools must be very deliberate and disciplined about staff wellness and communication. Moments of crisis can make or break a team, and success depends largely on effective communications. The Pandemic and its restrictions nullified many of the usual "go-to" strategies (which usually hinge on in-person spaces). Formal and informal communications spaces required remapping. Even creating the semblance of a normal "war room" to manage a crisis was impossible.

- **Uncertainty of resources:** As a social impact organization that relies largely on philanthropy for its operational budget, MAIA knows that global uncertainties can quickly create instability among donors. The Pandemic's global reach disrupted both projected expenses and revenue. While certain expenses went down (utilities, meals at school, staff transport, etc.), other unforeseen expenses went up (food baskets, hygiene kits, etc.). In previous moments of crisis in Guatemala (such as hurricane or famine), the international community has always responded

quickly and generously. The global impact and widespread financial uncertainty of MAIA's donors exacerbated a general unpredictability that made the allocation of resources significantly more difficult.

- **Human resources wellness systems requiring overhaul:** MAIA staff were all personally affected by the Pandemic at the same time as the Girl Pioneers and families. Many live in the same rural villages as students. These villages were suddenly cut off and in crisis. Others suddenly found themselves managing increased parenting/familial duties during the Pandemic, and others were separated from loved ones during Guatemala's shutdown. With both personal and professional lives disrupted simultaneously, the concept of work-life balance and wellness was even more critical and difficult. MAIA's normal spaces for staff wellness and organizational culture were made obsolete when the staff could no longer convene. The concept of "putting on your own oxygen mask first" while also managing a pressing food security crisis required very deliberate innovation around belonging, organizational culture, and interorganizational support.

How did we face these challenges?

Fortunately, MAIA is designed to be agile, with an enhanced capacity to pivot amid obstacles. The nimble nature of the organization proved to be a critical asset throughout 2020. The pandemic afforded MAIA the opportunity to double down on existing strategies for adapting to new challenges:

- **Embrace the value and need for more local decision-making**: MAIA's organizational design is predicated on quick and responsive decision-making at the local level. The Pandemic, and the incredibly fluid information flow, required nimble

responsiveness. MAIA's structure permitted the rapid creation and deployment of a myriad of strategies such as food aid or immediate emotional support of families in crisis. Trust-based leadership and quick delegation allowed MAIA to evidence its girl-centered approach in unprecedented ways and keep student retention at 100 percent.

- **Being comfortable with new precedents and approaches:** Responding to the Pandemic with the existing set of tools would have handcuffed any innovation or creativity. MAIA showed courage (aka willingness to fail) in numerous innovations, including rolling out an online learning program into remote villages and steering into mass media PSA campaigns to broadcast safety measures among remote and vulnerable communities.

- **Double down on staff wellness and connectedness:** The total uncertainty of life compelled MAIA to allocate significant time to staff communication, connection, and wellness. Around the country, NGOs were laying off staff, and the rumor mill was working overtime to stoke anxieties. Early in the Pandemic, MAIA leadership convened the different teams within the organization to openly discuss issues of financial/employment stability. The overarching message was that MAIA can/will weather this storm intact as long as we all embrace innovation and change. In other words, continued employment hinges on the MAIA team's shared growth mindset. Setting this expectation and spirit early on allowed MAIA to pivot and adjust even more quickly and on the fly throughout 2020. MAIA then invested heavily in organizational culture and motivation, often with the reinforcement of growth mindset in mind. Doing this virtually required renewed creativity. MAIA tested out a multitude of ideas to keep staff motivated and connected with each other and the mission (such as regular all-staff community meetings, online staff Zumba and kickboxing, wellness commissions with WhatsApp challenges). This has been a

constant stream of energy centering on celebrations of progress and space of support for staff with struggles. This seems to have paid off. MAIA's annual impact report revealed an overwhelmingly deeper connection to the mission and organization after 2020.

- **Find the data:** MAIA quickly conducted an assessment among families to determine the acute ways that the Pandemic was affecting their households (food security, economy, violence, etc.). This allowed MAIA to make high-impact decisions.

- **Make lemons out of lemonade:** Almost every challenge during the Pandemic also represented a shortcut to an eventual destination. Every organization has "what if" questions, and the Pandemic afforded MAIA the opportunity to answer some key questions. What would our educational intervention look like if Girl Pioneers had internet in their homes? What if families had a secure source of nutritious food? What if girls could show leadership skills to their villages as middle-schoolers? The Pandemic's unique set of variables allowed MAIA to make faster decisions and discover multiple shortcuts that have made the organization exponentially stronger. Keeping the end in mind with each response proved to be an incredibly useful lens through which MAIA evaluated decisions.

- **Identify and leverage partnerships:** The sudden arrival of a high volume of variables and needs creates a risk of mission drift. For MAIA, the challenge was responding to immediate pressures while keeping an eye on endgame and mission alignment. One successful way to balance these pressures was to proactively pursue new partnerships and/or deepen existing ones. These proved to be crucial as MAIA undertook new efforts to respond (without overstretching) to issues related to food security, home gardens, online schooling, and the mass communication of

COVID information. MAIA emerges from 2020 with deeper partnerships than ever before.

What helped us lead during the Pandemic?

- **Using partnerships to generate scale:** MAIA is a relatively small organization. The *inch wide, mile deep* ethos requires that MAIA stay modest in size to provide personalized, girl-centered programming. This severely limits the ability of MAIA to directly scale the number of clients and its geographic sphere of influence. The Pandemic accelerated MAIA's efforts to create and join networks and collective efforts. These networks provided essential access to resources and also created scale that MAIA could then leverage among other stakeholders such as investors and media. For example, MAIA, along with three other organizations, co-created a network called The Colectivo. This network focused on collectively contextualizing emerging COVID-related information to rural Indigenous villages. Through collaborative fundraising, The Colectivo was able to secure funds to support a massive radio/internet PSA campaign in three Maya languages that reached two million people. This effort received media attention, exponentially increasing social media followers, and positioned the MAIA brand in unprecedented ways.

- **"In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognize the opportunity":** One of MAIA's bigger reaches during the Pandemic has been the provision of internet-equipped tablets to each Girl Pioneer. Strict limits on mobility made online learning the only viable form of maintaining educational momentum. This was risky due to the financial investment as well as the idea of the internet reaching hundreds of households for the first time. Restoring the ability to conduct classes online was critical, but the tablets also opened up a multitude of other opportunities. MAIA's mentors could use Zoom to conduct regular check-ins

with families and to convene parent meetings. Additionally, MAIA could now project the voice of Girl Pioneers into previously inaccessible spaces. In 2020, MAIA was able to position the cause of girls' education with a variety of significant power brokers. The global shutdown paralyzed movement, and MAIA capitalized on this to connect students via live-streamed calls with Nobel Peace Prize laureates, vice presidents, Oscar winners, Olympic athletes, and other influencers. The media attention opened up avenues of fundraising, specifically around food aid.

- **Broadcast the "Girl Effect":** Adolescent girls are often invisible in rural villages. However, MAIA has always envisioned Girl Pioneers representing a bridge between their rural communities and the opportunities and resources that have eluded them for centuries. In turn, this would encourage a deeper belief in the value of girls' education. During the Pandemic, MAIA's was among just a handful of organizations with access and relationships with remote villages confronting severe food shortages. MAIA Girl Pioneers also channeled emergency food aid to their most vulnerable neighbors. This required that they interface with village elders, conduct a community assessment, and personally deliver the essential foodstuffs. Similarly, the voices of Girl Pioneers carrying COVID information have now been heard on the radio by millions of households.

What was most difficult about leading during the pandemic

- **Pacing and finding what comes after adrenaline:** The Pandemic's unique features, including the indefinite timeline and unprecedented volume of variables, immediately pushed MAIA into a crisis mode. The team kicked into high gear as adrenaline surged through MAIA's leadership. This surge was essential early on when quick decision-making and action is essential. However, the pace was unsustainable as the Pandemic consistently flew

through all predictions around its duration. With everyone's personal life also upside down, finding ways to downshift into a "normal" workflow was a tricky endeavor.

- **Balancing personal vulnerability and outward stability:** As a leader, modeling is among the most effective ways to guide desired behavior. The Pandemic triggered a waterfall of emotions and challenges among all staff. At certain times, staff seem to require stable and confident leadership. At other times, modeling vulnerability and accessibility seemed to be a better fit for the moment. Juggling the authenticity and timing of these two roles throughout 2020 has been challenging.

The educational consequences of the pandemic in the next five years

By any metric, Guatemala's underfunded and antiquated public system was severely underperforming well before the Pandemic. The results of 2019 show that just 13.5% of high school graduates are considered proficient in math[75]. It is no surprise that this struggling system could not rise to meet the challenges of COVID-19 in any meaningful way.

However, the Pandemic presents a unique crisis/opportunity. With the system at a halt, Guatemala has the unique chance to profoundly question, innovate, and redesign its public education system to meet the contemporary needs of students and the country. This is a unique moment in time when the window of opportunity is wide open. Perhaps the biggest risk is for Guatemala to aspire to return to

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[75]

https://www.mineduc.gob.gt/digeduca/documents/resultados/Resultad os_generales.pdf

"normal" in education. No data supports why this should be anyone's aspiration.

MAIA is a social impact organization dedicated to unlocking and maximizing the potential of young women to lead transformational change in Guatemala.

Travis Ning is Co-Executive Director of MAIA. He is a graduate of the Korbel Graduate School of International Studies and the Mira Fellowship. Travis is a former US Peace Corps volunteer (Paraguay/Timor Leste) and lives in Guatemala.

Norma Baján is Co-Executive Director of MAIA. She is Kachiquel Maya and the first in her family to complete university (she holds a degree in business administration). Norma is the 2018 recipient of the "Women Have Wings" Award and has been recognized by the UN and the White House for her commitment to girls' education.

Embracing Education Innovation in a Post-COVID-19 World

Christopher Petrie

HundrED.org is a Finland based non-governmental organization aiming to improve education through impactful innovations globally. Founded five years ago, our mission is to help every child flourish in life no matter what happens. We all know a plethora of new practices and solutions come out daily in education, and it is challenging knowing those that lead in their impact and may be highly transferable to multiple contexts. When COVID-19 hit, education had a sudden need to understand which non-governmental innovations were most effective under the new constraints – like school closures and social distancing. HundrED's Research Team responded by aligning our research process and projects to study how leading innovations addressed these challenges in our latest Global Collection[76].

HundrED's latest Global Collection celebrates 100 leading education innovations from 38 countries. These innovations underwent a rigorous review process, including a review and voting procedure by 150 selected education experts in 50 countries, making over 3400 evaluations from an innovation shortlist. HundrED's annual Global Collections aim to address the wide span of current education needs (e.g., Teacher Development, Environments, and more) in both the Global South and North [77]. We found no exception that COVID-19 challenged these non-governmental

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[76] Released November 2020 here:
https://hundred.org/en/collections/hundred-2021
[77] Read much more detail about our research process and findings at
https://hundred.org/en/reports

organizations to adapt and realign learning models, and in some cases, completely pivot or add significant new developments.

We think the learnings yielded from the challenges in 2020 by these innovation leaders are highly valuable to the discourse on how we might move forward in 2021 and beyond. This essay presents seven key lessons as the most frequent and notable from the diverse range of innovation leaders we interviewed and studied for our latest Global Collection. From these lessons, we think innovation in education from non-governmental organizations should be fostered and supported more; additionally, this essay concludes with four guiding recommendations of ways leaders of government schools can start working more effectively with the innovation leaders. My hope is these seven lessons and four recommendations will: (a) spark and amplify more cooperation and collaboration by leaders that find more ways we can learn across borders, structural boundaries in education, and leadership levels; and (b) from concrete actions by these leaders, have innovation be embraced more in education eco-systems.

Lesson #1 — Leadership wellbeing is vital

Leaders of organisations are responsible for ensuring that everyone's wellbeing is supported. This is because they know it is critical not only for meaningful learning to happen, but for the healthy operation of the whole organisation. The emotional shift from well-oiled routines for teachers, parents, and students was massive. Innovators reported a wide range of distressing issues testing everyone's wellbeing, including (but not limited to): parents feeling overwhelmed and unsure about what is happening, student loneliness, concerns about the increase of screen-time, anxious staff concerned about cutbacks and potential job losses, and a vast array of new technology related issues from everyone. One innovation leader aptly said that dealing with this shift felt like a "rollercoaster ride" of stress to swiftly respond and provide answers to problems

like these when he simply didn't have them immediately. Leaders learning to cope with this unusual onslaught has gone mostly unrecognised—yet their resilience deserves special praise.

This was while innovators had to quickly develop new compatible learning models for distance learning and other requirements, which shifted constantly in each context. With an increase in time spent online, some innovators said they felt a strong "productivity guilt" because it seemed like others were doing more when reading status updates and news. Some said it was a good time to revisit the original motivation and mission statement for the innovation, which helped as a starting point to find solutions. Reminding themselves of the fundamentals was valuable to formulate new healthy routines and environments appropriate for each stakeholder. What became clear from interviewing innovators across HundrED's 2021 Global Collection was that they look out for their own wellbeing *last*. While it is the essential role a leader to look out for everyone's wellbeing in their organisation, this crisis highlighted they *also* need support to cope with extreme situations like this in the future. In one way, connecting to other like-minded leading innovators in HundrED's Global Community has been reported as especially helpful because it is a unique way to connect, share experiences and learnings they don't have the luxury of doing so normally on a global scale.

Lesson #2 – Cultivate a positive mindset with first principles thinking

COVID-19 has disrupted many intrenched routines and protocols in education in a way like never before. In response, many short-term solutions to traditional whole government schools like 'pandemic pods' or online schools were quickly founded throughout 2020. Amidst this desperation for answers to problems, there is a danger short term thinking could dominate the opportunity we now have for bold long-term strategies and visions. All innovation leaders reported they need to accept that the future is yet even more

unpredictable than we imagined pre-COVID-19. Many innovators said a positive mindset in the face of this uncertainty is a challenge that also creates many exciting possibilities.

Some said one way to cultivate a positive mindset is to start addressing new challenges with first principles thinking. First principles thinking asks us to actively question every assumption (or reverse engineer) we previously thought to be true about education in order to then build up new solutions from refreshed fundamental ideas. For example, Sir Ken Robinson, who sadly passed in 2020, said one important pillar about education: "The heart of education is the relationship between teachers and learners, and everything else should be focused on making that the best relationship possible" [78]. As we reflect on the ways we can be proactive for another disruptive crisis like this (as opposed to the reactive measures in 2020), we can start with first principles like the aforementioned one by Sir Ken. In this way, we can not only develop quality long-term strategies that are highly resilient to future disruptive events like COVID-19, but also cultivate a positive mindset at the same time.

Lesson #3 – We need scalable teacher development solutions of sound digital pedagogical skills

For those with consistent online access, COVID-19 has brought teacher professional development especially into the foreground with dramatically increased technology use for online learning. However, it has also shone a spotlight on the urgent need for sound digital pedagogical skills to be used. One of the key challenges many innovators face today with teachers is how to scale the unlearning of teaching habits that may have worked well in-person but are impractical online. Some schools simply tried to replicate an in-person learning experience by having the same classes and pedagogical approach online, resulting in daily schedule of

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[78] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOPUpEKPl2Y

mandatory time in front of a screen that no human should have to sit through. Indeed, it is difficult to bring the full experience of human interaction, like play based group learning with physical materials, but there are many significant advantages to online learning that have been developed and researched for decades yet to be adopted at large. We also know software is changing fast to automate more and more repetitive tasks to free up teacher to spend more time helping students.

During 2020, innovators found great scalable solutions exist when we place less responsibility on the individual teacher. For example, technology support staff can play a greater role in showing teachers the range of functionality in different software tools and how they can be combined and integrated into a lesson. Another example is that online instruction makes it much easier for teachers to collaborate and provide support by easily "dropping into" scheduled classes. Still, innovators recognize a clear need in this space for a range of teacher development and support solutions to bring pedagogically sound instruction into the way teachers deliver online learning. To help address this need, HundrED in collaboration with The World Bank are conducting a research project called "Teachers for a Changing World" to be released September 2021.

Lesson #4 – Having rigorous iterative learning loops firmly in place for rapid development

To cope with the major challenges in 2020, having very strong iterative learning loops firmly in place was one of the key strategies for rapidly moving forward that innovators emphasized. Existing methodologies and frameworks, like Agile and Design Thinking, helped to formulate strategies to integrate these loops in their organizational processes. For example: developing, prototyping and iterating various physical learning kits delivered to the student's home helped to rapidly adapt maker space type education innovations for distance learning with various physical materials

during COVID-19. One of the major advantages that smaller independent organizations have over larger governmental systems is that they can integrate more rigorous and flexible feedback loops from users into their development and prototyping processes with far fewer bureaucratic barriers. In this way, the innovators featured in HundrED's latest Global Collection were very rapidly able to experiment with different distance learning prototypes and create very lean production supply close to the time of need.

It was emphasized that this development is driven first by a verified needs assessment and by both qualitative and quantitative data where possible. Trust was reported as a critical pillar, which can be made possible by having the data and analysis transparent and open to scrutiny for multiple stakeholder interpretations. It was also said that updating processes involves "unlearning" old ones with the advantages being made clear and theoretically "worth it". Behavior changes on an individual level are challenging by themselves, let alone at an organizational level. So, with schools commonly reporting being time poor and overwhelmed especially in this crisis, learning loops are unlikely to be well implemented under these conditions without increased support. Nevertheless, innovators from non-governmental organizations have a lot to teach and be inspired from in terms of how learning loops can be implemented effectively in education at an organizational level.

Lesson #5 – Cultivate a culture of risk tolerance for experimental innovative ideas to fail

To truly innovate, risk tolerance of bold ideas that may not yield the expected results need to be accepted as part of the learning process if we are to discover improved ways to scale quality education. There is often a consensus today that student failure is vital to their development and we need more ways to destigmatize it across the education system. If we are to change this attitude and improve on outcomes however, the same could be said for experimenting with

new processes and ways of learning at an educator and organizational level. More than ever, the disruption of COVID-19 has demanded impactful and scalable solutions to address the erosion of quality education in all parts of the world. At the same time, there is an opportunity to reform many of the old processes that we already know do not prepare young people well for the future.

There are valid fears and concerns that whimsically experimenting learning models on young people like animals in a science lab can be damaging. However, innovators have many strategies to prototype and test new ideas thoughtfully that can also benefit students to learn 21st century skills. For example, innovators emphasize that the development of new learning models is to involve student voices of reflection about their learning process through deep meta-cognitive reflection (with questions like 'How did that go?', 'What could we do better next time?' and the like). If we safely and openly involve students in these discussions about learning experiments in education, we can not only have the potential to learn about how to improve the innovative idea, but provide an environment where students increase their self-awareness about their own learning, which is often sorely lacking in traditional school curricula.

Lesson #6 – Parents can act as personalized learning guides resulting in powerful bonding with the teacher

Despite the challenges, one of the key silver linings of this crisis has been the increased involvement and enthusiasm of parents and caregivers in their child's development and learning. Many innovators reported extraordinary bonding experiences between the teacher, parent, and student in 2020—especially for primary school aged children (who often need greater support in their learning). One innovator described the powerful realization that parents can act as personalized learning aids who are already intimately in tune with the child. Before COVID-19, he said that parents would either passively observe or drop off their child to in person classes, which would

often have several additional employed learning aids to help the main instructor. However, parents can easily also take the role to facilitate instruction who learns alongside, and perhaps is even taught by the student.

With the rise of remote flexible work post-COVID-19 for many working parents, it is more possible for those who have time to be involved in this way. However, this strategy does rely on a strong relationship of trust with the child and their flexibility of time. This close involvement may also not be appropriate for the high school years when many teenagers are trying to explore a sense of individual identity and agency. Nevertheless, having parents and caregivers participate more in student learning where beneficial, is a silver lining that innovation leaders want to take forward and continue to cultivate.

Lesson #7 – Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is vital to student development and is best achieved in person with diverse groups of people

The learning that occurs in school and in person is so much more holistic than only the learning outcomes achieved through traditional subjects. The greatest concern emphasized by innovators of education during COVID-19 was the learning loss of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) commonly developed through spontaneous interactions at school and in person. Because SEL is undervalued in traditional school systems, learning loss and development in this area is not understood at all very well at large. Foundational pillars of friendship rely on trust, which have limitations online to achieve in a freely social way. Students today may still have previous friends when in person school environments made forming them easier. However, as time goes on with distance learning, it will be difficult for students to form new close friendships when so much of their interaction is online. We need future generations to interact in person with other young people whose

opinions, backgrounds, personalities vary widely in order to cultivate a future society that is compassionate and seeks to listen deeply and understand one another.

Conclusion

This essay touches on seven key lessons from innovation leaders in HundrED's latest Global Collection addressing how they adapted and their thoughts about the challenges of the COVID-19 disruption in education. Similar to the advantages that start-ups have over large established companies, it is clear non-governmental innovations in education have a higher degree of flexibility to prototype and deploy solutions to a crisis like COVID-19. Therefore, in the increasingly unpredictable 2021 world we face, this essay argues that we need to create formal pathways for non-governmental innovations in education to thoughtfully learn from and utilize the insights and lessons outlined here. Here are a few ideas I think could begin to enable more of this integration at a policy level:

Leaders need to band together with open two-way dialogue across stakeholders with non-governmental innovations. This dialogue should be centered around developing new and better processes as opposed to simply providing tools and resources only. One promising example of cross stakeholder cooperation is already happening in Pittsburgh USA, between school leaders, department heads, and NGOs on new innovative leaning models [79]. Every region in the world should have open and transparent forums like this to cultivate an innovation friendly culture in education.

Time allocation and wellbeing need to be accounted before anything else. Unfortunately, one of the negative side effects of the

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[79] See https://www.pennlive.com/opinion/2020/12/pennsylvania-needs-a-statewide-panel-on-learning-innovation-for-life-after-covid-19-opinion.html

pandemic is the high potential for a mass exodus of leaders and educators from the stress and exhaustion in responding to the crisis [80], [81], [82]. Effective strategies in this area are likely to require investment, however, little progress on any initiative for change will be sustained without significantly more time and support.

If we are to take the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goal #4 to provide 'quality education for all' seriously, **we need innovations that provide quality education with disadvantaged children the most**. Through HundrED's two main criteria of impact and scalability, our Research Team aims to identify innovations that strive to do much more with far fewer resources. Through a collaborative process where multiple stakeholders engage in thoughtful dialogue about contextualizing and adapting innovations for low-resource contexts, can non-governmental innovations take a role in helping make SDG #4 a reality by 2030.

Government education systems should know and engage with the leading innovative practices and solutions outside of their local area. HundrED have been researching and celebrating leading innovations on a global scale for almost five years now, but we acknowledge there is much more that could be done to learn, engage in meaningful dialogue that results in concrete action, and for those innovations assessed as appropriate for different contexts—start piloting adaptations of some. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, we need to be more open to the lessons outside of local education silos—we think there are more similarities in our educational challenges to learn from one another than are different.

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[80]
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666374020300169
[81] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/nov/18/exodus-of-exhausted-headteachers-predicted-in-england-after-pandemic
[82]
https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/school_principals_stressed_and_exhausted_during_corona_spring/11666851

I'm writing this in January 2021 as global vaccination programs are beginning to be rolled out, creating the hope that many restrictions currently in place will be progressively lifted in the coming months. It is clear that COVID-19 has made ripe the conditions for great strides in education possible. Never before has an event like this brought together people in search of solutions on a global level all at the same time, and we know that every country and region in the world have solutions we can all learn from. It is my desire that the lessons here will help to energize and inspire us in two-way collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations in education globally. Let's be fearless on trying bold innovative ideas together that make quality education for all a reality in the near future.

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The inevitable evolution of education as a result of the Sars-Covid 19 Pandemic: Experiences and policy implications derived from Taktaktak (by Inoma), a digital serious-game offering for K-6 education

Antonio Purón

Introduction

TAKTAKTAK (www.taktaktak.com) is a digital game-based educational offering freely available on the internet through a variety of technological platforms (PC browser-based, tablet and phone mobile apps, client-server and USB deployment). Inoma (www.inoma.mx), a Mexican NGO, initiated its development in 2009 which has grown to close to 100 educational serious games, that by the end of 2020 have been used worldwide by over 730,000 children ages 5 to 14, and more than 30,000 teachers.

This essay describes how the global pandemic impacted the usage of TAKTAKTAK (TTT) and LabTak (LT) as educational tools, Inoma's reaction to the emergency and its favorable results. Additionally, we describe some of the challenges that were surmounted in 2020, and some significant ones still to be addressed, ending with policy recommendations for the public and private spheres.

The context

TTT is intended to provide a tool to complement, reinforce and improve K-6 education, not as a substitute to teacher-based intervention. Because of its base-of -the-pyramid orientation, Inoma's goals are that "any child with or without access to the Internet, anywhere in the world, can play, have fun and sharpen his/her formal learning at no cost; additionally, provide access to new learning tools and resources to any teacher or parent." TTT has been deployed and tested in a wide variety of environments in several countries and continents individually or as part of school systems.

TAKTAKTAK and LABTAK design criteria

TTT was conceived and is structured around several key design principles:

- **Child (user)-driven**. Based on games that leverage three natural drivers of learning in pre-adolescent children: insatiable curiosity, desire to have fun and competition with peers.
- **Digital**, taking advantage of ICT breakthroughs that drive increased coverage and lower cost of access on par with Moore's law.
- **Consistent with official curricula** mandated by ministries of education for K-6 children, while at the same time allowing personalized learning and offering complementary topics. The look-and-feel of the games is fun and enjoyment, not related to particular subject areas (math, science, art, language, etc.) or formal grades (K to 6th).
- **Supporting teachers.** Simultaneously a parallel site LabTak (www.labtak.mx), permits parents and educators to understand the learning goals and mechanics of each game to support informed teacher interventions.

- **Quantifiable and AI-enabled**. All games continuously communicate player's actions to a cloud database. Data mining reports individual progress to teachers, algorithms suggest new games to be played once any particular one has been mastered so that the gaming sequence tracks the curriculum, and teachers obtain references of other relevant educational material.
- **Flexible**, following user-driven learning paths in accordance with children's preferences and skill level, as well as teacher's observations and guidance.
- **Fungible**. Games can be played in Spanish or English, as well as in several local languages. Adaptation to Latin-character languages is easy and low cost.
- **Transparent to user**. As children shift platforms, game picks up from last experience and is not affected by specific technologies.
- **Secure**. Registration does not allow sharing personal information, nor communication between and among users.
- **Free of charge for children** to encourage usage by the least advantaged children anywhere worldwide.
- **Independent of educational authorities**. TTT offers no accreditation and is therefore free to experiment in a fast-testing cycle. TTT is accepted into official curricula as a result of its measured impact.
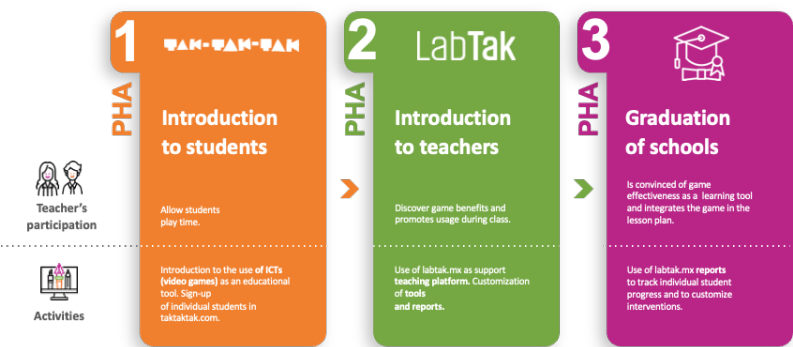
TTT operation

Figure 1 shows TTT basic structure outlining the two basic cycles of the educational games: an automatic cycle where an algorithm guides the child in her learning path, advancing when she has mastered a specific topic/game; and a teacher/parent mediated cycle in which the child is recommended a new game to be tried in response to data reported in LabTak (LT), the teacher/parents site.

Figure 1. TAKTAKTAK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM
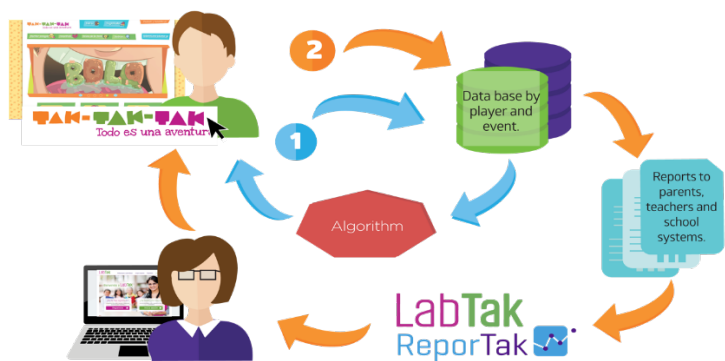
Techers and school administrators become familiar with TTT and LT through a sequence of 3 to 4 remote training sessions delivered over the internet by Inoma (see Figure 2). Teachers are supported by Inoma call center.

FIGURE 2: TAKTAKTAK DEPLOYMENT IN SCHOOLS

Results at the onset of the pandemic

TTT has been deployed and tested since 2009 in many different environments demonstrating significant impact in improvements in standardized test scores. The most significant results and milestones as of March 2020 were:

- 614,338 cumulative users and 21,864 teachers
- 100 games offered out of a goal of 200 (see figure 3) in a wide variety of topics.
- Deployment in 658 schools and refugee camps in 8 countries in Latin America and Africa, as well as free internet access in over 40 countries worldwide.
- Average session duration of 24 min.
- Acceptance as an educational tool by SEP[83].

FIGURE 3: TAKTAKTAK GAME OFFERING (CURRENT/PROJECTED)

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[83] Secretaría de Educación Pública, México.
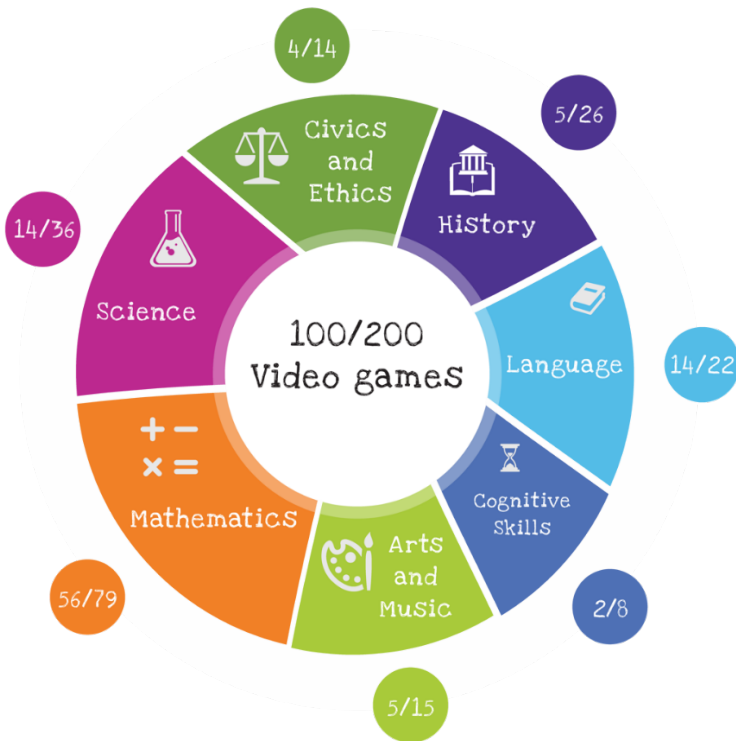
Impact measurements

Educational impact of TTT has been measured by independent evaluators[84], as well as by Inoma as part of our deployment process. Consistently TTT:

- Improves performance in standardized tests by 0.11 to 0.18 standard deviations.
- Closely correlates with intelligence and skill tests.

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[84] Impact evaluation of Inoma's online educational games. Chacon, A and Peña, P. Report to Inoma. April 2013 (available upon request).

- Shows similar gaming and learning patterns in different cultures and school settings.
- Allows teachers to improve their teaching dynamics.

Actions taken as a result of the onset of the pandemic

As of March 2020, Inoma took a series of proactive measures to ensure continuity of operations. It started in the Mexican perimeter, but also included some international measures of importance. Behind both sets of initiatives is the conviction that the pandemic sharpened the shortcomings of governmental initiatives, particularly when the political process defined as more urgent initiatives protecting population health and in the case of Mexico maintaining a balanced federal budget, good terms with the Trump administration and public safety (control of drug gangs and crime). The most important initiatives were:

- In Mexico:
    - Offer free availability of TTT games to be used in the educational platforms designed by the ministry of education to reach students during the pandemic.
    - Offer free technical support to governments to ensure that the games could operate seamlessly in the governmental platforms.
    - Design and delivery of short teachers'-plans and activities for remote classes using educational videogames, deployed through the TTT platform banner, and through TTT social media (Instagram) suggestions to include parents.
    - Preparation of USBs with TTT games for students with no internet connection.
    - Free incorporation of TTT games in Mexico´s largest teachers´ digital content platform "Red Magisterial" to support teachers planning through digital resources.

- Internationally:
  - o Proactively pursue associations with established school networks lacking digital content that would be able to leverage TTT and LT extensive experience.
  - o Aggressively advertise TTT on the internet, particularly through targeted purchases in GoogleAds and Facebook posts, based on marketing experience gathered through GoogleAds grants over more than 5 years.
- Organizationally:
  - o Rationalize and re-organize staff, focusing on the immediate challenges to deploy TTT and LT according to the above priorities.
  - o Leverage our networking opportunities (corporate and board member's) to explore further immediate deployment opportunities.

Main accomplishments during the pandemic

As a result of the proactive stance, by December 2020 Inoma had substantial tracking, reflecting widespread international interest in digital serious educational offerings:

- Increase 2.5 X registrations in TTT platform during pandemic over 2019 trend, many of them from South America and attracted through open subscriptions, culminating in 730,794 cumulative users by December 31, 2020.
- Increase in average time spent per session in videogames from 28 to 45 minutes
- Increase 1.8 X number of TTT sessions during pandemic over 2019 trend.

- Increase 3.2 X registrations in LT platform during pandemic over 2019 trend, culminating in 30,213 registered teachers by December 31, 2020.
- Increase of 2.4 X in the number of LT sessions during pandemic over 2019 trend.
- Formal trials in 23 schools in Latin America using TTT intensively as part of their curricula during the pandemic months.
- TTT program expansion to 5 countries in Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras , El Salvador, Venezuela)
- Approval of usage of program in a private school system in Spain.

Key barriers, challenges and future issues to be addressed

Most governments were unprepared for the consequences of the pandemic on their educational systems. The almost universal closure of schools and home schooling stressed the elementary school as well as the residential and at-home infrastructures.

Though the Mexican federal government reacted with speed to close schools, bottlenecks and tensions became evident at several levels: a) Technology, b) Delivery platforms, c) Educational content, d) Human capital and e) Organizational effectiveness. These were particularly evident in public education and in large centrally managed systems. (which in Mexico cover over 92% of K-6 enrollment).

The herculean task of delivering continuous education to close to over 15 million children in their homes fell in a first stage on household infrastructure to access content and lessons. Schools and teachers had to maintain contact with individual students and their parents while maintaining physical distance. To this effect in March SEP set up and extensively advertised an internet site

https://aprendeencasa.sep.gob.mx/ covering the most important building blocks of public education, coupled with TV broadcasting of lessons on defined time segments.

Internet coverage and hardware and software unavailability in a large fraction of homes impeded many children from getting a fair share of education. Private and internet-available content already vetted by SEP has been moved since to a different site: Nueva Escuela Mexicana (https://nuevaescuelamexicana.sep.gob.mx/), causing some confusion in access to resources through the internet.

It is clear that meeting this challenge requires a clear sense of direction established by a credible and authoritative agent. Successful and timely implementation in large societies (greater than a few million students) in order that the majority of children have access to an acceptable minimum of the educational program now executed remotely -and mostly in their homes-, however, requires participation of tens of thousands of agents at several levels (federal, state, municipal and local). Crucially, many participants must come from civil society (NGOs and other relevant parties) that have been active through the years. Coordinating, and at the same time allowing them sufficient space to experiment and make decisions. Large bureaucracies are not designed to carry out this implementation task and often follow rigid procedures unsuitable for emergencies. Considering the above Inoma followed one of its key design principles: Independence from educational authorities and proactively experimented in a fast-testing cycle, adjusting its TTT and LT offerings frequently according to local country and school-system needs, while leveraging its experience and goodwill to gain access.

Inoma was prepared with a product suiting this step change based on digital technologies, platforms and content and that had been experienced firsthand in hundreds of Mexican schools with tens of thousands of students.

As soon as the emergency was declared, Inoma contacted the office of the secretary of education offering to link our content for free in SEP's platform. Given the track record Inoma had accumulated over more than 10 years of interactions, and our experience in digital deployment, TTT was displayed within a couple of weeks in SEP's platform.

At the same time, and through our Board members' network connections, Inoma started exploratory conversations with Fe y Alegria[85] (a Jesuit led federation of schools in 19 countries) to implement TTT and LT. Speedy negotiations took place resulting in the start of implementation in a few months.

Several other leads are being pursued simultaneously, reflecting existing appetite for digital educational products with a proven track record of impact.

Notwithstanding these successes, being able to "be in the flow" of philanthropic and governmental activity for basic education is a major challenge for NGOs. There is no easy way to connect and access relevant foundations, international agencies and ministries of education to create awareness of products and offerings.

Policy suggestions

Free equal access to quality basic education is a prerequisite to productive participation in modern societies. Since ancient times it has signified not only an aspiration of every culture and group to achieve justice and inclusion of its members in the collective, but also as a means to offer its most capable participants mobility to realize their full potential. Denying children in their most important

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[85] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fe_y_Alegr%C3%ADa

formative years the universal right of a minimum quality education is not only morally unjustified, but also incredibly short-sighted and senseless. Countries have established public education systems to deliver free education run by governments through large, usually centrally managed, organizations using time-tested teaching methods that have been slow to adjust to technological challenges and globalization requirements. Stability, not experimentation is in their organizational and political DNA.

Conclusions

- It is becoming evident that as a result of the pandemic education has changed forever, accelerating trends already taking place since the digital revolution and globalization, and will become a hybrid activity between teaching in a classroom and individual learning, oftentimes remotely and digitally enabled. To introduce new technology-based teaching and learning models (digital or hybrid), governments must recognize that education programs and contents cannot be "one size fits all" nor it can be decided in a centralized manner. Parents, teachers and authorities must reach agreements on what is best for students' learning.

- Basic education is an activity that requires constancy and at the same time experimentation, but whose outcomes are observed with decades-long time lags. It is of vital importance to allow for both (constancy and experimentation) at the same time.

- A purely top-down approach from education ministries cannot be successful only by itself and must be complemented and coupled with bottom-up initiatives that require tolerance to experimentation and cooperation with civil society.

- What is really relevant in the basic curriculum must be defined and agreed to. When resources become scarce, including the capability of first-hand human contact with children, the true learning priorities must emerge. This should consider also socio-emotional skills.

- The pandemic has shown the tremendous potential of more active parent participation in children education. New forms of school organization to leverage them should be explored.

- The pandemic has laid bare the bottlenecks and criticality of investments in connectivity and hardware at the residential level, which are borne by society members privately.

- When NGOs and private agents adopt an incisively proactive stance their time gains in experimentation and testing are orders of magnitude larger that governments.

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Leading learning ecosystems in times of disruption and uncertainty

Ana Maria Raad

With school closures we have experienced radical changes that are redefining the way we understand and face educational demands. During the pandemic new leadership challenges arose. For example, the need to support students that were experiencing difficulties learning remotely or helping families in the transition to adopt new roles, or teachers and educators adjusting their strategies to assure learning in new and hybrid scenarios. All of them were new situations, demanding fast, innovative, and well-coordinated efforts. We needed innovative solutions which ensured inclusiveness and equity. Is exactly in that scenario of uncertainty and total disruption where I took the decision to undertake new projects and to establish a new organization, because from the point of view of many, there was crisis and chaos, while I saw needs and opportunities to contribute with more innovations to face this avalanche.

Learn and take moderate risks

During the pandemic we understood that people must be equipped with a fundamental skill set that will help them, not only compete in the job market but also grow and achieve higher levels of well-being throughout their lives. Socioemotional skills (SEL) such as empathy, adaptability, perseverance, and resilience are more important than ever. Other fundamental skills are digital skills; advanced cognitive skills such as teamwork, communication, creativity, critical thinking, or problem solving, and the ability to aspire to lifelong learning. None of these skills are new, but they are critical now. The unplanned and rapid move to online learning, accelerated the need of strategies and alternative solutions to ensure educational continuity. It was clear then that a single strategy, through a single

channel or a single purpose (which had long been the "trademark" of standardized education) was not what was needed, but rather it was quite the opposite. I thought with agility about multichannel, multidimensional strategies that involved different sectors and fields related to education, especially because of the difficulty to reach the most remote and vulnerable communities in Latin America. As a result, during, the first three weeks after schools were closed, I developed a new program named *Aprendo En Casa*[86], an initiative designed and launched in collaboration with 70 other organizations in the region with the support of Ashoka Chile, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS-Harvard), the United States Embassy and BHP Foundation. From the very beginning I was seeking to bring together and connect some of those emerging efforts from different countries and organizations, avoiding starting from scratch or duplicating efforts. Through a digital collaboration solution, educational resources, and support, was delivered to families and teachers, with strategic focus that responded to the needs derived from the pandemic: A) learning with technology in a hybrid environment; B) new and effective methodologies C) Social Emotional Learning D) 21st century skills with an emphasis on creativity and innovation. In less than a month this new model of radical and horizontal collaboration started to impact teachers and parents around the region.

This has been a quite different challenge of leading from those under "normal" conditions. For example, I had learned that each crisis comes with its specific demands, and we need to overcome, adapt, and learn from past situations, otherwise we will lose energy and the capacity to impact on time. During 2010 I had the opportunity to lead *Educarchile* (a public digital initiative from the Ministry of Education of Chile in collaboration with Fundación Chile). In that year an earthquake left several regions of the country disconnected and thousands of students without access to their schools. I had to implement a support plan with my team that included off-line and online strategies, and hybrid solutions. As a consequence, we allowed

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[86] www.aprendoencasa.org

students to continue preparing their final year of school and improve their opportunities to enter university. The *PSU educarchile* program was then recognized by Qatar Foundation with the WISE Award in 2012. In a way, having had that previous experience gave me the confidence and knowledge to undertake this new initiative *Aprendo En Casa*, and face a bigger challenge unleashed by the pandemic. An important lesson is to introduce innovations, bringing the best of our previous learning, making it available for the following decisions and solutions. The history and learning of what works in education is the necessary steppingstone to get to the next level of impact and thus take moderate risks that will ensure a real impact.

Agile innovations to redesign the change we dream of

In a matter of a few weeks, we saw how entry barriers collapsed like a house of cards. The fear of technology was displaced by the urgency and immediate search for solutions; the appreciation for key skills such as curiosity, creativity, agency, digital skills, and social-emotional development, were no longer at the back of the school and started to be integrated into the center of teacher-student relationship. This was the evidence that many changes were possible, but our cultural barriers and prejudice about changes were limiting our actions.

For many years my work has been promoting and delineating programs and organizations to accelerate social and educational innovation in Latin America, however, as a result of this crisis I have been able to perceive with great optimism, how in few months we have managed to lower the barriers and deploy the principles of an inclusive education that really responds to the needs of the 21st century.

One of the challenges has been to face and rely on a different form of leadership. I no longer needed to convince or "evangelize" or try

to influence others that were reluctant to adopt these changes. The urgency and avalanche of new forms of education (demanding key social emotional competences, a less restrictive curriculum or the inclusion of digital solutions) required new capacities, specially to deploy abilities focused on "doing", showing others "how" and emphasizing the implementation strategies. This challenge undoubtedly puts me in a different leadership situation. It has implied being able to raise my head and propose a future that allows us to redesign education with a shared and relevant vision beyond the crisis and the pandemic. Therefore, I decided to create *Reimagina Foundation*, a non-for-profit organization born in the middle of the greatest educational crisis. We pursue to transform education and culture, through innovation, creativity, and permanent collaboration. As we seek that all children and young people in Chile and Latin America can acquire and apply their knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to prosper in today's and future society.

The creation of a new organization under these conditions has demanded a greater plasticity from me. The ability to look beyond our projects while the changes are happening abruptly. For me, it has been like changing the engine of a flying plane. It has required being able to make the initial plans more flexible (each week our plans change due to new restrictions or lockdowns), stop doing things that we had been doing (like teachers' development in physical environments), not fall in love with the solutions that had worked for us before and engage the team to learn from those experiences in order to bring better ideas.

Leading others' wills to accelerate changes

It is clear this educational challenge cannot be solved alone, nor is it the result of the effort of a single organization or government. It requires multiple wills and generosity. In recent years, I have been able to contribute and lead the development of learning networks and ecosystems, to mobilize efforts and wills to ensure learning.

Together with representatives of Ashoka in Chile we designed and created "Collective Action for Education" network that unites leading organizations in education in Chile and aspire to influence policies and the education system in general. Also, in 2019, together with the Harvard regional office in Latin America (DRCLAS), I started a new network named EcosiSTEAM that brings together organizations interested in promoting education in Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math (STEAM). From my previous collective work with these organizations, I learned the richness of integrating different views, of opening the possibilities to solutions that come from other areas of knowledge, also to be flexible and adapt to different approaches. However, when we faced the closure of schools and the avalanche of educational challenges from the crisis generated by the pandemic, I realized that we required additional, but also different, efforts in the way we work and lead ecosystems.

As a result, *Aprendo En Casa* program brings together more than 70 leading organizations from fields as diverse as science, art, educational improvement, psychology, entrepreneurship, technology, etc., in 7 countries from Latin America, reaching more than 250.000 users. Thinking about what helped me to lead and mobilize other organizations' wills, the first answer is having a strong common vision and purpose. We wanted to collaborate and work together, that is, to tackle the same educational challenges and transformative approaches. It was also important to mobilize from hope, looking at the glass half full, despite the tremendous difficulties and that is how the crisis did not stop us, instead it accelerated us.

A second challenge leading this new way of collaboration was the need to strengthen trust and confidence within educational systems that tend to be fragmented. Although this is primarily an initiative led by civil society and private organizations, we are also working

with many local governments[87] in the public sphere, and regardless of the differences that we may have, we always prioritize efforts to collaborate and share our knowledge. In other words, we are promoting alliances beyond our differences, and it has only been possible due to the genuine interest in helping to close gaps and make a real leap in education. The result is also a stronger group of organizations that can advance their stated missions and common goals more effectively. We have radicalized our collaborative work, and this has been possible because we share that common purpose and optimism.

Undoubtedly, during this period I have faced difficulties, mainly because this new leadership form demands a more horizontal, decentralized, collective leadership, which is supported by trusting others, not by competition, nor by duplication of efforts. It is a challenge because it demands defining a unique identity, with less egos and fewer individualities. And at the same time requires clarity and direction to be able to guide efforts and influence to achieve the objectives.

Liquid times for a solid future

As the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman assures, "we are living liquid times" where ambiguity, uncertainty and immediacy have erased the limits of our relationships. However, at the center of this crisis, I have seen how relevant and central human ties are. From teachers, who communicate with their students using WhatsApp or phone calls, through parents that are developing social emotional strategies with their kids, to emerging professional communities of teachers who share their ideas on Instagram or YouTube, all of these are

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[87] Some local governments collaborating with Aprendo En Casa are:
Ministry of Education in Chile; Ministry of Education in Ecuador;
Ministry of Culture and Heritage in Chile; Public cultural organizations in Argentina; Alcaldía de Guayaquil (Ecuador).

examples of how important and relevant the appreciation and value of others has become for the future of education. The more disconnected and separated we are, the more important our relations become.

I know that there are justified doubts about how effective some of the emerging strategies are, but the answer cannot be to return to the same starting point as if nothing had changed. On the contrary, we must assume these changes, learn from them, and adjust to them. It implies for the coming years to recognize the innovations that occur in the periphery, at the edges of the system and place them in a central position. We will require agile processes of innovation that can be adapted and improved as we learn from them, hence decision-making based on evidence and data analysis is essential to be able to lay the foundations of this new education. In the next few years, we will continuously face an avalanche of changes, and beyond the pandemic new ways of learning inside and outside the classroom will emerge with greater force. All the evidence suggests that in Latin America we need to prioritize and work urgently on the development of students' agency capacity (students' ability to be active agents in their own education), and their resilience and socio-emotional capacities to recover the lost rhythm to reduce school dropout. Also, to improve the effectiveness of teachers with techniques and methods in the use of technologies inside and outside the classroom. And facilitate collaboration and provide them with access to resources and platforms for collaboration (curated educational resources and technology) so they can stay updated on rapidly evolving challenges and educational and social responses.

There is no doubt that we can creatively manage immediate problems while building a bridge towards a reinvention of the education system. This pandemic has shown us the need to establish extensive collaborative networks. Schools need partners, inside and outside the building, to share and shape their vision. The involvement of the entire community is essential if students are to have the opportunity to engage in meaningful real-world learning

that extends beyond the classroom. This level of challenge demands leaders whose decisions are based on robust technical considerations but also on shared and collective convictions that we are facing a unique opportunity to reimagine and redesign a more inclusive and relevant education for all.

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Collaborating with Schools in Oaxaca

Eric Ramirez-Ruiz

At Teach for Mexico, I saw how each fellow from our program changed the reality of so many students, teachers and communities. Evidence was visible every time I talked to teachers or directly to students. Academic outcomes were improving and access to future better opportunities was possible. In 2017, the World Bank and Teach for All financed an evaluation of our fellows' impact on social, emotional skills and academic outcomes. With the information gathered from more than 30,000 students I was sure that we were doing something outstanding in public education. Our fellows believed that all their students could learn faster and better and, for sure, also improve their outcomes.

This impact was not just from our program. Globally, a collaborative network of leaders throughout Teach for All, every day, are trying to change the education system of more than 55 countries, where highly motivated and empathic young leaders collaborate to change so many lives through education. Student learning is possible to achieve if it is clear what teachers know, what teachers can do, or what they are missing.

However, I felt that the work of 800 fellows and alumni from Mexico, where every year impacted 10-20 thousand students, was far from helping more than 33 million students that are part of the Mexican education system. I am sure that several of our fellows will participate in the public education system and change the lives of millions in the long run. Also, I am convinced that leadership could be fostered in teachers and principals to change student outcomes. A broader impact to more schools was possible to achieve by using and transferring our research, experience and practice.

In November 2019, we decided to launch a new organization that focused on teachers' professional development by implementing direct training for schools, schools' operations, helping schools incorporate technology into classrooms, and promoting collaboration amongst public education leaders.

Working with teachers was the next step since everyday teachers and principals work directly with students and, at the end of each school year, they change students' future opportunities. Teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes drive the success or failure of a life. From this perspective, teachers' professional development is a crucial investment in the development of any community.

At the begging of 2020, with a small and highly motivated team, we started training teachers in the *Mixe* communities from Oaxaca with our stellar program **Proyecto Nuevo Maestro (PNM)**. Our principal focus was on challenging existing beliefs about teaching and developing new knowledge and skills by exposing them to our teaching and learning methods. We started talks with several governments and foundations to expand our professional development program for teachers to Tamaulipas, State of Mexico, Baja California Sur and other regions. I was very optimistic that the expansion of PNM was happening fast. But COVID-19 hit Mexico and in less than a month, and schools all over the country were closed.

What could we do if the primary people we were trying to collaborate, and support were not in schools? We were hesitant about what to do next. However, in the beginning, we missed seeing that so many teachers, principals and authorities were looking for help and support for a new education reality. We were sure that collectively, we could solve it. No one believed that the hit from COVID-19 would keep schools closed for so long. Students needed to continue learning.

According to the Op-Ed, "*Back to 1960? Education may be Latin America's most lasting scar from COVID 19*" from Nora Lustig (Brookings 2020), the probability of completing secondary school for individuals with low-educated parents will be considerably lower in the post-pandemic. It is declining by 20 percentage points, from 52 percent to 32 percent. And compared to other countries, Mexico stands out because of the absence of mitigation policies, which have driven more than 12 million people to poverty[88].

Proyecto Nuevo Maestro (Pnm) In Oaxaca

When I met with the team, they had already moved to an online mode, and we noticed in the online meetings that, instead of our group of 65 registered teachers, we had more than 120 people attending our trainings. And 60 more teachers from the Gulf region from Oaxaca wanted to join the training that we were offering. We thought several questions: Why was it that, before the COVID-19, online or distance training were not seen as possible solutions? The team committed to supporting more teachers if the teachers would learn new technologies and commit to improve student outcomes.

Before the Pandemic of COVID-19, many people thought it impossible for teachers and principals from rural and indigenous communities from Oaxaca to attend zoom or online training. Before the Pandemic, excuses like "*we do not know how to use these platforms*" were quite common. A small (and deadly) virus forced our team to adapt to the region's challenging circumstances. We had to change from face-to-face support and interaction, to an online and virtual

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[88] The impact of COVID-19 economic shock on inequality and poverty in Mexico, Nora Lustig and Valentina Martinez Pabon, CEQ Institute, Working Paper 98, October 2020.

professional development program. The Pandemic showed that even as they lacked skills in handling digital tools or virtual platforms, and with all the possible challenges of working in a rural region, we had to recognize the extraordinary effort from so many teachers.

So often we assume that it is easy to work in schools. But to provide some context, the Mixe region is located in a mountainous area where internet coverage is terrible and varies by micro-region or community. Just 2% of the population has access to phone services. Some coverage is provided by cell phones offering 2G or 3G signal, without internet access. Several teachers and students use local cyber-coffee shops or businesses that rent computers with internet access at a very high price. Even with these *"tools"* the service is quite deficient. You can hardly connect video calls, or the connection is intermittent, making virtual work more difficult. So, most of the teachers connect without video because putting their video causes greater data consumption. But each one of them was finding a way to communicate with us.

Indigenous and rural communities face different deficiencies, and the Pandemic has made more visible the inequality of so many communities. However, the teachers' attitude was impressive. They adapted very fast and tried new strategies and methodologies for hybrid learning environments facing contexts with limited or almost no internet access.

I am sure that the most important lesson is to value the teachers' willingness to learn and their humility to accept support have created a fantastic teamwork among each community.

Our team offered a program with resources for "Remote Learning." Our professional development program focused on the curriculum and core skills in literacy and math, how to teach it effectively and how to assess students' learning. With the Pandemic, we had to adapt

and include new topics and practical examples on how to use WhatsApp, PDF, google classroom, drive, plan a personalized learning lesson for two weeks, evaluate in long-distance and better communicate with parents and tutors to support students. Our team hosted online and phone meetings to better understand the complex problems that each teacher is confronting. This information helped us fully utilize the available knowledge and experience to develop better teachers' solutions.

To overcome anyone's frustration using any technology, our PNM team developed an "*Espacios de Práctica*" (Practice Spaces) program. These are trusted spaces where teachers learn, share and practice digital tools that complement their distance learning and strengthen their teaching practice. Each teacher shares the use of tools such as Google Met, Zoom and Canva, and discovers how these tools can be implemented in their classes. The team created Digital Solutions, a compilation of more than 20 short videos to explain how to use free Ed-Tech tools. I am amazed to see that this "Practice Space" now is co-lead by teachers, and today includes teachers from all over Mexico, not just Oaxaca.

When internet or online learning is impossible, our teachers are scheduling every Monday visits to the communities. They leave study guides or activity programs for the students. At the same time, they collect the tasks of the previous week. These visits also serve to provide some specific support. At some schools, work through exercise booklets is delivered to parents and mothers to carry out their sons and daughters' activities from their homes. Teachers provide counseling every fifteen days to groups of four students to answer questions or concerns.

For isolated communities, exciting systems and innovations have also emerged. In the region of "Rio Manso" is the "Itinerant Combi." A small truck that visits rural towns every day, with "missionary teachers" (full of educational resources, including books and

booklets) who support students at elementary and middle school levels. In other regions, where access is not easy, teachers have partnered with local authorities to ensure that students complete their assignments on time. In these communities, parent committees play a significant role in keeping healthy communication with each teacher, following each student's progress.

PNM, at launching, was looking to work in a *status quo* environment, where teachers wanted to participate in a very fixed seminar with a specific number of hours per month. The Pandemic created a new way to do professional development by building trust and shared goals. The professional development program became a powerful force able to accelerate the transformation of the lives of so many students in Oaxaca and beyond.

The team has emphasized:

a) Creating a *direct and genuine communication* channel with the participant teachers and principals. Sometimes different approaches are necessary to help teachers try new ideas.

b) Designing and implementing a follow-up focused on strengthening the teaching task and, above all, through *reflective dialogue*.

c) Rethinking how to face challenges *from the collective and not from the individual*.

Something fundamental is that the team has followed three principles to guide the communication with each teacher and build capacity on each community by promoting:

1. **Involvement:** understood as the process in which teachers take ownership of virtual spaces, sharing experiences of their work in different contexts, with all the problems and challenges that they face. This activity encourages teachers to lead the workshops and monitoring spaces in collaboration with the PNM team.

2. Sharing: understood as space where each teacher can share, build and create learning strategies, recognizing the experience of others, and building collectively compilations of excellent and effective practices to address specific issues.

3. Participation: refers to other continuous training programs that we have shared to strengthen their knowledge, skills and areas of interest. For example, courses from the Coursera platform, workshops with the Latin American Network of Teachers, talks with experts, and several webinars.

I believe that the Pandemic became a force to push for new education reform, that it is not recycling old ideas as so many reforms have tried to do. It's happening fast. Before, teachers were facing a lack of engagement with their students learning experiences, but today I see a more collective concern towards educating the whole child. It is not just with outdated academic content instead, we are thinking about the social, emotional and core behaviors that each student has to develop to succeed. Today our teachers know that we have to help our students to become independent, reflective and long-time learners.

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Continued education, during Covid-19, in the rural Satya Bharti Schools of Bharti Foundation, India

Mamta Saikia

Those were hectic days, as one would expect in a typical March, when the current financial year is winding down and the organization is preparing for the next. In India, most states start the new academic year in April, and that meant our ground operations were also at peak with examinations finishing, new admissions, teachers' training picking up and distribution of materials (books, notebooks, stationery, etc) for 183 Satya Bharti Schools spread across villages in six states of India catering serving nearly 40,000 underprivileged children. It was at that time that the announcements of school closures started, to prevent Covid-19 from spreading; first the precautionary closure of schools and later the national level lockdown.

Setting the Context

The Bharti Foundation is one of the leading corporate foundations in India. In 2006, it established a network of schools in villages, providing quality education to underprivileged children with a special focus on girls. These 183 **Satya Bharti Schools** have nearly 40,000 students, half of them girls and with over 1300 teachers. The schools provide holistic quality education as well as mid-day meals, uniforms, books, notebooks and stationery to students, completely free of cost. In 2013, the Bharti Foundation's Board decided to scale up by partnering with State Education Departments to work with government schools. We currently partner with over 800 government schools in 14 states, catering to over 2,30,000 students involving nearly 10,000 teachers under the **Satya Bharti Quality**

Support Program. The program aims to strengthen quality of government schools with stakeholders' active participation. Our work with government schools creates a multiplier effect. In many states, our teams now support local education officials to scale up select initiatives to schools in an entire block or district.

This essay focuses on the Satya Bharti School program's journey during this period to draw out learnings, though an equally inspiring work is happening in the Quality Support Program.

The Covid-19 Lockdown

In March, exhaustive work was going on to finalize school level plans. The energy was at the peak because the start of a new chapter with new goals, initiatives and ideas is the best phase of any program. Little did we know that all this would stay on paper because of a virus.

The lockdown announcement put everything on pause. Everything stopped and people were confined to their homes. The pause for the Bharti Foundation team was momentary as by the evening of the first day, hectic consultations started. The DNA of Bharti Foundation is about dealing with problems head on, ethically and sensitively, with children at the center of all decisions. This time, the situation presented a tectonic shift with schools closed and teams under lockdown. We had to find a solution!

Field Consultations: Setting Priorities

Consultations among Operations' leaders revolved around ways to continue education for 40,000 students in the Satya Bharti Schools, our flagship program. Teachers, Head Teachers and Principals chipped in with field realities and ideas. Along with the top priority

of continued education, it was important to provide Covid-19 related safety information to students and parents. Teachers' discussion groups talked about ways to keep children feeling safe and keeping their morale high in addition to continued learning. The theme across Bharti Foundation was to stay connected, keep ideating and continue working on the ground to deliver project goals.

Passionate Work with Enthusiasm & Empathy

With priorities set, things started to move with speed. Within a week of the lockdown, a virtual network of Satya Bharti schools and students started to build. Teachers connected with parents on WhatsApp (WA) based class-groups on smartphones. With that students connected with their teachers and school. The academic unit at Bharti Foundation, immediately created small project assignments for students to be done at home. It also initiated began creating and curating online resources.

Closed schools were just the start of our problems. Coming from underprivileged backgrounds, many students didn't have a smartphone. Even if they did, it was a family phone shared by other members, so access was limited. Parents weren't smartphone savvy, and their literacy levels were low. Messages with academic content would not be read by many parents. Teachers took practical steps: (a) communicated with parents using voice notes to brief them about education methodology in the virtual Satya Bharti Schools, and (b) created a process of mostly asynchronous virtual teaching, thus enabling children to study when they could. While teachers were initiating students into the rhythm of learning at home, the academic unit created curriculum linked small assignments and learning resources that could be sent over WhatsApp.

Soon, the virtual Satya Bharti Schools got into teaching/learning by sending small assignments and learning links to students for study at

home, over WhatsApp groups. Parents would send photos of their child's homework or videos of child's reading assignment to teachers. Teachers reviewed these to send feedback over voice notes to parents to help their child improve.

Special effort was required to serve those 25% students without a smartphone. Teachers connected with a group of around four students through voice calls-based teaching sessions concluding with assignments for self-study. After a few days, teachers called students individually to listen in to their work and explain concepts again, if students needed help.

Enterprise & Execution in practice

The academic unit-initiated teachers' virtual training on online tools/apps and the principles of virtual/online pedagogy. Training was kept time-flexible with self-learning modules for teachers, post which trainers took short online sessions for critical concepts. Managing teachers' time was important as they teach multiple small groups of the same class e.g., students with or without smartphone. Evaluation of assignments, feedback to students or parents requires more time than usual. Teachers spend time motivating parents to ensure their child's regular attendance or training them on handholding their ward's study at home. All this requires time and unlimited energy. We were alive to their household obligations since most teachers stay in joint families with elders.

The initial round of teachers' training almost let a virtual genie out, much to our surprise! Teachers went on to train themselves way beyond formal trainings. They started creating video-based lessons, initiated online activities and assessments. We now have our own Digital Content Repository wherein content created by our teachers is uploaded for use by other teachers. Teachers created screen videos to train parents on various online activities. Soon teachers started

online synchronous classes over zoom for students who could join. This brought much cheer among students to attend classes with friends. Most parents also attend classes with children given their new role as co-teachers.

Lockdown opened; field visits re-started and schools opened for administrative work, with safety protocols. We undertook text-book distribution for the new academic year. Its implementation with nearly 40,000 parent-visits, with safety protocols, monitored by the Foundation's Quality team and under observation of local community leader, was appreciated by all for fault-less execution. Teachers undertook home visits for students without phone or who were irregular in WA groups to motivate them to stay connected. In November, schools were allowed to call senior students for classes. The safety of children and teachers was of utmost importance. With the leadership team, I gave my personal attention to ensure that every safety process, based on Government protocols, was designed to the minutest detail. Orientations for teachers, parents and students were undertaken. Covid-19 related safety-material be it oximeters, temperature guns, sanitizing guns, foot-operated sanitizer holders, sanitizing materials, masks, PPE kits for support-staff were provided. Five Satya Bharti Secondary schools welcomed their senior students and classes continue safely.

Keeping teams energized

It soon became apparent that controlling Covid-19 would take time. Uncertainty worried everybody. As a leader, it was my duty to keep the team motivated. Supported by HR, I personally involved myself in activities to reach out to our staff.

Communication & connect to inspire

I started monthly emails and video-messages for employees, cheering them on, applauding their work, giving them a sense of continuity and safety. Employee response showed that these messages served as a source of motivation and reassurance. Over weeks, I connected with each field team member, nearly 200 people, talking about their family and work. I communicated with a number of teachers, listening about their innovations on the ground. I also spoke with a few students to understand their challenges. In October, monthly Town-hall sessions were initiated to take the team through the history of the Bharti Foundation. These sessions are joyful as they connect everybody with the history; build pride and a common purpose among all our teams, apparent from messages received after sessions.

Leadership Connect

Each team leader has regular connecting structures with their teams to keep them inspired and focused on the mission. Motivation WhatsApp groups were created, and team fun zoom calls were set to cheer everybody up. In addition to work, team members' well-being is also monitored, should they require any support.

Employee engagement

The Human Resource (HR) team created a robust engagement calendar. The virtual world facilitated bringing people on one common platform. There were webinars, lectures, mental health sessions, quizzes, fun competitions, photo participations, recognition of innovative work, festival celebrations, and recognition by instituting awards like Lockdown Heroes etc. The HR team made it a point to connect with every teacher and employee to check on their well-being. The most important aspect was the confidence given to employees that they were not alone.

Inspiration back: Stories from the ground

While interacting with teachers and students, we realized how well the values and ethos of Bharti Foundation were imbibed. There were powerful stories that moved us. Stories of our teachers who made masks for distribution to poor people around their homes, or those who cooked food. Many joined village initiatives to help people. In some instances where parents of our students were low on food, our teachers coordinated with village-heads to ensure grains reached them. Our students are trained to undertake impactful campaigns as part of school's holistic development curriculum; many made cloth masks to distribute, used public-address system to talk about Covid-19 precautions. Our young change-makers kept true to being a Satya Bharti School student, in these tough times.

Program features that helped

If I look back at the last nine months, there were many organizational level and school level program processes that supported us in navigating the Covid-19 challenges. The following features helped us initiate virtual education with over 90% students connected with teachers, even though our students come from disadvantaged groups:

School-level

At the school-level, many established ethos and practices created a framework of knowledge and capability for teachers, students and parents, which facilitated a quick transition.

> (a) Empathy and students' well-being: We are quite aware of difficult circumstances our students may experience at home, given their background. Our schools are created as happy and safe spaces. Teachers make efforts to

connect with parents to understand each child's context to help them adjust and learn well in schools. It is this ability to connect with empathy that enabled our teachers to motivate students to stay engaged with education.

(b) Project-based learning: Teachers are trained to create project-based assignments and students are encouraged to learn by doing. Projects give agency and confidence to students to explore and create their learning. Both students and teachers could therefore adapt to the Covid-19 scenario, which expected students to be fairly independent in studies with teachers playing a facilitating role.

(c) Creative TLM (Teaching Learning Material): Our teachers are trained to create innovative TLM using low cost/waste material to help children learn better (e.g., discarded computer's keyboard for alphabet recognition). This practice helped teachers adapt and create e-resources for virtual teaching. They also helped parents create easy TLM at home for activities/projects.

(d) Grooming leaders: Our schools groom students to be future leaders. This training, especially in life-skills is helping them deal with challenges and exhibit admirable leadership behavior. Students making masks for distribution; helping their friends with studies are just a few examples. Many alumni are teaching junior students. These efforts are supporting teachers tremendously.

(e) Parents' connections: Teachers maintain regular connections with parents in our schools which helped them set up class WhatsApp groups within days, as parents' database was available on their mobiles. Today they do virtual PTMs to stay connected with parents.

(f) Home-mentoring: Parents are guided to mentor their child at home themselves or with help of an educated relative/sibling, and are given basic tools of study-play time management etc. Making them important stakeholder in child's education, stood us in good stead during this period.

(g) Phone PTMs (Parent-Teacher Meetings): Parents with smartphones are called to school and helped to download educational YouTube videos/free apps for child's use at home. It helped us transition to virtual teaching smoothly as most parents were partially trained on use of phone for learning.

Organization level

(a) Empowered Leadership: Clear roles with Delegation of Authority at every level ensures quick decisions. Teams are regularly trained on skills critical for their jobs. This empowerment facilitated transition to a completely new structure of schooling, program and safety processes etc., quickly and efficiently during the period.

(b) DNA of Innovation: Teams across levels are encouraged to come up with creative solutions or processes, thus helping the organization pool in different perspectives regularly. This DNA helped field teams and teachers to contribute to the solution design.

(c) Process orientation: All programs and functions in the Bharti Foundation operate on internally created processes (SoPs). For any new initiative, process creation is always the first step, resulting in speed and clarity in implementation. Process orientation helped us scale up virtual operations uniformly across regions swiftly.

(d) The ethos of teamwork, consultation, transparency, quick decision-making, empathy and children at the center of all decisions, is the way we work. In this period of pandemic, this ethos helped us pull the entire system together with a single-minded focus to keep education uninterrupted for our children.

Reflections

Operationalizing a large-scale education program is always full of challenges. Covid-19 presented new dilemmas that had to be dealt with sensitively. It brought on fears of a new disease, along with a nationwide lockdown. Keeping employee morale high to face the new reality was key during these critical times. The employee connections established were intense, purposeful and honest. Senior management exhibited care by deeply involving themselves in ensuring high levels of safety protocols for the simplest of operations to ensure employee safety.

Working with disadvantaged communities, especially during lockdown, involves being aware of financial or other difficulties a family may be going through. Empathy as well as leadership attributes of our team enabled them to go beyond their call of duty. It was reflected in many examples of support provided to parents in their hour of need. Special Changemaker Awards were instituted to recognize teachers for their exemplary work in a virtual ceremony in presence of the Board members.

Satya Bharti Schools have EdTech embedded in curriculum to an extent, but Covid-19 brought technology to the forefront. Lack of digital resources with students, lack of virtual pedagogy exposure to village-based teachers were the two big barriers. As one teacher said to me, "If a year ago somebody had told me that we would be running our school on mobile phones and I will be taking zoom classes using the e-TLM created myself, I would not have believed a single word. Yet here I am." This remark embodies the transition we made.

Another big challenge was the absence of the school, the building, suddenly taken out of the equation. This was the biggest shift everybody had to make. The definition of schools was challenged, and one had to completely reimagine education. A journey that most education institutions and educationists are undertaking.

The most difficult aspect is the impact of the digital divide on underprivileged children, especially girls. Although, in Satya Bharti Schools girls' engagement with education and access to technology is currently the same as boys, due to our years of work on girl-child education around our schools. This continues to remain a concern until schools reopen with full attendance of girl-students.

The challenge for any leader in the education space is to start planning for the period post Covid-19, when schools will open partially or fully. Schools would have to look at slightly longer-term remediation phase with learning activities for home as well. The challenge is to get students to be grade ready while keeping the mental health aspects in mind.

Education, like any other sector has been impacted by the pandemic. Some key changes we would see in the future are:

- Technology adaptation in teaching learning would get institutionalized at speed with teachers, parents and students even in rural underprivileged segments experiencing its power
- Personalized learning, thanks to many online apps, will become a reality. This may help bridge learning gaps
- Teachers' education and training would adapt to this new world of technology
- Education will expand beyond schools with homes, community and online spaces included. Online education may also improve teachers' availability in difficult areas with school boundaries becoming porous.
- Parents' role seen in the last few months may get institutionalized as they will engage a lot more, leading to a beneficial partnership for kids.

This period and its impact will continue to challenge educationists for some time. Many gains made across the world, be it getting out-of-school children back into schools or ensuring girls enrollment and

regular attendance in schools, may have to be re-assessed for a renewed action and focus. Lack of device availability for disadvantaged children has exacerbated the digital divide, not conducive for a future that would be led by technology. As we emerge from this difficult phase, we must ensure that the learnings gathered during this phase should inform our future policies and practices. The stage is now set for all of us to be ready for when students come back to school, even if it is for limited periods of time, to give every child the attention s/he deserves to make up for the lost time.

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The Right Thing by Children. Luminos Fund Reflections on COVID-19 Leadership Challenges

Mubuso Zamchiya and Caitlin Baron

The Global Setting

At the 2005 Arctic AIDS benefit concert in *Tromsø*, Norway, President Nelson Mandela delivered a stunning address that is uncannily relevant to our present times.[89] Madiba portrayed a sorely divided world where hope and despair are paradoxically juxtaposed. One side boasts leapfrog gains in science and technology. The other side laments unnecessary child mortality and children out of school.

With the G8 meetings in the foreground, Mandela reminded his audience that, "We now need leadership, vision, and political courage," from the world's highest decision makers.

"When the history of our times is written, will we be remembered as the generation that turned our backs in a moment of global crisis, or will it be recorded that we did the right thing?" (Nelson Mandela)

President Mandela's *Tromsø* speech was reminiscent of Marvin Gaye's soulful remonstration of humanity in the wake of the Vietnam War, which bewailed the reality that the United States and the world at large were still hotbeds of suffering, inequality, and injustice. The tone, tenor, and task of his classic 1971 concert album were aptly captured in the title of the record, and in its iconic lead

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[89] Address by Nelson Mandela at 46664 Concert, *Tromsø, Norway. Transcript at* http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/2005/050611_46664.htm

single, "What's Going On." Like Mandela, Gaye demanded answers from a world seemingly stuck in a soporific stupor of indifference.

Doing right by the world's children, thereby responding to clarion calls like Mandela's and poignant interrogations such as Gaye's, is both what motivates us and keeps us awake at night at the Luminos Fund. Today, against the backdrop of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the world finds itself in a catastrophic moment in education. The pandemic has caused a terrible loss of life and disrupted livelihoods to extreme humanitarian crisis levels. Despite these tragedies, education disruption may be the virus' deepest and most enduring negative consequence. After all, learning poverty and education inequality are primary root causes of all other forms of poverty and inequality. With 1.6 billion children out of school worldwide in early 2020[90], and presently with upwards of 24 million additional children likely to never return to school[91] (including four million in Ethiopia alone based on latest government estimates[92]), education stakeholders are facing the leadership challenge of a generation.

To make matters worse, tragic events like the brutal murder of George Floyd[93] serve as reminders that the systems we rely upon to

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[90] "COVID-19 Impact on Education" UNESCO Data: https://en.unesco.org/COVID-19/educationresponse
[91] UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore's remarks at a press conference on new updated guidance on school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. 15 September 2020. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fores-remarks-press-conference-new-updated
[92] From country-level discussions with national government education officials in Ethiopia.
[93] Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein, "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," New York Times, Published May 31, 2020, Updated November 5, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html

undergird our pursuits of life, liberty, and happiness in the United States have a grim and ugly underbelly. All too often, the voices, interests, and lives of people from the Global South are exploited, excluded, and even eliminated. Injustice and inequality are as systemic in our collective society as fear and hatred are endemic in our individual hearts. An honest response to Madiba and Gaye will necessitate that we not only address the academic learning needs of children, but that we also invest in values-based education. It will require leadership, vision, and political courage to push for more local ownership of education interventions, and more global participation by people from the Global South in the decision-making forums of international agencies and nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

The Luminos Fund

Under the foresight of our founders and anchor funders, the Luminos Fund[94] was created for a moment precisely like this. Luminos was established as a direct response to the seemingly intractable problem that far too many children across the world are denied a chance to learn due to poverty, crisis, discrimination, inequality, and injustice. Our threefold mandate is to:

  i.   Show that all children can learn, regardless of circumstance, through at-scale direct delivery of our 10-month Second Chance accelerated program for primary-age out-of-school children.

  ii. Share our innovation with government and nongovernment stakeholders to help them weave Second Chance best practices into the fabric of the broader education system.

  iii. Shift mindsets on what works in solving learning loss and learning poverty, by establishing a robust evidence base of

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[94] https://luminosfund.org

effectiveness and then advocating widely for children's rights to learn.

By 2020, prior to the advent of the novel coronavirus, Luminos made impressive progress along all three fronts. We successfully reached over 136,502 children in Ethiopia, Liberia, and Lebanon with a second chance to learn. We supported the Ethiopian government as it piloted government-funded and operated delivery of Second Chance, and then made plans to scale the innovation across all country regions. Our external evaluators, the University of Sussex, Centre for International Education demonstrated in an Ethiopian Longitudinal Study that even six years after participating in our Second Chance program, formerly out-of-school children were consistently outperforming their government peers academically. These former Luminos students were dropping out less and completing primary school at a higher rate. They also had higher aspirations for their future lives.[95] Finally, we also established an emerging advocacy presence within the cycle of international education policy, funding, and thought leadership convenings.

That said, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 served as a humbling reminder of Robert Burns' insightful reflection that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. We therefore begin 2021 with many fruitful lessons that will help strengthen our leadership, vison, and political courage as we work to fulfill our charge in this new COVID-19 reality. Like many NGO leaders who serve marginalized communities, the core challenges we at Luminos face in this pandemic are the same ones we must navigate during normal times. These challenges are nuanced, of course, and much accentuated, and fall into three categories: (i) building an equitable learning organization; (ii) expanding empathy among supporters and funders;

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[95] Second Education: A longitudinal study of out-of-school education in Ethiopia. A summary of an independent study by the University of Sussex Centre for International Education. https://luminosfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Luminos_Longitudinal_Study_FINAL.pdf

and (iii) making good on the commitment to do the right thing for children.

Building an Equitable Learning Organization

The type of organization you are determines the impact you make. As a global education organization, the Luminos Fund is committed to building teams that truly reflect justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The advent of COVID-19 was an opportunity to fast-track our plans in this regard. We improved the gender and Global South diversity of our Board of Directors and continued to build an inclusive Advisory Board. We acted upon our longstanding intentions to add local senior African leaders in our Ethiopian and Liberian country contexts. We also took advantage of digital communication technologies like Zoom and WhatsApp to make our team meetings more geographically inclusive. Before COVID-19, our headquarters staff meeting engaged only US-based staff, most of whom participated in-person. The physical distancing required during the pandemic constrained our ability to meet face to face, but it also facilitated an important paradigm shift. As a result, strategic and operational meetings are now inclusive of both country-level leaders and US staff.

Furthermore, our expanded use of communication technologies accelerated our progress in building a comprehensive data collection system and program management dashboard. This dashboard is a tool that is now increasingly accessible by changemakers across the entire Luminos network from the classroom to the CEO's office.

These collective adjustments and transformations have dramatically improved the participatory nature, quality, and effectiveness of decision making and teamwork within the organization.

As an example, when it came to responding to the immediate needs of our children and families at the onset of the pandemic, we are

quickly able to rely upon the leadership of our Liberian country lead, Abba G. Karnga, Jr. Since COVID-19 is Liberia's second pandemic in six years, Abba was able to draw upon his experience living and working through Ebola. Under his guidance, we commissioned a research study to understand the impact of the lockdown on our families. Eighty percent of parents suffered decreased income, one in three children reported not getting enough to eat, and seventy-two percent of children overall were drawn back into income-generating activities. Abba directed Luminos to make the rapid strategic shift to engage in humanitarian relief efforts (personal protection equipment, food, and other supplies), while also engaging the generosity of our funders to continue paying Second Chance teacher salaries throughout the period. Outside of Abba's leadership, our response would have been slower and less impactful for our communities.

Beyond Luminos itself, the global shift to virtual meetings and webinars changed the way we engaged the broader global education ecosystem. We took the opportunity to host virtual funder convenings, United Nations General Assembly week-related discussions, and an education leader video series. We accepted invitations to lead sessions at global virtual events, like RewirEdX. We contributed to the thought leadership blogs of organizations like the Global Partnership for Education and Center for Global Development. Throughout these engagements, our close, real-time connection with Second Chance parents and teachers in Ethiopia, Liberia, and Lebanon allowed us to bring their voices into global discourses where perspectives like theirs are typically excluded.

Expanding Empathy among Supporters and Funders

In many ways, COVID-19 has been a great equalizer. Everyone is susceptible to infection and nobody is completely free from its disruption. We are in the same storm, but, of course, the privileged and the underprivileged are in different boats. Still, our common experience, especially in regard to school closures, has greatly

expanded empathy among wealthy families, who now have a more visceral appreciation of the hardship their low-income counterparts live through every day, even when there is no pandemic. Thus, a silver lining in this moment of collective global anguish is that the task of explaining the work and significance of organizations like Luminos to prospective funders and supporters has become much more straightforward.

COVID-19 has also transformed relationship dynamics with our active funders. Even before the pandemic, Luminos was privileged to be backed by world-class core funders. During the pandemic, these partners demonstrated their mettle by immediately reaching out to underscore their commitment to the organization and our work. They increased grant fund usage flexibility and reduced the rigidity of reporting requirements, even when some of them were facing threats to the security of their endowments. Their generosity of spirit allowed for more effective, real-time information sharing and grantor-grantee collaboration in decision making. Some even explained that their lived experience through COVID-19 helped them better appreciate the difficulty NGO leaders face in navigating operations through crisis environments and events that are unpredictable, unmanageable, and outside of the scope of rudimentary analysis. A less demanding posture, an eagerness to sit on the same side of the table as grantees, and a greater commitment to roll up their sleeves and address opportunities and challenges together, are very welcome new benchmarks of engagement for philanthropic funders.

Making Good on our Commitment to Serve Children Well

If the first two challenges are examples of where we are navigating well, this final challenge is a work in progress and an exercise that has stretched our capacity for leadership, vision, and political courage. When schools closed in Ethiopia, Liberia, and Lebanon, we, like all other education NGOs, faced the urgent question of what to do. Children had to stay at home and could not participate in

traditional classes. Beyond humanitarian considerations, protracted absence from school brought with it very tangible risks to child health, child safety, and, of course, learning. In terms of learning, we had a pressing decision to make. On the one hand, we could depart from our traditional low-tech, high-touch education intervention model to invest in distance learning solutions. Or, on the other hand, we could wait out the period of school closures, and then jump into action with our fully equipped, fully resourced, conventional Second Chance model and theory of change when it finally became safe for children to learn together in classroom groups. This was a real tension for us in February and March of 2020.

The decision was comparatively easier in Lebanon where years of investment in evidence-based, distance-learning solutions that were widely accessible and curriculum-aligned confirmed the likely effectiveness of reliance on education technology for learning continuity. By contrast, education technology interventions are much more nascent in Ethiopia and Liberia, especially in the most marginalized communities we serve.

What helped us make our decision for Ethiopia and Liberia was our confirmed understanding that from the beginning, our Second Chance program was designed as a mitigation to learning loss. Under ordinary circumstances, Luminos helps out-of-school children cover three years of missed learning in the short space of 10 months before they transition to the appropriate grade level in mainstream schooling. Like other forms of accelerated learning, the Luminos Second Chance program in its customary form, is a COVID-19 learning loss antidote. We resolved therefore, that beyond providing families with basic remote learning materials, our efforts during the period of school closures would be best served by equipping our team, implementation partners, teachers, and participating governments to deliver Second Chance as effectively as possible, and at the greatest possible scale, once schools reopened.

Looking to the Future

As we reflect on 2020 and press forward in our mission to ensure no child is denied the chance to learn, we recognize three key steps for education leaders and systems to come back strong after a crisis like COVID-19. First, targeted outreach must be conducted to bring the most vulnerable students back to school. Next, each child should be assessed to understand the extent of their learning loss, and how to meet them where they are in the curriculum. Finally, accelerated learning should be employed to bring learners back to grade level. These steps are impossible outside of the efforts and tenacity of frontline educators. Alas, few low-income countries have nearly enough teachers. UNESCO estimates a global shortage of nearly 69 million teachers, 70 percent of whom are needed in sub-Saharan Africa.[96]

Traditional teachers alone will not meet the need. Lessons can be drawn from the powerful success Luminos has achieved in Ethiopia and Liberia with "last mile teachers" – the education equivalent of the world-famous network of 3,600 frontline health workers being deployed by Last Mile Health. Our teacher preparation model recruits local, motivated young adults with high potential but minimal qualifications as teachers. Our program has shown that, with an intensive three-week training followed by ongoing classroom-based coaching, these recruits deliver transformative learning for children who are often the first in their families to read. Luminos teachers are so successful that, after 10 months of schooling, our students read at a rate that only 15 percent of Liberian third graders can match.

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[96] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016. "The World needs almost 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 Education goals," https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246124

In the last 20 years, the single greatest achievement of international education has been expanding access.[97] COVID-19 is placing that progress at significant risk. Thus, today, heeding President Nelson Mandela's words of leadership, vision, and political courage requires school systems to think expansively about the talent they can deploy in response to the current crisis. This talent can help school systems weather periodic closures and still deliver transformative learning for students. Status quo thinking is inadequate and will leave us with the same unacceptable responses to Marvin Gaye's question, "What's Going On?" Most importantly, how will we look this generation of children in the eyes if we fail to do the right thing?

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[97] UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015, Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges. https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2015/education-all-2000-2015-achievements-and-challenges