

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT LOCAL LEARNING PRIORITIES IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA?

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Panel:

MODERATOR: JENNIFER I. O'DONOGHUE
Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Center for Universal Education, Brookings

RUKMINI BANERJI
CEO, Pratham Education Foundation
2021 Yidan Prize for Education Development Laureate

ESTEBAN MOCTEZUMA
Ambassador of Mexico to the U.S.
Former Secretary of Public Education, Government of Mexico

LYNDA EUNICE NAKAIBALE
Program Associate, Raising Teenagers Uganda
Founder, Tujifunze Africa
Member, UNESCO SDG4 Youth Network

SUMAN SACHDEVA
Education Specialist, UNICEF Sierra Leone
2015 Echidna Global Scholar, Brookings

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Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:00:52] Good morning, good afternoon and good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. On behalf of the Center for Universal Education and the Global Economy and Development Program at Brookings, I am very pleased to kick off this third event in a three-part series in partnership with the Yidan Prize Foundation, exploring emerging and timely topics in education likely to have deep implications for decades to come.

With the world focused on pandemic recovery and a myriad of sociopolitical challenges on the horizon, now is the time to discuss, analyze and, when appropriate, seize upon emerging opportunities in education. Our event series brings together Yidan prize laureates, members of the Yidan Council of Luminaries, education experts from the Center for Universal Education, and other leaders in global education. Our first event, which took place on June 21st, explored how to ensure

refugee children can access education and sought to find more sustainable system level solutions for the hundreds of thousands of young people forcibly on the move around the world.

Our second event, “Education meets the metaverse,” held on June 28th, featured a lively discussion on the intersection of technology, innovation and education, focused on how to bring our best understandings of how young people learn into the metaverse while it is still under development. And if you missed either of these events, we invite you to watch the recordings which you can find on the event page at Brookings dot edu.

And today we've come to our third event in which we will focus on another critical issue: learning priorities in a post-COVID era. In the midst of the enormous challenges to education across the globe, both caused by and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, there has been vigorous international debate about where we should focus our focus, our attention and our resources as we move forward. Should education systems prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy, or aim to develop broader holistic skills? Or is this really a false dichotomy? This debate has become especially heated as evidence continues to emerge around learning loss, especially in math and literacy, around the crisis of young people's wellbeing and social emotional development, around the inequalities that have only deepened in our education systems, and around growing movements for racial, gender and climate justice.

Before we get started, I would like to extend our appreciation to the Yidan Prize Foundation for its support of the Center for Universal Education, making it possible to co-host these events. I would also like to reiterate Brookings's commitment to quality, independence, and impact in all of our work. Throughout this discussion, we invite you to share your questions and comments on Twitter using the hashtag Brookings Yidan Prize or to email them to events at Brookings edu.

And now, without further delay, I am pleased to introduce our guests for today's discussion and invite them to join me on screen. Joining us from Delhi, India, Rukmini Banerji, CEO of Pratham Education Foundation, and 2021 Yidan Prize for Education Development Laureate. Esteban Moctezuma, Ambassador of Mexico to the United States and former secretary of public education in Mexico, who joins us today from Washington, D.C..

Esteban Moctezuma [00:03:55] Good morning.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:03:56] Good morning, Lynda Eunice Nakaibale, program associate at Raising Teenagers Uganda, founder of Tujifunze Africa, and member of UNESCO's

SDG4 Youth Network, who joins us today from Uganda. Suman Sachdeva, education specialist with UNICEF in Sierra Leone and a member of our CUE family as a 2015 Echidna global scholar at Brookings who's joining us from Freetown. And I'm Jennifer Donahue, a senior fellow and deputy director of the Center for Universal Education at Brookings. It's great to have you all here today, looking forward to this conversation together.

And I thought maybe we could kick off our conversation by talking about learning priorities and what each of you have learned through your work about how local communities are prioritizing learning at this moment, and what might be some of the tensions or challenges that arise in that prioritization. So, Lynda, I would love to start with you. You've been really active in ensuring the youth voice and perspective have been included in the conversation around learning priorities, both locally in Uganda and globally. Maybe you could share with us a bit about what you learned in the process of helping develop the youth platform that was recently presented at the Transforming Education Summit at the United Nations. And just help us understand, what are young people talking about in terms of education priorities and how might this vary regionally or really, what are you finding there?

Lynda Eunice Nakaibale [00:05:25] Well, thank you so much. Perfect. The lesson I learned during the grassroots consultations for the youth declaration for transforming education is that the education crisis is a global crisis, and that it wasn't only limited to Uganda; all over the world, youth demanded for a change, for a change in education systems and the curriculum to suit the ever-changing world of life, work, and to ensure that there is sustainable development. And of course, in terms of education priorities. Young people in Uganda and globally are asking for investment in foundational learning. We have young people in Uganda that cannot read, write, or count. But these are young people that are supposed to grow up into developmental people that are able to contribute to development. So there is that gap in foundation climbing and young people are demanding for that.

They are also a demanding competence-based learning, as opposed to learning that focuses on passing exams and tests. I went through such an education system that was focusing on just passing tests or an exam instead of focusing on nurturing my competencies, my skills. So young people are saying, no, we need a change in the education systems. We need learning that focuses on us, developing our talents, developing our gifts, and being able to contribute to development of our

countries and of the world. That demanding of, of course, again, education systems that develop our natural talents, cater to the social emotional needs of learners and provide equal opportunities for learners in all their diversities. In terms of age, children from 5 to 13, doing our grassroots consultations with our youth declaration, illustrated through diagrams that they needed to play. They need to learn through play. And that as well was highlighted in the youth declaration. We cannot learn, young people cannot learn without having play -- to play.

Most of that syllabus is about going to class, studying, and finishing without actually having a component of play. So that was as well highlighted by young people between 5 to 13 years of age. And of course, young people age 14 to 19 demanded for a change in the curriculum to a more practical and hands-on curriculum that enhances skills development. I work with young people in the communities that dropped out of school but are gifted in football and gifted in singing. If the curriculums were able to integrate skills development, it would be great to support learners continue learning, if I may say. So, these are some of the things our young people are demanding: foundational learning, competence-based learning, social emotional [cuts out] learning. Thank you.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:08:10] Thank you so much, Lynda. I think, you know, that really helps to give us an understanding of the comprehensive way that young people are thinking about learning not as an either or, but really this holistic model of learning, very practical, being linked to being able to contribute. And I think really importantly, one thing that you've added to this conversation for us today is not just the what young people should be learning but how. And and I think, you know, keeping that in mind around the play base, the practical base, the competency base will be really important in helping to guide our conversation today. So thank you so much for for that. Rukmini, I'd love to turn to you now. And you know, over the years with Pratham, have worked really closely with families and communities with a focus on systemically marginalized and under-resourced contexts. So what have you been seeing and hearing as learning priorities for these communities moving out of COVID?

Rukmini Banerji [00:09:08] Thank you, Jennifer. So I think that during the pandemic – and India had one of the longest closure of schools – I think everybody had a chance to sort of rethink and rework in their own both minds and families and communities what this whole business of education is about. And I think Lynda's comments about what youth want, and the age range at which, starting from kids who are today in first and second grade who've never been to school or had any exposure

all the way up to those who have had several years, I think there is a whole variety of reactions and learnings. I just think that, you know, given that we have a short time here, I felt that one of the things I think everybody learned was that engaging with kids and staying with high motivation was a very important ingredient into this whole learning process.

A second one, not just the what and the how, but the who. I think across the board, many different types of people were interacting with children during the pandemic, during school closures and family members, siblings, neighbors, friends, were a very important part of sort of people who stepped in. And I think the third thing that probably everybody will agree with, and I think Lynda mentioned that already, is that while academic or school type learning may have taken a hit, I think children learned many other things, including seeing how adults in their families and communities coped with disruption, coped with loss, coped with all kinds of things that were perhaps happening for the first time in these communities.

So coming out of all of this, firstly, I have to say that when schools finally opened in India, I think there was a real joy about being in school that teachers, children, parents, everybody expressed. And I think it reminded everyone why we all go to school. It's not only for learning outcomes, it's for so many more things. And I wish that we could keep that joy alive because we know what it's like when you can't go to school for two years. Two other things I think would be important to mention here. One is, during the pandemic, India had a, India launched a new education policy. And in some ways I think and I don't know what the thinking behind that and the timing was, but it also gave people an opportunity to digest and absorb what the policy is saying. One of the most important things, according to us in Pratham and by the way, Pratham means primary, so we are looking a lot at pre-primary and primary, was that we need to really strengthen the basic foundations of learning in the early years and by the time we get to grade three, how can we make sure that kids have a strong, you know, a strong base from which to build? So since schools have opened, and since, you know, things have begun to function across the board, in most states, we see a lot of movement on this early years of how to strengthen it, which would be a high priority as we came out of COVID, because these are kids who, we need to rethink these early years in a different way because most kids, even in grade three, haven't had that much schooling till now.

But I think a couple of other things that we are seeing is variations in basic academic subjects has increased a lot, both within the classroom and across locations. And so if you have a system

where we were operating earlier with kind of one size fits all in terms of curriculum or curricular expectations, we need to modify that to say that, you know, different groups, different locations have been affected in different ways. And so the starting point is quite different, whether you look at it at a micro level or a macro level. And therefore there is a need to reengage with where the kids are and try to devise solutions moving forward. Because I think this gap was such a long and, you know, big disruption.

There is also a natural tendency to want to do business as usual quickly get back to pretending or behaving as if the world is, you know, back to normal. And I think we need to resist that a little bit because there are things that we need to take from what we learned in the pandemic further into when now things are much more possible to do. And the second is that we need to really look at where we need to start. And I would say that in higher grades, it's harder because you are closer to high stakes examinations. You know, there's worry among teenagers about whether they've missed out on some major opportunities. Whereas in the younger grades, there is time to do that. So even within the same schools system, I think the pressures are at different points. So my overall view would be remember, engaging with everyone is important at whatever level we are working, and starting from where students are and working our way through is really important as well. If we want to get back on a new foundation.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:14:29] Thank you, Rukmini. I'm taking with me too that word that you brought in again at the beginning and the end around engagement and how important that is to really be engaging people, to move away from this sort of one size fits all model that you mentioned. And I also love the word you used about the we need to get back. We should resist resisting that urge to sort of get back and just, you know, return to what we were doing before. But really to rethink, to start with people where they are as we move forward. So thank you so much for sharing that with us.

And Esteban, I'd like to turn to you now. And, you know, as minister of education in Mexico, which is one of the world's largest education systems, with over 36 million students in primary and secondary schooling, which comprise a multitude of experiences and contexts and also significant challenges in terms of social and educational inequities. You know, you were there, present, right in the middle of it all when COVID hit in 2020. And I'm curious to know, what what did you learn from prioritizing or sorry about prioritizing learning for such a diverse and large population through that experience? And I'd actually like to add on a question that we received from one of our attendees

around, you know, in terms of learning both what you learned that we should do, what policy and ministries can do, but also what education ministries might stop doing or what they should try to avoid doing in order to create space for local learning priorities to be defined, designed and delivered.

Esteban Moctezuma [00:15:58] Thank you very much, Jennifer, for the invitation to participate in this dialog. And I'm very pleased to be among these wonderful, committed women with education. It was very hard to be in that position in that precise moment. Because many decisions had to be taken and they had to be taken without any previous experience; the world didn't have in a very, very long time pandemic as the one we had. So the the Ministry of Education had to start to see how to continue the children's learning process, but without a present, a present day experience in the school. So distant learning, it was not a muscle that was exercised in the educational system. So what we had to do is to think first in in the children and then in the teachers because, as you well know, in Mexico, we have a very well developed educational system that is like a first world class system and a very underdeveloped system, which is like an underdeveloped educational system, living together in our country. So we very fast had to analyze what would be the tools in order to deliver the the learning process.

But the learning process was mainly looked as the bond of teachers with the students. So we didn't want that bond to be broken. What we wanted to do is to see that school is where the teacher and the and the student are present, not the building. So we started analyzing what were the tools that the family had in order to deliver education. And most of the families in Mexico, 96% of the families had TV. So we started to build up a very strong TV educational program. And this was really, really a something that took a great effort from the ministry because we didn't have that experience and we didn't develop every one of the of the materials. What we wanted to do is to take materials that already existed and put it in a package that could be sent to the teachers in order to to deliver it to every grade education. After that, we had also a new curricula for the digital education and then radio. And for those that didn't have even radio, we delivered some printed materials. So what we found is that most of the children continue studying.

But there is one thing that I think is very positive. Because what you read about the educational experience during the pandemic is only the costs and the negative side, which is this learning loss. But also, there were experiences, as Rukmini said, that we need to remember and not forget. One of those is that teachers learned to have a personalized relationship with each student.

When they were in the in the classroom, and you remember that in Mexico, teachers are taught to be maestro frente a un grupo, teachers in front of a group. And so all their experience was to have a learning process for the group, not for individuals. And this thing that Lynda already said about developing personal skills and talent in each person, was something that I believe was rescued by the teachers because they started to know the experience of every one of their pupils. So they started to learn that some children had all the support of the families. And so they were doing great and some others had really a problem with their families, and they didn't make it so well. So as they started learning these differences between their own pupils, they started to learn that personalized education was something that they should study and develop much more in their in their pedagogical scheme.

The other thing, what Rukmini said about this approach to micro and macro experiences, is also a very important thing, because what happened was that the teachers got empowered. So as the central authorities had to rely on the teachers in order to deliver information, they were empowered. And so something came to education, which was creativity. You couldn't really be more aware of how so many teachers and schools started developing new ways to connect with their with their students and new ways to connect with the families. And also, that's the third thing, which I think is very important, that at last, families started to participate. When I started to work in the ministry, many, many teachers told me, and this was a general, a petition, ask parents to help us, because they go out to work and they leave their children at school. And they want us not just to give them education, but also to to to have all the process of the children's formation. And we don't have the time or the capabilities to do all, the family and home has to step in into the educational scheme. And this is something that also Rukmini said that children learn too many other things, but also families learned that they were part of the education of children. And so this participation, it's something that was renewed, and we need to keep it in place.

So I think that these are part of the of the process that we have to see together with the negative parts. And one thing that I think we have to take care of is our conversation, because we speak very openly about the educational system, about the crisis, about that the crisis in learning about the failure of school, and children are listening. And the next step is children go to school. So so we think that we have to include children in the conversation in order to make them more hopeful about their commitment on going to school.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:24:19] Now. Thank thank you, Esteban. I think those are great pieces. And I'm actually going to pick up pick up on several of them as we continue the conversation. But really, you know, this piece around the move to that both you and Rukmini and Lynda all mentioned around a personalized learning relationship, and the importance of creating space for for teachers and children to have that type of relationship to have creativity in that relationship and families as well, to be engaged in that process. And on your last point, I couldn't agree more. And I say this as a parent, and as someone who works in education around, you know, how do we talk about education? How do we maintain that joy and that engagement that Rukmini talked about by involving by involving young people.

Suman, I want to turn to you now as as a researcher, as someone who's worked in education for many years in different contexts, currently an education specialist and UNICEF now in Sierra Leone during one of, again, these most challenging moments in education. How have you been working both with the government and with other groups on the ground to understand local learning priorities? And and how has research and evidence really been a part of that journey for you all?

Suman Sachdeva [00:25:27] Thank you, Jane, for your questions. And I must begin by saying that I am really privileged to be part of this panel and share thoughts among this esteemed panelist. I would like to begin by saying that actually the face of learning strategies is a very dynamic space. I would say that it's not linked to only post COVID pre-COVID or something, but it is something that we need to keep on addressing, identifying and changing as we go on with education. I also like the piece that Rukmini said that schools was very important when children went back and we had I remember our conversation when Rebecca Winthrop from Brookings came to India sharing what works for girls, looking at leapfrog inequalities. And there was a debate happening, why do we need school? Education can be given from home, you just need digital reading and things like that. But I think COVID has brought us back to the reality well, yes, it's much more school is much more a space to do that.

So how did we go back go in understanding local priorities at that time when COVID was at its peak, was done again through some digital means but also having some kind of a discussion and getting all the pieces pulled back together at our level to sit and analyze. So to my mind, generating and analyzing evidence is extremely important to understand the local learning priorities. So during COVID, we got voices from grassroots, from various stakeholders, young children, young people,

teachers, parents, everybody, we used things like you poll, we used different ways of getting this information. Now that we had realized that well, yes, we are looking at learning priorities which are emerging very clearly people are talking about the usual, which we all would know, because even prior to COVID, we had issues in terms of poor learning outcomes, especially in foundational learning. But during COVID, children were absolutely not confident about themselves and they were really struggling with foundational learning. But at the same time, the revelation was that there were learning priorities, even for teachers, things had changed. Teachers also were talking about what they would want to be learning, now, how do we they would be tackling. So it was very interesting.

The second piece that was interesting was to understand, to realize that when it's beyond reading, beyond numeracy, beyond subjects, it's all about how are we coping. What are those enablers which will help us to learn? And that's where I think this was kind of a very, very stuck understanding and recognition that learning priorities are important, they vary, and they apply to children, teachers, kids, everybody. Once we had this data, we also used this opportunity during COVID. As many were saying, we sat with this data and started analyzing it, which normally we never do. We collect data, we're always in a hurry to plan programs and see how we go forward. But now we had luxury of time. We started looking at analyzing the education sector analysis we undertook, we did an education sector plan, one of the very leading document which was just launched, we did an out of school study, we did a whole lot of data. And I'm saying we is the government, but also all the partners, civil society organizations, everybody jumped into that and we all came together and that was the beauty in Sierra Leone. We started looking at the data together, we developed the education sector plan, looking at what data was telling us and what the voices were telling us. Interestingly, we found that it's very complex. The priorities vary across age group, both for learning and both for all kind of social emotional needs, etc. And that is important when you're looking at content and curriculum. So that was a very, very interesting thing that we found. So we had a number of consultations and we put those, used all the research and evidence pieces and being a researcher, it was a treat for me looking at the data coming, quality quantitative data, and see how we could analyze and look at what needs to be done for the country. And then Transforming Education Summit was planned and was going to happen, that actually kicked off lots of things in the country, many countries, and we were forced to look at more seriously, identify one priority reform, around learning.

So all this data, evidence, research contributed to that space. I would like to also, Jen, add here, it was not just about what learning priorities emerged from this data, but for who what mattered. Like for our country, there is a rampant issue around pregnant girls and parent girls, parent learners. So that emerged so strongly that this this particular group needs to be addressed much more strongly than we thought otherwise. Children with disability came up very, very strongly. So, I mean, in conclusion, I would say that, you know, all the children, but you also need to look at who needs what. So it cannot be again one size fits all. And lastly, I would like to say that creating this evidence, creating and analyzing evidence is very important. But dissemination is also important. But these are not sufficient pieces. You really need to choose the right platforms. You need to really identify key influencers, key decision makers to use this evidence, to use this data, and actually come up with what learning priorities are. You might struggle, with say, ten pieces which have emerged, but ultimately those are the influencers, power decision makers who actually take a decision for the country. So that's something that we realized while we did this whole lot of exercise over the last one year. Thank you Jen.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:31:21] Suman. Thank you so much. I think you gave us a really great entryway, a view of what that process look like, looks like. Right, of really trying to understand and use data to understand learning priorities where for whom, what kind of priorities, how they might vary, how power can play into that definition of learning priorities as well. And really, the complexity is around developing, you know, truly, truly localized learning priorities that are relevant, you know, to particular, particular communities. And I want to pick up on that a bit in terms of how we respond. So one is sort of how do we learn about what learning priorities might be? And two, we have had several questions that have come in here around, you know, with these pieces that you've all talked about in terms of, you know, being responsive, being engaging, really listening to, you know, where people are in the moment, being personalized, all of that. How can we respond effectively, equitably in culturally responsive ways and inclusive ways and fun ways? You know, going back to to what Lynda said at the beginning around how children also want to learn through play and other means.

So I'd like us to take some time to just think about and talk about how you know what what you all have been doing, what practices you've seen, what you've learned about, you know, responding to learning priorities. And and Rukmini, I'd love to start with you because at Pratham you are the developers of the teach at the right level approach which really is one of the approaches that

has been taken up in contexts around the globe as as one possible answer to some of the current learning challenges. And I would love to hear from, from sort of the creator of where it all began, what you see as both the potential of that model to address some of these local priorities and perhaps some of the possible limitations or things that we might look out for in bringing teach at the right level to other communities.

Rukmini Banerji [00:33:18] Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about what I love to talk about. I think that we needed something that would help us help kids get back on track even before COVID. But perhaps the pandemic provides an opportunity, like we've all been saying, to rethink and reconfigure our education systems in a different way. So I can only speak for India, but it looks like some of these issues are relevant elsewhere as well. But we have a very age grade linear system. If you are six years old, you're in first grade, if you are ten years old, you are in fifth grade. And every grade has some expectations which at least in in countries like India, assume that you have sort of dealt with satisfactorily, dealt with whatever was expected of you in the previous grade.

Now, if you actually look at the data from years even before COVID, we do this big survey every year called the Annual Status of Education Report, the ASER report, which basically looks at basic reading and math. And we will see that in many states, in many districts, kids in third grade, were at grade level or perhaps only like 25 or 30%, which meant that by the time you would spend three years in school already many, many children had been left behind. But because the system moves in this age grade way, the hope of catching up, there wasn't any flexibility in the system to help kids catch up. And so teaching at the right level, in a way, I mean, it's very common sense. That's exactly what we do with our kids at home. You figure out where the child is getting stuck or needs help and move from there onwards. I think teaching at the right level was a way in which to say that without basic reading, without basic numbers sense, basic ability to do operations, you can't do all the things that come ahead. So if for whatever reason, you haven't been able to acquire these by grade three or so, let us take time to help you, you know, catch up. And. But what that requires, at least in places like India, is put the curriculum aside for a few hours a day or for a few months of the year to enable this catch up. What it requires is a different way of assessment.

In many countries, assessments are done with pen and paper, you know, even if you're in an early grade. But if you can't read, you can't actually do pen and paper assessment. It needs to be something in which you can hear children read, understand how they are computing and so on. So it

requires a different approach to assessment. You have textbooks for your grade, but if you are not at that grade and you need something basic, kids have dignity. You don't want to be in fourth grade and be reading a first grade textbook. So you need something else that looks, you know, not that you are being targetedw for some reason, but just help you come back and catch up and so on and so forth. And, you know, all our teachers have been trained to be, you know, teaching at the grade level. So how do you then help the whole system move away from that, even if it's for a brief time to teach in some different way?

Now, as we come out of COVID and we look at these big variations, both in the classroom or across regions, you kind of really need to start where the children are, understand where the children are, and then move from there upwards. And in many cases, children were not at the grade level even before COVID and likely to have been lowered, you know, lower now. So you also need quick wins because you want to bring the energy back to everybody. You want teachers to feel that their work is making a big difference. You want parents to feel the kids are back in school and they're beginning to gain again. And most importantly, as Esteban said, remember what the children want. They want to feel like they are back and progress is happening. So there is some low hanging fruit that I think needs to be leveraged. And at some level, if you are seven or eight or older, and you use some appropriate methods, then learning to read or learning to do basic math actually is that low hanging fruit that brings the energy, the positive energy back to being able to do all of this.

But as I said, it is this teaching at the right level of growth sometimes needs you to depart from what you have been trained and told how to do. It needs you to depart from saying it's okay, ggrade level stuff will come later, but if the foundation is not strong then it can't happen. And I think the interest we are seeing across in many countries is partly because I think there's an openness after going through the pandemic to try new things and there is an acceptance, I think also that there is issues with learning that we need to help children. I'd like to use the word recovery. I think many people are using it rather than loss or deficit or whatever to, you know, quickly climb up the ladder. And so, you know, the limitations are exactly what makes it effective, which is that you have to accept that there is a new way of doing things and then move on a little bit.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:38:39] Yea, that's great. Thank you, Rukmini. And I think to that point, too, about the limitation is that you need to depart from what you've been trained, how the system has been organized, often what you've been told to do, what you're held accountable for. And

I think that probably goes back to the question earlier around what can a policymaker, what should policymakers stop, stop doing right in order to support teachers and children in these relationships at the school level. A lot of that has to do with what you mentioned around assessment systems and other things that create that space. Right, how can we create space for local actors to really respond to learning needs?

And in that relationship, that personalized relationship. I wanted to sort of talk speak a bit to young children. We've had questions that have come in, both for young children and for for youth. And so I want to sort of direct a question first to Suman to you, I know you've worked more with with younger populations of children, but, you know, really, you know, there's a special concern among our attendees around the experience for young people. And this is either for those who should have been in school in their early years that were not or were in sort of less effective learning experiences outside of school or those who missed entering that school on time altogether. And so just to ask you, you know, in the work that you've been doing recently, how have you been working to meet the learning needs of these young, young children in particular?

Suman Sachdeva [00:40:07] Yeah, thank you, Jen. If you were to look at young children, I would say that in this country, but also looking at young people both so the learning needs and people who've missed the bus (phonetic), these are two focal areas for us as well. It says it's a it's a very, very concerning area. And you do realize that a lot of children who come, they have either been dropped out, never gone to school, etc . And the country is very cognizant of that fact. We were still grappling with the learning outcomes at the primary level, and there's a way to go to look at how we can take action for learning recovery.

Pratham have been very kindly collaborating with us on initiating these teaching at the right level project here. But but but the West Africa situation in a country like Sierra Leone is a big challenge in terms of technology. And we were looking at distance mode of supporting our faster trainers and going ahead with teachers while we realized that we could create materials and take it forward. We have been a little slow in that process, but this shows that definitely the government has an intent. They are looking at this space more seriously than ever before. So that is something that we would be looking at.

The second thing is that the as per the policy, we never had a policy in which pre-primary was mandatory for all children. And this is the first time last year since COVID hit, probably against

sitting in closed doors. Everybody analyzed and said, well, hey, this is time, let's make it mandatory. So at least one year of preschool is a huge achievement for us. And moving forward, that is going to be extremely important because children will not go to school without having their preschool exposure. And another thing that we realized was that we need to start working more and more on learning recovery and we need to do an analysis of for who. So this is something that the country did in terms of doing a huge piece on out of school, out of school study. Who are the out of school, what are they learning, what are the. And they were startling facts in terms of how learning has been impacted, who are those who are out of school. And right now we are in the process, we have developed an out of school strategy, but the process is in terms of implementing that. So country has been seriously looking at those initiatives as well. So I must say that this is commitment and we are moving towards it, but there's a long way to cover. Thank you.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:42:30] Thank you so much. And Lynda, I would love to jump over to you now. I know that you've been work working with a focus on sort of older young people and teenagers and working closely with teenagers and youth and wondering what you've been doing, what you've learned about what works, what's effective and working and responding equitably to young people's learning at that stage. And. And would love to tag on a question about technology here and sort of the the gaps. We've had a few questions about, you know, how can we bridge learning gaps in areas where technology not be a viable option? So if you want to talk about some of the creative ways you've been working in contexts that don't have access to technology, that would be great.

Lynda Eunice Nakaibale [00:43:18] Okay. Thank you so much for that wonderful question. I would like to start by saying that one of the lessons I've learned really in regards to working with young people and teenagers is that young people and teenagers are not homogeneous. They have their vast learning needs. And that means that there's no one size fits all solution to addressing their education needs. And that requires an intersectional approach. It's supporting young people's learning at this stage as teenagers, as, as youth. I'll share my experience I work with an organization called Raising Teenagers Uganda, and we work with girls in and out of school and girls with disabilities, of course, who have different learning needs again.

So what we do as an organization is design targeted interventions to address specific challenges. For example, we are training girls with disabilities in the refugee settlement of Nakivale in

making reusable sanitary pads because we identify that many girls with disabilities drop out of school due to period poverty. So we are training them to make reusable sanitary pads, pads and also make pads for sale for them to menstruate safely, stay in school but also earn money. We're also training them, skilling them in tailoring to be able to make clothes, tailor clothes and make money out of out of that. And it has really been helpful they're now able to learn a skill but also able to stay in school. You make pads for sale but also your own use.

For girls out-of-school who are child mothers, we are aware that COVID 19 exposed so many girls to GBV, to child marriage, teenage pregnancies. So many girls got pregnant and gave birth. So to support girls out of school that gave birth, we formed community clubs for these child mothers. So what we do is train them in making liquid soap and making candles. That way they're able to sell these products, earn money and take care of their children, but also realize that there are gaps in regards to how they take care of their money or how they run their businesses. So what we did, we trained them in basic literacy skills. How do you count, how would you count your money when somebody when you somebody comes to buy a product for 5000 and they've given you 10,000, which change you give back.

So that has really helped them run successful businesses, but also taught them how to speak, how do you communicate, how do you negotiate. In case somebody comes to buy your product, do you sell it to them at a cheaper price because want them to buy or, you know, negotiating prices? And that has really, really helped them a lot for girls with disabilities. Again, I need to emphasize that we are partnering with organizations to provide assistive technology for these girls. In terms of technology.

But before I get into that, I need to emphasize that gender and disabilities affect education, access to education for girls and boys, of course. But many girls in Uganda that have disabilities are not able to access education. And so we are demanding a change in that, we want education systems that meet the needs of everyone leaving no one behind. But in terms of technology, I work in communities where there's no electricity, there's no solar panels. You know that would be an alternative, electricity, but that is not existing. So what we did, for example, during COVID 19, we realized that some students from well-to-do families, from international schools and of course, some from government schools were able to continue learning during COVID-19 through television and of course, radio, applications with their tablets, computers like Zoom.

However, many children in the communities I work in, in Wakiso, in the Kampala district, were not able to learn because they don't even have electricity, they don't have a television and all these gadgets. So what we did as an organization is to run a project called the Home Learning Project. We partnered with teachers in the communities to continue teaching these children physically. So what we did is distribute material in the newspapers provided by the government, the learning materials during COVID 19, distributed them to the communities, and the teachers were able to facilitate learning. And this this material was in line with the syllabus for Uganda so that's where children connected to learning, not learning online, but were able to learn physically with these teachers facilitating learning, using the learning materials that we distributed.

But I need to emphasize the fact that the most sustainable way to bridge learning gaps besides technology is that we need to set up schools. We need to take learning to the communities where these children are. Many children in Uganda drop out of school also because of the long distance, a child has to walk miles to get to school. And within, and for example, girls, when they're walking at school, they walk past the men who sexually harass them, now they get pregnant and drop out of school. So we are saying if you are not able to provide technology now, set up the schools in the communities, let them be accessible, train teachers, provide learning materials. We need storybooks, textbooks, but also equip schools in terms of infrastructure. There's need for toilets in the schools, make the learning environment accessible, appealing to learners. And I think that's one way of bridging the learning gaps, really. If there's not technology, then make basic education accessible to all. Thank you.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:48:35] Thank you so much, Lynda. You know, so many, so many really important points within what you're saying, around, you know, meeting people where they are, meeting children where they are. And sometimes that means, like, how do we get to where they are right, travel to where they are, taking learning to the communities where the children are, that inclusiveness and really responding to everyone. You know, I think the work that you're doing is so important in terms of how it's truly responsive. Right. It's trying to understand what do people need, what do people want? And then trying to design around that and systems of support for that rather than coming to tell them, this is what this is what we have, but really, you know, learning and responding to them.

I want to go back in that sense to, you know, Linda, the type of work that that you've been talking about. And and also so Sumana and Rukmini, in terms of how do we respond to children, how do we have that personalized relationship and turn back to you Esteban. Because I know that that you as a policymaker and again, have a very large and diverse school system, you know, have to try to think about how do we make that happen in policy. Like it's often easier to do that at a programmatic level that we can do that in one community or a few communities. But how do you do that across an entire country is a whole different question. And we'd love to hear from your perspective in particular, talking about teachers and what you mentioned earlier around the creativity of teachers to think about, you know, how from your perspective and experience, how can policy engage teachers, engage them more effectively in both the conversation around learning priorities and engage them and their creativity in really developing and implementing practices that can respond to those very unique and dynamic learning priorities in the communities they work in.

Esteban Moctezuma [00:50:32] You're asking me, or Lynda.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:50:34] I'm sorry. I'm asking, I'm asking you. Yes.

Esteban Moctezuma [00:50:36] It's okay, because you were asking Lynda something. Well, I what you said before about thinking out of the box and to realize that the traditional educational system needs to be reviewed from the bottom up, it's very, very important. And I believe that the standard education approach, the thing that really blew up with the with the pandemic and that there is a huge opportunity in order to move and change. Regarding technology, we started in Mexico with about 27% of the students using digital devices to have their classes. And after one year, they, this figure grew to 73%. So it was a huge change in digital education in Mexico during the first year of the pandemic. I cannot tell you about the rest, but the first year of the pandemic and there are some important developments after the the pandemic, which is that many, many young students needed to start to work during the pandemic because of the economic crisis.

And so you will find that there is a lot of people that didn't come back to school because they started another path in their lives, which was a working path. And this is something that wanted to be tackled by a policy set up by the government, government mainly in in in college education, which is to give a scholarship to every every student in order to have some pocket money in there for them to use and and not to to be as needed economically. And I think that that policy was very powerful to maintain many of these young people in the school or coming back to it.

Now, another issue is that poverty grew in Mexico after the pandemic. And so you have nutrition problems. And if you have nutrition problems, you have learning problems. So one thing that we defined was to strengthen the schools in order to deliver and give to the children breakfast and lunch. This was the project of keep, growing the full time schools, which we call Escuela de Tiempo completo, which didn't happen. And this is one of the reasons that made me resign to the ministry, because if you don't have budgets, you don't really have a priority in the sector, and we really needed budgets in order to give a step forward after the pandemic.

And one thing that I would like to raise is that, I agree absolutely that you need to be very focused on reading and math. But the way to do it is I think that is something we have to think about. We started a very strong music project and we started developing children's orchestras and you could see that children learned very quick to read music and they learned teamwork and they learned discipline and they learned many things, and their self-esteem grew very, very sharply. We had 30,000 children in the orchestras, which also were dropped by the budget. And so that was part of the problem that I just mentioned. But I believe that this approach to learning, which is something that Linda said at the beginning, is a very important one, because you don't tell the truth and you have to read and write. You tell them the purpose of reading and the purpose of writing. And if you started focusing on the purpose and you find that a boy likes nature, maybe you go out with him and tell him how many trees you see around and you start counting the trees.

So instead of just having a standard education in math, you start putting the experience of learning to the children. That's something that we were discussing at the ministry after the pandemic. And I don't want to leave mentioning that children and parents had a very strong emotional problem after the pandemic, and many children are attached to their families. And and this is something and many teachers also, they have a lot of emotional problems. This is also something that in the recovery effort has to be tackled.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:57:04] Okay. Excuse me. Thank you, Esteban. I think you pointed again to lots of different areas where we could continue the conversation. And personally, I'm seeing we only have a few minutes left, so I would like to turn maybe, Suman, Rukmini, Lynda, if each of you could take one minute to give sort of a closing thought, you know, maybe to address something that we haven't addressed yet, we haven't talked about social emotional learning, and in particular, we haven't talked really about community engagement. We haven't talked about what global actors might

do. So many topics still on the table that we could continue for another hour. But as a closing thought, what might that be? And Suman, I'll start with you one minute.

Suman Sachdeva [00:57:42] Okay. I don't know a minute, but I'll just share a story. I was trying to go for a focus group discussion with some teachers, and I was trying to find my way. And I was looking around for an (inaudible). And I stopped at a shop and old woman comes out and I said, Can you please direct me to this (inaudible)? She said she calls her little kid, Lamin, come and tell her. Lamin comes and says, Yes, madam. I said, I need to go to (inaudible). Okay, no problem. Go straight, turn around. And there is a Chinese embassy, you know, Chinese embassy, it looks like China. So you stop there and there's a security guard outside, please, asking him where (inaudible) is and he'll guide you. And I really laughed and I said, hey, what's your name? And I'm very impressed. I go to the focus group and the teachers mentioned I was just hearing the story and she said, oh, he's one of us, he's one of my kid studies in class four, and that's the education we want. And she said, well, it's beyond subjects. We try and provide opportunities, platforms to build confidence, to build the skills that we're all talking about. It's much, much beyond education. So I'll end here when we're talking about learning priorities, let's make it show that they are relevant and they are productive and even life saving. So thank you.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:58:58] Thank you. Suman, that's great. Rukmini, over to you for one minute.

Lynda Eunice Nakaibale [00:59:02] So in my one minute, I'd say that many bad things happened during the pandemic, but some good things as well. And one of it was conversations like these, you know, to be able to talk to somebody from Mexico and Uganda and Sierra Leone and America all in one conversation. And I think this possibility of sharing learnings and things that work from both within our own countries as well as across, is something that we must still hang on to, whether it is for teachers or for parents or for policymakers. Sharing in much easier and very, very cheap ways has become the norm. And so big thanks to people like yourself who made all this possible.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [00:59:51] Thank you so much Rukmini. And Lynda, we'll wrap up with you. Your final thoughts.

Lynda Eunice Nakaibale [00:59:57] Wow. In one minute. I have so much to say. Oh, okay. But one of the things I want to talk about is the role of global actors. I know that the Global

Partnership for Education is funding governments, you know, to implement education projects and programs. But I would like global actors to cooperate, to partner and fund grassroots organizations, youth led initiatives. It's it's us. It's organizations like mine that are doing the work on the grassroots. We are the ones that are working with people directly. So if it's possible, they would fund, partner and collaborate with grassroots organizations. And then finally, I can't leave this call without talking about the youth declaration. I would like to implore every person on this call, whether you are youth or older, to implement the youth declaration for transforming education. It has over 25 bold demands on access to sexual education, access to learning and all the other thematic areas that are very, very key in transforming education. So go ahead, address yourself with the information and implement the Youth Declaration for Transforming Education with and for young people. Thank you.

Jennifer O'Donoghue [01:01:04] Thank you so much, Lynda. Extremely important to remember to remember that and for all of us to support that youth platform. I want to thank all of our guests today, Rukmini Banerji, Esteban Moctezuma, Lynda Nakaibale, Suman Sachdeva. To those of you who submitted your questions and a huge thank you to all of you for joining us today for what we hope was an engaging and thought provoking conversation. I know it's a conversation that could continue for for hours and months and hopefully years to come. We encourage you to continue the conversation on Twitter using the hashtag Brookings Yidan Prize. And we hope to see you again soon. Thank you so much.

Suman Sachdeva [01:01:37] Thank you.