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The Future of Education Depends on 'Operationalising' Dignified Learning



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Well into 2023, the state of basic education remains complex. World leaders, policy-makers, educators, parents, and learners all feel the strain put on children's education. Before the pandemic, we already had high learning poverty (i.e., children unable to read a simple text by age ten) with 57 per cent in low- and middle-income countries. Now, some [estimate](#) an additional 72 million primary-school aged children have fallen into learning poverty, increasing the rate to 70 per cent!

As school systems and communities around the world grapple with remediation and the future of education, one universal truth remains and must guide our decision-making; quality. Education is a fundamental right for every child. That inherent right transcends economics, race, gender, language, conflict and crisis.

To realise a future where all children exercise this right, we must create localised learning systems that are scalable across contexts. Effective materials development and supply chains, teacher support and coaching, lesson plans and assessments, and meeting





basic needs like nutrition and safety are essential. Just as important as this is human connection – which is critical for young learners to appreciate their self-worth and the increased opportunities education provides. Sustainable, dignified learning systems are the only way to solve the ever-widening learning gap and is the best way in which young learners can recognise their rights and abilities to maximise the power of learning.

What do we mean by dignified learning?

Systems affording children dignity by acknowledging their diversity, their need for social and emotional support to lessen the effects of chronic or toxic stress, and their learning outside of school are more likely to sustain positive learning outcomes at scale. The combination of ensuring

barriers between home language and language of instruction are overcome through well-designed curricula, accessible hardware (e.g., hard copy materials, radios, televisions or mobile phones), and a motivated educator who is also present (e.g. a trained teacher, community advocate or family member) and prepares a child not only with the skills they need, but also with the treatment they deserve.

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Educational spaces, schools and other non-formal settings are places of academic learning where children recognise their self-worth and the value they can bring to themselves, their families and society. Learning systems also need to sustain excellence in the quality of curricula, materials and skill training alongside activities that reinforce the ongoing human connection.

How do we “operationalise” dignified learning?

The United Nations (UN)’s 1989 ratification of the [Convention on](#)

[the Rights of the Child](#) set standards to recognise a child’s right to an education. However, learning systems have not evolved in order to scale quality learning for all children. Quality education, of course, supports strong learning outcomes. Quality learning must also foster children’s recognition that they deserve those outcomes and are equipped to forge their own futures.

Room to Read (www.roomtoread.org) focuses on creating a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality through education. Our programmes have operated across 21 countries in the past two decades and benefitted

more than 32 million children. We scale learning sustainably by designing, implementing and institutionalising effective models for literacy and gender equality. We support governments as they integrate our models into their own.

Humans, especially the youngest, learn best face-to-face with trusted mentors, advocates, role models and peers. [Research shows](#) that we cannot underestimate the importance of [learning through social transmission](#). Education systems have the infrastructure to harness this human connection between teacher and students and

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among peer groups. Room to Read supports teachers in engaging with learners in literacy and life skills activities, and designs and scales quality mentoring for adolescent girls. We create high-quality, proven teacher guides and student books that are organised, scoped and sequenced, allowing teachers to lighten their load, thus increasing time to focus on connecting with students.

Strong teachers and mentors need time to build trust with students. They have knowledge and expertise learners can recognise. They allow learners to ask questions and try new things. They give respectful feedback and encourage their students to experiment and improve their skills. They guide with patience, helping develop grit and perseverance. They create opportunities to laugh and rejoice in learning. They celebrate “aha” moments and affirm their students’ self-worth. They ensure dignified learning.

We know there needs to be more qualified teachers with enough time to address the learning needs of every student. Some students find themselves in classrooms with more than 100 children per teacher. Other children are left out of classrooms completely. If we have any hope of ensuring quality education for all, solutions for dignified learning in informal educational settings are critical. We need to broaden our definition of educators, and encourage those with skills to impart, support to give and who respect every child's dignity.

Responding to disruptions in learning

The pandemic disrupted our understanding of effective learning systems and Room to Read’s implementation model was tested as we could not depend on face-to-face learning in school. Previously celebrated solutions of replacing teachers with technology clearly reduced student enrichment, limiting access to the human connectivity needed for self-development.

We focused on benefitting children wherever they were, so we partnered with local radio and TV stations to broadcast literacy and life skills lessons, and supported parents in engaging their children as they observed those lessons. We delivered hard-copy books and self-guided learning materials to students at home via post offices, cars, camels, and boats. We reinforced human connectivity by building the efficacy of teachers’ and mentors’ work with their students and provided peer support networks in all our programming.

The result? In the first two years of the COVID-19 crisis, when many of the world’s schools closed, Room to Read conducted more than 550,000 individual remote mentoring sessions with girls. Numerous young women reflected that they would have dropped out of school if not for these sessions and their connections with their peers. 95 per cent of the girls on our programme returned to school as schools reopened – even though 50 per cent were at risk of dropout!

Through our literacy work, we benefitted more than 10.5 million children and witnessed children creating libraries in their homes and introducing their parents to the habit of reading. We witnessed dignified and individualised learning continue outside of classrooms. The successful partnerships with governments that ensured the power of learning continued with all the education resources they had available (e.g., national broadcast stations, government digital portals, community outreach networks) and led to exponential growth. These experiences gave us new insights on pathways to scaling dignified learning. Human connectivity made all the difference.

The future of education

When young students with access to locally relevant, high-quality learning materials are encouraged and treated as diverse thinkers, they exercise their right to education and experience dignified learning, placing them on track for improved educational and life outcomes.

I invite education leaders everywhere to make this vision possible by examining their operational models and recognising the value of traditional educational components alongside those that foster learners' sense of self-worth. Nelson Mandela noted: “The true character of society is revealed in how it treats its children?”. Let’s make sure our children are treated with dignity. ■