

Parent-Teacher Partnerships

The Need for Renewed
Collaboration in the Time of
COVID-19



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Introduction

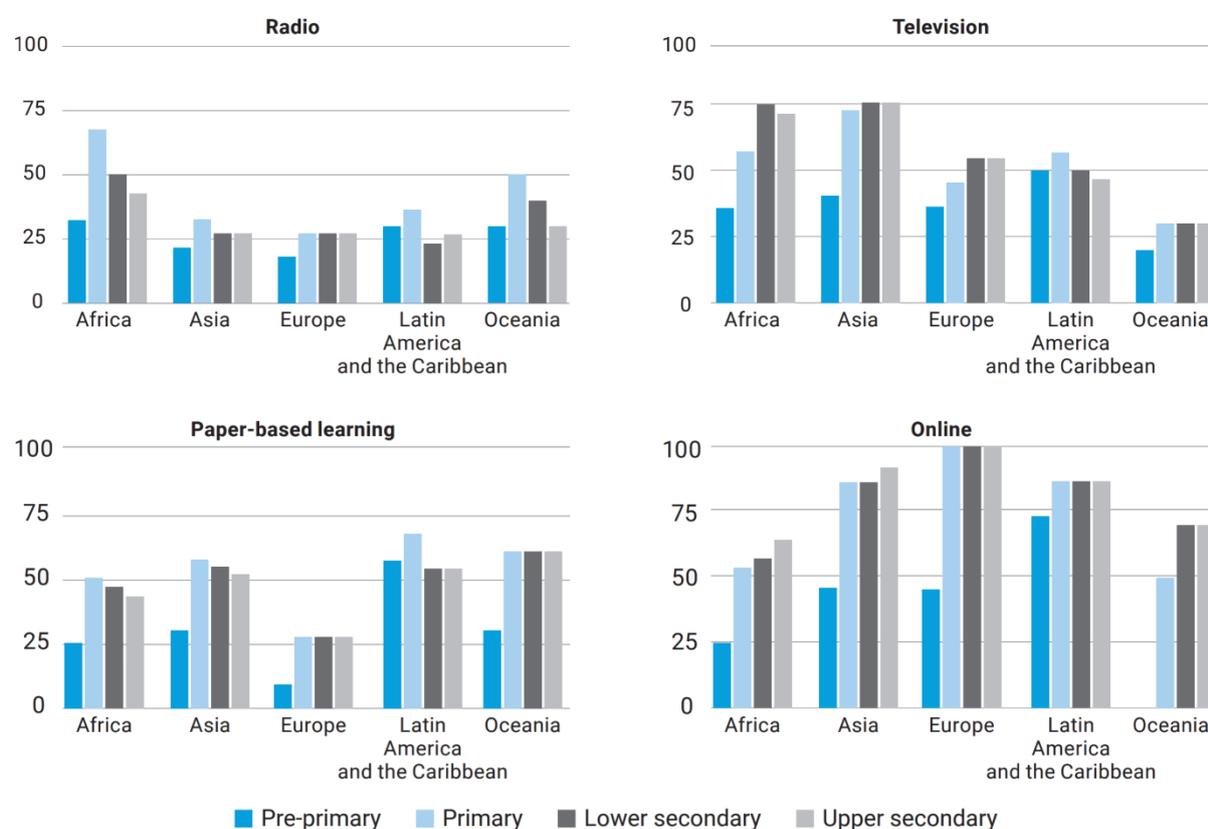
According to a recent United Nations report, “the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world’s student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle-income countries”.¹

In response to the acute learning crisis generated by the Coronavirus outbreak, teachers have had to adopt new methods of educating their students and staying connected to their communities. Around the world, millions of parents have also stepped up and taken charge of their child’s education. Most parents are doing all they can, in enormously difficult circumstances, to minimize and mitigate the significant disruption to learning caused by school closures. As this document makes clear, the greatest success stories have come from where parents and teachers have found ways to work together on behalf of children and young people. And we hope that this document inspires even more teachers and parents to collaborate and work together to ensure that children keep learning during the current pandemic.

During the pandemic, learning has become highly dependent on the use of technology. Globally, a large number of schools in urban areas are conducting online classes for students. In areas with limited connectivity, education providers have used more traditional distance learning methods, or a mix of educational television and radio programming, as well as the distribution of print materials. As shown in Figure 1, countries have chosen different modes of distance education depending on education level, with variability across regions.

¹ *United Nations Policy Brief: Education During COVID-19 and Beyond*, UN, 2020

FIGURE 1: COUNTRY CHOICE OF DISTANCE LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES WAS INFLUENCED BY EDUCATION LEVEL AND REGION (percentage).



Source: UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank joint database, May-June 2020.

While the use of Edtech tools and the rise of distance learning have become the ‘new normal’ in education during the global pandemic, adapting to it has not been a smooth process for all. Teachers, parents and students are striving to adjust to the new system. Issues such as a lack of technological infrastructure in many parts of the world and a low level of digital literacy among students, parents and teachers have compounded the problem. As per the latest data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), “only 56% of teachers across the OECD received training in the use of ICT for teaching as part of their formal education or training, and only 43% of teachers felt well or very well prepared for this element when they completed their initial education or training.”²

² TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners, OECD, 2019

The issue has also affected parents and students, who face a struggle to access quality learning resources. A large number of students do not have access to the internet, and most cannot even afford to buy the technology they need to receive online lessons. According to a recent UNICEF study on internet access that covered 183 countries, in 71 of the countries surveyed less than half of the population had access to the internet.³

The COVID-19 pandemic, then, has laid bare the growing digital divide between the richest and poorest, one that includes access to education. Parents around the world want a good education for their children. But only in the richest countries and communities do parents and their children have access to a high-quality digital infrastructure. The remainder of parents and students, who represent the majority of the world's population, have faced enormous challenges in keeping connected to education systems. It is a testament to the courage and determination of these parents that so many have worked to keep their child learning throughout the pandemic, often hand-in-hand with local teachers.

The worldwide closure of schools has led to many more problems for students other than missing out on learning opportunities. In many places, students from economically disadvantaged households cannot access the free meals provided to them through the schools. Educationists also fear that keeping children out of school has raised the risk of children being forced into child labour and other forms of exploitation and abuse such as early marriage for girls. Disruptions in schooling systems have also affected children with special educational needs and disabilities or those who are socially marginalised as strategies of distance learning do not always address their needs.⁴

While school closures due to the pandemic have deprived children of a safe and supportive environment of educational institutions essential for their all-round development, it has also affected parents. Lockdowns and social distancing restrictions have forced many parents to work from home. With schools and childcare centers closed, many parents are struggling to manage their work along with the increased responsibility of looking after their children's learning at home. According to a recent study by Matt Krents and others "in countries such as France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the USA, 60 per cent of parents

³ T Dreeson et al, *Promising practices for equitable remote learning Emerging lessons from COVID-19 education responses in 127 countries*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2020

⁴ *Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children*, UN, 2020

have been unable to find alternative solutions for schools and day-care centres”.⁵ Beyond the figures are the countless stories of parents struggling to keep their jobs, or find work, in the middle of the worst economic downturn in modern history.⁶ Parents, then, deserve unqualified support in their efforts to keep their children learning.

An effective education policy in the ‘new normal’ therefore requires the development of new adjustment strategies for all key stakeholders. It calls for a renewed collaboration between teachers and parents, who must work together in the best interest of students.

Parents are a crucial link between children and schools. The importance of a healthy and strong partnership between parents and other caregivers with teachers is a well-recognized and researched topic in education.⁷ Several studies have proven that collaboration between parents and teachers improves children’s academic achievement, work habits, social skills and emotional well-being.⁸ As per the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, on average across the OECD, 62% of principals consider that parents or guardians contribute to student achievement “quite a bit or “a lot.”⁹ Recognizing the importance of collaboration with parents in improving learning outcomes for children several OECD countries have incorporated guidelines on working with parents in their curriculum framework.¹⁰ Parents are key stakeholders in education, who have the authority to hold schools accountable for their child’s learning.

In the ‘new normal’, parents and other caregivers have to play a more significant role in the learning and development of their child than they have done traditionally. More so, because most education is now taking place in the home environment instead of the school campus, without the physical presence of teachers.

But the critical questions are: What supporting role can parents play in the education system in the ‘new normal’? What are the key issues where parent-teacher collaboration is

⁵ Matt Krents and others, *Easing the COVID-19 burden on working parents*, BCG, 21 May 2020

⁶ See e.g. Gita Gopinath, “The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression”, IMF Blog, 14 April 2020

⁷ *School and Parents: developing partnerships*, Ofsted, 2011

⁸ See e.g. Susan M. Sheridan, *Establishing healthy parent-teacher relationships for early learning success*, 2018

⁹ *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, OECD, 2020

¹⁰ *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*, OECD, 2017

required? And in what ways can teachers effectively communicate and coordinate with parents for better learning outcomes? In July 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Varkey Foundation established a Task Force of teachers from around the world to discuss how teachers could better communicate, coordinate and collaborate with parents. The Task Force comprised of teachers, all Global Teacher Prize Ambassadors,¹¹ from 19 countries. Their experiences of collaboration with parents shed global insight on the issue of parent-teacher partnership. In a series of calls hosted by the Varkey Foundation, these teachers shared their personal stories from the field, which gave us evidence of what strategies work when it comes to dealing with parents and families in their day-to-day lives. **Some of these strategies, which can potentially become 'best practices' in a parent-teacher partnership, are documented in this report.** The recommendations made in the paper are recommendations for parents and teachers that draw from the discussions that took place during the meetings of the Task Force.

The discussions also highlighted the warmth, understanding and genuine compassion felt by teachers around the world toward the parents of their students. All of the teachers who took part in this initiative spoke of the importance of reaching out and connecting with their students' parents. Most spoke of the struggles faced by parents in keeping their children connected with education during lockdowns and school closures. And many teachers spoke of how the poorest families in their communities had been hit the hardest by the pandemic, with parents struggling to educate their children and keep food on the table.

Fundamentally, to keep learning alive amid a global crisis, teachers and parents must work together. As the case studies below make clear, the best of education is built upon such partnerships.

Establishing Contact with Parents: The Roadblocks

Several factors influence the levels of communication between parents and teachers, and these factors are likely to vary in different socio-economic contexts. Members of the Teacher Task Force highlighted the significant role played by the socio-economic and educational background of parents in shaping their relationship with teachers. Several

¹¹ Every year the top 50 finalists of the Global Teacher Prize join the community of Global Teacher Prize Ambassadors. The Varkey Foundation works with these outstanding teachers to shed light on the expertise and capacity of teachers worldwide, giving those who work in the front line of education the recognition and voice that they deserve, to influence policy and practice. We now have 300 ambassadors from more than 60 countries.

members also spoke of the difficulty of communicating with parents who do not have internet connectivity or are unable to operate a simple, communication devices such as a mobile phone. Very often, impoverished parents don't have the means to buy a simple phone, which is needed to keep lines of communications open between parents and teachers at times of social distancing.

For example, Melinda Wilson, a teacher for Chicago Public Schools in the USA, noted that some irregular migrant parents do not like to share their telephone number or home address with schools because they fear the authorities. Reaching out to these parents is therefore a daunting task for her.

The Task Force identified a range of challenges in engaging with parents during the COVID-19 school closures. Some parents are unable or unwilling to support their children in distance learning programmes. Others are intimidated by teachers, or simply don't trust them. To build an effective working relationship with parents, teachers themselves also need to develop adequate interpersonal skills to communicate confidently and effectively.

Collaboration strategies developed by teachers

World over, teachers are working tirelessly to make sure that they keep their students engaged in the learning process. They are trying novel methods to communicate with students and families. The focus is not only on imparting academic lessons to students but also to help them to maintain their physical, mental and social well-being. During its work, the Task Force uncovered inspiring stories from all over the world, where teachers went the extra mile to reach out to parents and collaborate with them in different ways. The objective is to ensure that there is as little disruption as possible to the education of students during the pandemic. For example, Marie-Christine Ghanbari Jahrami, a teacher from Comprehensive School Gescher in Germany arranges sponsors and raises funds from the public to provide electronic devices for remote learning to economically disadvantaged families.

Teachers like Melissa Collins are playing a vital role in keeping the spirit of her students' community high. Melissa teaches at the John. P. Freeman Optional School in Memphis. Her students are affected by systemic socioeconomic inequality and the legacy of segregation. She visits students' homes if they are unable to participate in online lessons. She distributes goody bags to the children and even invites them to come over to her garden for informal meetings. In this manner, she can socialise with the families and check

on their well-being. **Paying visits to homes has proved to be an excellent strategy for her to build trust with the parents of her students.**

Another teacher from Chicago, Melinda Wilson, who works with students from socially marginalised backgrounds, is using the written word to communicate with her students and their parents. She writes at least three letters to them every week. Melinda also visits their homes to see if they are getting enough food and keeping well. To cultivate a relationship with the families, she organises online Yoga and dancing classes for the families. Participation in group activities also provides an opportunity for the families to come together as a community and connect.

Social distancing can isolate families from teachers, and such group activities provide a much-needed avenue to bond with people of the same interests.

Similarly, in an attempt to open a channel of communication between parents, Muhammad Nazir bin Amir from the Green View Secondary School in Singapore showcases the creative talents of all his students to parents. For the convenience of busy parents, he organizes exhibitions of his students' work only on the weekends.

These exhibitions create an opportunity for parents to come together as a group and discuss the learning outcomes of children.

Most teachers in the Task Force believe that the ideal way to engage parents in the learning process is through creating tailor-made activities, with defined roles for them. Ranjithsinh Disale, who teaches in rural India, has adopted this approach very successfully. At the start of the pandemic when the schools were closed in his area, he found it difficult to connect with the parents of his students. Ranjithsinh, through community donations, purchased pre-owned smartphones for these parents and established regular contact with them. **To give parents a sense of participation in decision making, he asked them if they would like to help in teaching children at home.** It was only after their consent that he created online activities where parents were required to spend just one hour each day to help children complete the task. Ranjithsinh calls it an “hour of life”. To make the job more comfortable for the parents, he sets clear instructions on what parents are required to do in that hour. **Through this “hour of life”, parents and students learn life skills and practical knowledge that they can apply in day-to-day life.**

There are numerous other examples of educators innovating and implementing strategies to engage with parents in the new normal. **In countries like China, teachers are providing psychological counselling to families.** As Wu Rongjin, a Principal at Primary school in Shanghai shared during the Task Force discussions, teachers in Shanghai provide psychological support to students and their parents through interactive radio programs. The programme aired thrice a week has helped thousands of listeners and is based on a story-telling format. **In Durham, North Carolina, parents have volunteered for food distribution activities in schools.**¹² Many teachers have gone one step further to include parents in the learning of their child. **They have entrusted parents with the task of evaluating their child's work at home.**

All these steps initiated by the teachers aim at building a relationship of mutual trust and understanding with parents in the 'new normal'. There are several other communication and collaboration strategies recommended by the Teacher Task Force for improving communication with the parents, as discussed below.

Recommendations for Teachers

Know your parents: To develop a strong relationship with parents, the teacher must have information about who they are, what they do and how are they coping in the pandemic. Where possible, make use of online surveys to understand what support parents expect from schools.

Talk to parents: Frequency, clarity and usefulness of communication is very crucial to keep parents engaged. Teachers must contact parents regularly to give updates on activities planned for their child and ask for feedback. Appointing a parent representative to exchange information with a group of parents is often helpful.

Build support systems: Create a 'buddy system' for parents to help their peers to cope with the demands of new learning systems. Design non-academic activities that involve families as a group and allow socialising with each other either virtually or physically, if possible.

¹² See eg Jessica Fu, "School lunch as we know it is over. Here's how school nutrition directors are reinventing it for an uncertain year", Chalkbeat, 23 June 2020

Provide access to psychological counselling, where resources are available: Many families are under increased pressure because of the ongoing pandemic and may need psychological mentoring. Where possible and practical, involve school counsellors in meetings with parents to give guidance on dealing with stress and to bolster mental health.

Build capacity: Create a ‘one-stop’ platform for parents to keep them informed about all the learning activities, assignments and teaching tools used by the school/teachers for distance education. Organise online workshops or design multimedia tutorials to train parents in using e-learning tools.

Role of Parents

All parents and other caregivers want the best for their children. By working in partnership with teachers, they can contribute to the learning and well-being of their children. The demands of the education system in the ‘new normal’ require parents to play a multifaceted role in minimising the impact of the pandemic on their children’s academic performance and well-being. This report has found that the greatest success stories were to be found where a parent was a:

Good communicator: Parents should share their concerns about the education of their child with the teacher. They should also inform the teacher if the child has any special educational needs or disabilities and requires extra help.

Active Caretaker: As a primary caregiver, parents should provide a working space in their home for their children to study and create an environment conducive to learning at home.

Routine builder: Teachers require the help of parents to ensure that their students participate consistently in remote learning programmes and complete their assigned tasks on time and to the best of their ability. In particular, it falls to parents to manage their child’s timetable of lessons and to ensure that they keep up with their schoolwork.

Vigilant guardian: Parents should take reasonable action to protect their children from harm online, including against violations of their right to privacy, as well as cyberbullying, sexting and other forms of harassment. Besides using parental controls, the parent should talk to their child about how to stay safe online – including to suggest guidance and resources from trusted third parties. In particular, educators suggest that children

shouldn't be left unattended online for several hours. Parents and guardians should regularly check on them and the content that they are watching.

Friendly teacher: If possible, parents should help children when they have problems with learning tasks. Parents must teach children the importance of practicing hygiene and maintaining good health. Parents have to mentor children to stay positive and develop the life skills necessary to survive and thrive during periods of crisis.

Conclusion

The unabated COVID-19 pandemic has generated an unprecedented crisis in the education systems across the world. While all the stakeholders in education, from governments to school leaders, to teachers, students and parents, are struggling to find strategies to contain the damage, it is apparent that any successful policy will need to be built on partnerships among them. Solutions to the issues generating conflict amongst the stakeholders, like the reopening of schools, payment of school fee during school closures or the sharing of the increased work burden can only be found through effective communication strategies. Every stakeholder has to understand the need to work together in the best interest of students.

The collaboration between educators and parents is the foundation of the education system in the 'new normal' as they are the first point of contact for students for all the educational needs. All the stakeholders should come together to support this partnership to ensure that children receive education seamlessly in the times of the pandemic. For instance, in Shanghai, the government provided professional guidance and learning support for parents. As noted in the report *Online and Open Education in Shanghai: Emergency Response and Innovative Practice during COVID-19 Pandemic*, "the online course Shanghai Parents School, created by Shanghai Open University, invited prominent experts in the homeschooling field to give live lectures every week. More than 150,000 parents nationwide have so far watched and studied in the seven courses delivered". The government also sent letters to parents to help understand online learning and ways of creating a positive learning environment for their children at home.¹³

¹³ *Online and Open Education in Shanghai Emergency Response and Innovative Practice during COVID-19 Pandemic*, UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, 2020

And while all the efforts are currently directed towards supporting children in distance learning programmes and reopening schools, there is an urgent need to mentor students to walk on the path to self-organised independent learners.

Annex

The Teacher Task Force on The Role of Parents in Blended Learning

Co-Chairs

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- Muhammad Nazir bin Amir (Singapore)
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