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THINK-PIECE

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School leadership for resilient education systems

What is the role of professional networks in effective response to crisis?

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Introduction

"I've been a headteacher for 15 years and I have never had a situation that challenged my leadership skills in the way Covid has. And that's been the same for my colleagues.

— Pip Utting, Headteacher, London UK

As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the globe, schools were confronted by a period of exceptional uncertainty. Headteachers, with often minimal experience or training in crisis leadership, needed to react quickly to minimise disruption to learning. Education Development Trust (EDT) has been collaborating with UNESCO-IIEP as a thought leadership partner to consider how education leadership might be strengthened in crisis settings, as part of IIEP's work on crisis-sensitive planning. This think-piece captures learnings from our dialogue to date, including insights shared during a webinar series hosted by IIEP during March 2022. Drawing on EDT's experiences from the UK, Kenya and Rwanda, the following pages offer insights into how collaborative leadership and networks can, and did, contribute to effective crisis response, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.
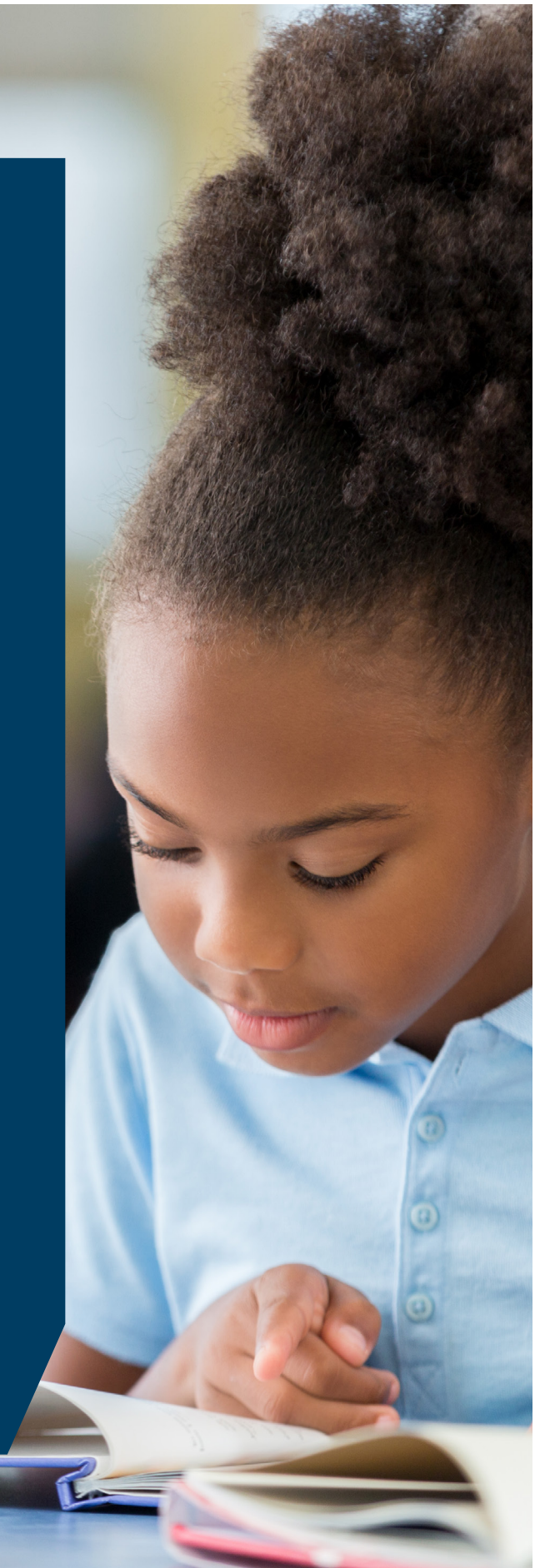
School closures due to Covid-19 had the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged children.[1] The replacement of face-to-face teaching in a classroom setting with virtual teaching and online tools highlighted the existing technology divide, as well as many logistical, equity, protection and safety challenges. On top of this, wider socio-economic impacts resulting from the pandemic have exacerbated teacher shortages and a heightened risk of children, and especially girls, assuming additional household responsibilities to the detriment of their learning.[2] These new circumstances called for rapid decision-making and innovative problem-solving by school leaders to curtail damage to learning, equity and wellbeing.

This think-piece focuses on the potential of leadership networks to strengthen resilience in the face of crisis. Our focus on this topic has been driven by the wider global evidence in this area as well as EDT's practical programme experience.

Attempts to strengthen school leadership often place emphasis on individual professional development and external experts in schools. But some researchers now argue there is too much focus on professionals' 'human capital' – their knowledge and teaching skills, and not enough

on their 'social capital' – that which 'resides in the relationships among teachers'.[8] The effect size of collective teacher efficacy has shown that teachers working together achieve more – especially when all parties believe they are making a difference.[9]

The benefits of collaboration range from improved information-sharing and innovation, better decision making and faster responses, to increased motivation and emotional wellbeing.[10] Professional collaboration can also improve teacher effectiveness and retention, pupil and school outcomes,[11] and can be strengthened through both expert knowledge and strong relationships.[12]

In this think-piece, we look at how pre-existing leadership networks affected school leaders' response during the pandemic. Across three diverse contexts, EDT has been supporting collaborative leadership practices via the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) in the UK, Building Learning Foundations (BLF) in Rwanda, and the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) in Kenya. Each programme has its own distinct structures and characteristics, but all are enabling regular and collaborative meetings between headteachers across 'clusters' of schools.

Why the focus on school leadership?

Evidence shows that quality of leadership can be a critical factor in explaining variation in student outcomes between schools.[3] A study by the World Bank found that the most effective school leaders achieved the equivalent of **three extra months of learning** per year, compared to their least effective counterparts.[4]

Effective headteachers provide a clear vision and sense of direction for their school and focus on the immediate needs of their staff.[5] School leadership is now widely accepted as a powerful determinant of learning outcomes – often described as second only to the quality of teaching.[6]

Some education researchers even argue that leadership is the most important factor because the actions that leaders take work as a catalyst for rapid improvement across the whole school. The Wallace Foundation, for example, found that while the average impact of headteacher contributions was just below that of teachers, their effects are 'larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom.'[7]

[1] Frohn (2021); OECD (2020)
[2] McAleavy et al. (2021), UN (2020)
[3] Education Development Trust (2014)
[4] Leaver (2019)
[5] National College for School Leadership (2001)
[6] VVOB (2021)
[7] Grissom (2021)
[8] Leana (2011)
[9] Hattie (2018)
[10] Solvason (2019)
[11] Ronfeldt (2015); Chapman (2014)
[12] Hargreaves (2018)

By analysing these programmes together, we ask: how can collaborative relationships act as a key building block of resilience and how do networks enhance leadership so that education systems are better able to withstand shocks?
To answer this, we consider five distinct ways in which these networks have built resilience within and between schools during the pandemic.

The main section of this piece explores how the networks: 1) built trust and enabled an agile response; 2) realigned leadership priorities to address equity and wellbeing concerns; 3) harnessed expertise at multiple levels; 4) improved use of data; and 5) built relationships with communities.

This is a joint think-piece between EDT and IIEP-UNESCO and the three case studies have been drawn from a range of literature reviews, existing research reports and case study research which have been compiled using varied methodologies (see Appendix 1). The think-piece is intentionally short, designed to generate reflections and solutions for resilient leadership of education systems.

Resilient education systems

Resilience in the education sector has been described as 'the ability of children, households, communities, and systems to anticipate, prevent, withstand, adapt to, and recover from stresses and shocks while advancing the rights of every child, with special attention to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.'[13]

As part of its thought leadership on education crisis response, UNESCO-IIEP stresses that in addition to addressing equity, gender equality and inclusion, resilient education systems have the potential to improve individual, community, and institutional resilience, and take an 'all-hazards' approach. Ultimately, because they institutionalise crisis risk management into all policies and processes, resilient education systems are sustainable. They promote child rights to education, improve the safety and quality of learning facilities, safeguard education sector investments, and promote a culture of safety and social cohesion.

Education systems are complex, and their effectiveness – or resilience to shocks – cannot be understood simply by breaking down its component parts. Instead, by considering leadership as a process of social influence which emerges through the relationships and interactions of diverse stakeholder groups, and focusing on how different elements function together, it is possible to understand how a system might respond in crisis.[14]

[13] UNICEF (2017)
[14] Uhl-Bien (2006); Harris (2021); Mitchell (2022)

Case Studies

In this section we offer an overview of the collaborative leadership networks facilitated by EDT in three settings, the UK, Rwanda and Kenya, and introduce the role of these networks in responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

01 UK Schools Partnership Programme – peer review and school-to-school support

The Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) is the largest collaborative school improvement programme in the UK. Run by EDT, the programme is now working with more than 1,700 schools nationwide. SPP provides coaching and support to headteachers and other school leaders (including deputy heads and subject leads) from across groups of schools committed to working together to improve their leadership practice.

Through a continuous cycle of self-review, peer review and school-to-school support, SPP school leaders are supported to drive their own improvements in their schools and beyond. For many headteachers, joining the SPP programme was the first time they began exploring school improvement across and between schools, as opposed to looking at their own school in isolation.

In March 2020, schools in the UK were closed, with remote home learning solutions needed in a matter of days, as well as in-school arrangements made for vulnerable children and children of 'key workers'. In an unprecedented move, the government announced that national exams would be cancelled, with grades instead based on teacher predictions and assessment. Subsequent school re-openings, (partial and full) closures, and corresponding guidance varied across the UK's four devolved nations and by year group; nearly two years of significant disruption tested the resilience of schools and leaders.

SPP was well underway before the pandemic, but in response to the crisis, some adjustments were made to ensure its continuation. The programme handbook and training were supplemented with practical advice on how to engage in effective, virtual peer reviews – with suggested tools and strategies to gather evidence and data – and how to facilitate effective improvement workshops online to develop evidence-based improvement strategies. It also provided insights into how to develop a culture of trust, honesty and transparency in a virtual peer review environment. This enabled peer review and school-to-school support to continue despite the distance.

A key result of this pre-existing peer review system was increased openness and honesty about challenges and concerns when it came to the pandemic response – resilience and effective action came about not as a result of being traditionally 'tough' and insular, but through sharing vulnerabilities, connecting and looking outwards. Interestingly, the focus of the networks was able to shift smoothly from school improvement to response planning and sharing good practice in provision for learners at home. In addition, leaders participating in this scheme supplemented the practical advice provided to one another in peer reviews with emotional support.

Adaptations made to the programme during the pandemic have now been reviewed for long-term usefulness, including virtual meetings which are reported to be less disruptive to the school day and more conducive to fast-tracking change.
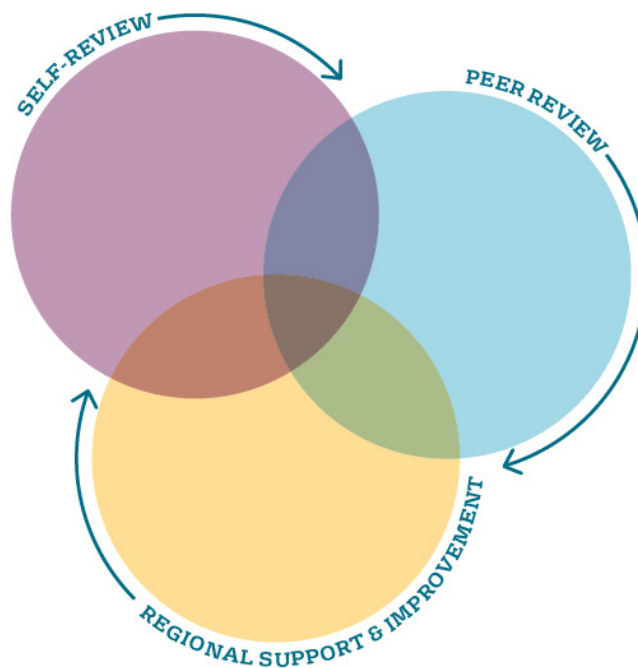

Figure 1: The SPP model enables a continuous cycle of review and support

02 Rwanda: Building Learning Foundations – professional learning communities

Building Learning Foundations (BLF) is a programme of the Rwanda Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and Rwanda Education Board (REB), funded by the UK government and delivered in a partnership between EDT, the British Council and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). BLF aims to improve English literacy and numeracy in all public and government-subsidised primary schools in Rwanda.

One of the three central components of BLF is leadership for learning (leadership of and for learning). The programme aims to transform headteachers' practices through school-to-school collaboration. In local clusters and at district level, leaders come together in 'professional learning communities' (PLCs) – groups of headteachers who work together, voluntarily, to focus on a specific area of teaching or school development in order to improve learning outcomes for pupils.

Attendance and engagement with the PLCs is a requirement for all headteachers in Rwanda, who come together regularly to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of their roles and to embed a joint approach to problem solving. They are each supported and facilitated by National and Local Leaders of Learning (NLLs and LLLs) – high performing headteachers trained to act as change agents and lead teaching and learning improvements beyond their own school. They coach fellow headteachers and strengthen collaborative networks in their locality.

Many schools managed to keep running regular PLCs during the pandemic, typically via phone conference or online and via forums like WhatsApp. During school closures, the challenges school leaders faced were novel and varied – they included the need to reach vulnerable learners whose families did not have access to radio or TV;

being 'cut-off' from class teachers and communities; children losing interest in learning due to prolonged time out of school; and teachers struggling to teach or speak whilst wearing masks.

The networks were reported as the headteachers' first recourse in crisis, enabling headteachers to learn from each other, inspire action and share best practices in a timely manner. The Rwandan government made equity a key focus of their Back-to-School campaign, asking schools to identify the most vulnerable children and ensure they returned to school. The PLCs have been credited for enabling the smooth implementation of this initiative, using local data to great effect and bringing greater focus to student performance data, dropout rates, and absenteeism. The groups have also created a culture of accountability and oversight that is enabling teaching improvements and increased engagement with parents and communities – a culture that was particularly critical during the pandemic.

03 Kenya: Girls' Education Challenge – communities of practice (CoPs)

EDT's project in Kenya, [Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu (WWW)](#) or 'let our girls succeed', is helping over 52,000 girls to remain in education and transition to secondary school. Funded by UK FCDO Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), the programme is engaging nearly 12,500 teachers and 1,000 school leaders in collaborative professional development, which is in turn helping 60,000 learners to get better learning outcomes.

In the WWW programme, primary school headteachers come together in networks known as Communities of Practice (CoPs). The present structure of CoPs has evolved from a hierarchical model where 'high-performing' headteachers lead their peers, to a more equitable model centred around peer mentorship. CoP clusters now comprise headteachers within walking distance (one-hour journey maximum) of each other for ease of meeting.

A key feature of the CoPs in Kenya is their use of a coach who is specifically trained to support headteachers and to moderate or 'broker' the sessions.

Each coach oversees multiple CoPs, giving them a broader understanding of the challenges in a particular region and the ability to facilitate the sharing of practices which have succeeded in nearby clusters.

Since inception, CoPs have been used to identify and solve local problems and have been critical to achieving quick change across clusters of schools. At the CoP meetings, groups develop and review action plans collectively, ensuring clear responsibilities and a level of accountability. These interactions continued virtually during Covid-19, with 75% of teachers and school leaders continuing to collaborate via WhatsApp and other informal communications. A study of the virtual CoPs showed they provided a platform for:

» Sharing information about schedule of radio lessons with parents (78%)

» Supporting continuity of learning by sharing WWW revision questions with parents (72%)

» Providing learner feedback on WWW revision questions (80%)

» Sharing information on helping girls return to school and catch up on their learning (88%)

» Sharing information on strategies for supporting vulnerable learners (88%)

» Sharing information on helping learners catch up in their learning (90%)

» Regular check-in between teachers and school leaders (78%).[15]

Key Reflections

How did leadership networks contribute to resilient education systems in our case study countries? The following section shares five reflections.

Key Reflection 1:
Professional networks build trust and enable adaptive problem solving during crisis

Resilience is the ability to withstand shocks and interruptions to the functioning of organizations and systems. At the organisational level, resilience is about having the capabilities and tools to well functioning of organizations and systems. Resilient organisations have been described as: 'prepared, adaptable, collaborative, trustworthy and responsible' – they invest ahead of time, ensure their staff are comfortable with ambiguity, work together, build strong relationships and are often more committed to diversity, equity and inclusion – bringing a broad range of perspectives to support agile thinking in crisis.[16] From our analysis of networked systems in the UK, Kenya and Rwanda, the characteristics exhibited by school leadership during Covid-19, as a result of networking, closely align with these features of resilience.

Faced with Covid-induced challenges, headteachers maintained their practices of collaboration, often virtually, and cemented existing, strong levels of trust between peers. The open and non-judgemental culture developed during the peer review process enabled leaders to be more adaptable and agile in their thinking and to find solutions for immediate problems more readily. In EDT's Kenya programme, all school leaders agreed that knowledge learnt from cluster meetings helped with teaching while adhering to Covid-19 protocols and 98% reported that the experience of attending these meetings before the pandemic was helpful in supporting learning recovery after school re-opening.[17]

[16] Deloitte (2021)
[17] Education Development Trust (forthcoming)

In all three countries, the PLCs, CoPs and peer review systems in place built strong foundational and habitual relationships between headteachers, based on peer trust. As mentioned above, the peer group model in Kenya is based on equal respect and a 'giving and receiving' culture – recognising that every leader has something to contribute, and every leader has something to learn. This approach has led to higher levels of trust and engagement across the CoP clusters – critical for solutions to strengthen resilience.

Examples of rapid, collective action championed or initiated by the groups can be found across each of the study countries. In each case, ideas for good practice were discussed at the cluster meetings ahead of government directives, with the meetings providing an important opportunity for good practice to be shared and scaled up. In Rwanda, schools led the critical early response whilst waiting for top-down instructions; following

closures and with support from their peers in the PLCs in Rwanda, leaders and teachers mapped where the children lived, their learning needs, and their access to internet and radio. This enabled radio lessons to commence quickly and minimise disruption to learning. Schools in Kenya similarly developed radio lessons – with innovations shared at the cluster meetings. An example of best practice shared between school leaders via the CoPs was to design the radio lessons for both parents and children to listen to, thus enabling buy-in from the parents and forging good school-home relations. Solutions around school meals were also shared between headteachers at the cluster meetings.

Meanwhile, in the UK, school leaders navigated remote learning and wellbeing challenges – and credited the SPP programme for enabling honest and collaborative problem-solving:

> The four schools [...] that have been involved in SPP have had a much more honest and open approach to discussing risk assessment, sharing documents and making decisions during this time and this is down to the culture developed through SPP.
>
> – School leader, Berkshire, UK

> SPP is conducted with trust in the real sense of the word, at the heart of the process, allowing you to reveal your school 'warts and all' in the safe knowledge that the group genuinely wants to help solve those really trying problems.
>
> – Ann Davey, CEO of the Pathfinder Schools Multi-Academy Trust in Northamptonshire, UK

Research shows that relationship building, openness, trust and respect are at the heart of successful learning communities[18] and our case studies support this, also showing how relationships maximised through active professional networks can enhance problem-solving abilities and bring innovation and rapid response to crisis.

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[18] Usoro (2007)

The collaborative energy which emerged from school leaders this time can be directly attributed to the cluster meetings. Feedback from headteachers in Kenya and Rwanda in particular highlighted the previously competitive nature between headteachers, often fuelled by higher school results equating to more funding. This is despite research showing that monetary incentives do not necessarily lead to improved school performance.[19] The networks were important for helping headteachers to recognise and break down the silos they were working in and instead learn to network and collaborate. For instance, in Mombasa, there was an example of two public schools sharing the same building. Before CoPs, there was great hostility between the schools. The students and teachers refused to interact, share the same stairwell or even purchase snacks from the 'rival' neighbouring school's canteen. Despite initial resistance to pairing the schools in the leadership programme, the headteachers started working together, the tension eased, and pupils started interacting with each other. The two schools have even set up a joint learning centre and farm.

Headteachers in Rwanda also described a noticeable difference in attitudes to trust, collaboration and problem-solving as a result of the PLCs. As they explained,

> "Before PLCs there was a kind of selfishness among headteachers. If one had an innovation, it was not shared. Everyone wished to be a star on his/her own.
>
> – **Hatangimana Ephrem, National Leader of Learning, Rwanda**

> Before PLCs, every headteacher worked alone in secret and tried to ensure that no one among headteachers can know what is being done in his/her school. It was a shame to share with others the challenges the school is facing, and the best practices were kept as secret. The collaboration between headteachers at sector level was at low level.   – **Nyirangirimana Christine, Headteacher, Rwanda**"

Finally, the strong bonds and joint commitments made together in the network meetings led to greater accountability. For instance, the collective agreement around a specific action plan at a CoP meeting in Kenya, made other headteachers 'witness' to their commitments which developed a culture of accountability between members. Likewise, SPP enabled school leaders to create and sustain a culture of collaboration and mutual accountability within and between schools. The flattened hierarchical structures which emerged from peer review ultimately led to new ways of working for headteachers including openness to constructive criticism which was critical in a time of crisis.

Key Reflection 2:
Networks can be repurposed in times of crisis to address pressing challenges, such as equity and wellbeing

When the pandemic hit, schools' priorities changed. Personal and collective health and wellbeing became the overriding concern, followed by how to maintain education for children under new circumstances, including those with fewer resources and more challenging home environments. The SPP, BLF and GEC leadership networks were initially established for similar a purpose: to improve learning outcomes. Amid the pandemic, however, it became more important for schools to re-align priorities and focus on the areas threatened by school closures. As a result, the schools needed explicit leadership around access, equity and wellbeing as well as greater teamwork and more lateral styles of leadership.

Professional networks develop trusting behaviours and enable 'bottom-up' responses to buttress shocks. As such, they can also be a platform easily utilised or re-purposed to address new challenges, as required by the specific situation or crisis. Evidence suggests that collaborative practices turn school systems into learning systems, encouraging leaders to look inward and outward to improve and adapt (Muijs et al., 2010).[20] CoPs also build coordinated perspectives, discourse, and actions: together members negotiate a shared purpose through evolving interactions.[21] In our three settings, we found examples of evolving purpose and agility within the professional networks, particularly towards equity and wellbeing. This arose both as a result of national level strategies as well as from endogenous system leadership emerging from various school actors and reflecting local values, knowledge and practices.

Rwanda's Back-to-School Campaign is a good example of how PLCs enabled the cultivation of shared purpose nationally, helping the country recover from the pandemic. The campaign had a major focus on equity and getting all children back in the classroom. Through the virtual PLCs held on WhatsApp, Zoom, WebEx and Teams, National and Local Leaders of Learning (NLLs and LLLs) focused discussions on how to reach the most vulnerable, hard-to-reach children. Leaders of learning helped other headteachers understand the importance of collecting data. PLCs were used as a vehicle for realising government 'build back better' plans in practice, with headteachers reminded at the meetings to submit a list of vulnerable children in their schools and to engage with parents via SMS and home visits.

At the local level, there was demonstration of shared new purpose among headteachers in Kenya; something made possible by the structure of the networks. A key feature of the CoPs in Kenya context was their autonomy. The evolution of the model was organic and there was little involvement from the Ministry of Education (MoE). Instead, each CoP with support from a coach agreed on the criteria for an effective school and their own school priorities. This has enabled headteachers to address specific issues that are relevant to their schools at the time – not based on a larger or regional agenda and revealing a strong endogenous leadership from school actors. During Covid-19, headteachers discussed localised and time-sensitive issues, such as book shortages and challenging home environments, that the ministry could not address. They adapted the meetings' focus depending on the current priorities and threats to individual student's learning, equity and wellbeing.

In the UK, leaders used their networks to discuss how to address wellbeing specifically as it related to the impact of the pandemic. As schools waited for the government guidance to emerge, they forged their own approaches to overcoming feelings of isolation, including weekly phone calls between teachers and students, and daily Zoom calls by headteachers to check in on their teachers. The networks enabled schools to come together around a wellbeing agenda.

Additionally, networks fostered greater wellbeing among leaders themselves. Research suggests that teacher wellbeing is likely to prosper in environments that engage them in deep and morally inspiring purposes over which they exert shared professional control[22] and a sense of commitment and connection to a higher purpose contributes to organisational wellbeing.[23] In the peer review sittings and cluster meetings, headteachers were able to cultivate purpose and share ways to make each other's and their teachers' lives easier during an already stressful period. As one headteacher reported from Rwanda,

> "Now experiences and challenges are shared, and solutions are found together. Teachers' motivation was increased; we teach each other how to conduct effective class visits without stressing teachers.
>
> – Kabayiza Pierre Damien, Local Leader of Learning, Rwanda

Across our case study countries, schools have also reported how the pandemic and lockdowns accelerated plans which had been on hold and re-instilled a sense of purpose and urgency to address equity in the longer-term. As one headteacher reported:

> The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns […] fast-tracked our digital strategy. Our peer reviews celebrated the remote education we provided through lockdowns and bubble closures and how we are using new technology to reduce workload and create efficiencies, for example through document sharing and virtual parents' meetings. As we move forward, we keep challenging ourselves to ask: "to what extent is our offer equitable for all children?"
>
> – Headteacher, UK

Key Reflection 3:
Networks harness expertise in the education workforce and empower school-based professionals as change agents, notably during crisis

In 'The Missing Link in School Reform' Leana argues that 'in trying to improve public schools we are overselling the role of human capital and innovation' from the top, while greatly undervaluing the benefits of social capital and stability at the bottom.[24] Schools often rely on outside experts ('the power of outsiders') to tackle problems in schools, but these experts may have little practical experience in schools or the local knowledge and agility critical for effective response. This is particularly true in crisis or humanitarian contexts when local levels of expertise can be bypassed as rapid government-led responses are rolled out.

Despite this, headteachers in our case study countries were often in the driver's seat for innovation and actions during the pandemic, ensuring the wellbeing and learning of their students. In professional networks, there is less emphasis on the theory of school improvement – instead relationships are built between headteachers based on a sense of credibility that is unique to peers who have overcome these same challenges themselves. Professional networks innately value practitioner expertise and skills and are heavily based around on-the-job learning and working on real issues.

In response to school closures, the networks pooled this expertise and allowed for the rapid mobilisation of school leaders, information and resources. As a result, headteachers and teachers across all three countries were suddenly designing and implementing the solutions their schools needed simultaneously. Their contextual knowledge enabled tailored solutions and local problem-solving and endogenous leadership led to quick, agile reactions as required by the crisis setting. These models demonstrate the importance of harnessing the value of the capital which already exists within schools as a complement to external outsider support into schools.

Furthermore, BLF's integrated model shows how practitioners can be helped to step up and become agents of change as leaders during crisis. To support the networks, the BLF programme developed a new role for high performing headteachers called Local Leaders of Learning (LLLs). The LLLs act as role models, provide coaching to their peer headteachers and lead the PLCs. This approach is based on a 'triple helix' model (figure 2) embedding support throughout the system – not only do LLLs support headteachers, but headteachers support the development of CoPs among teachers in their schools. School leaders reported that they encouraged teachers to innovate and take risks to ensure learning continuity during the pandemic. Professional networks which harness the expertise of school level practitioners and communities promote professional agency and in turn boost levels of motivation and morale.
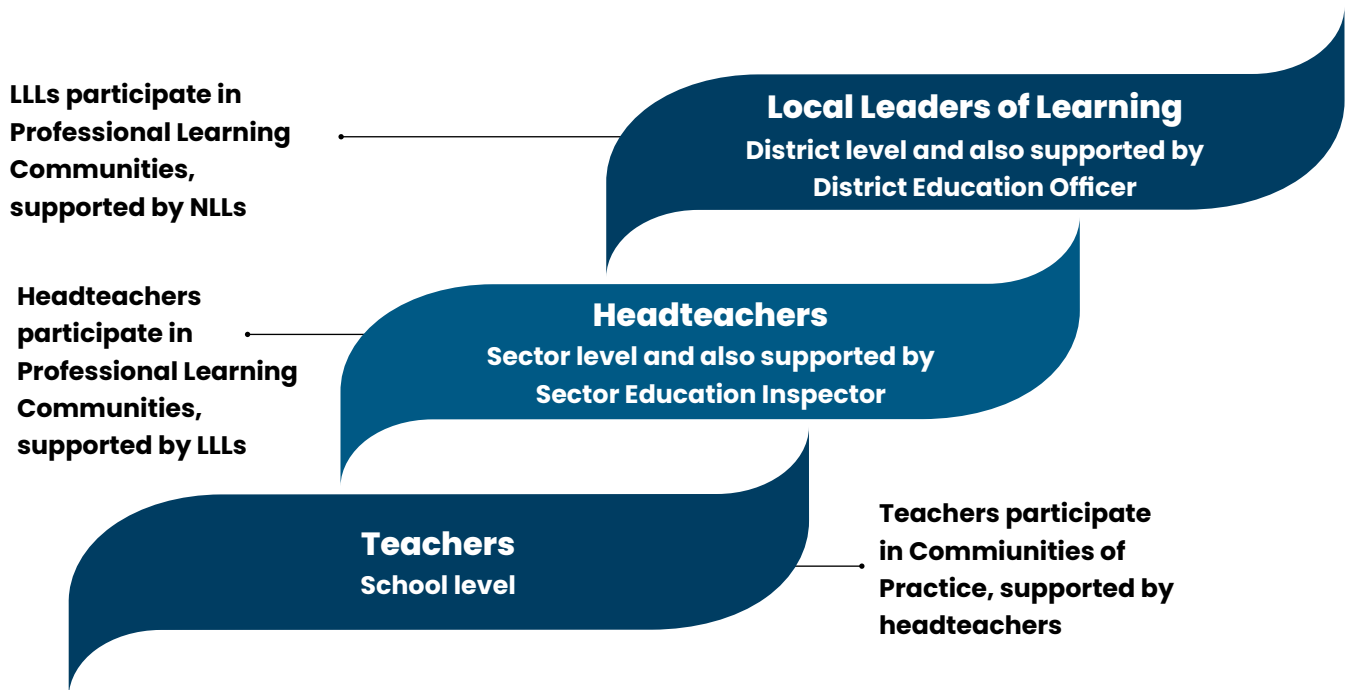
LLLs participate in Professional Learning Communities, supported by NLLs

Local Leaders of Learning
District level and also supported by
District Education Officer

Headteachers participate in Professional Learning Communities, supported by LLLs

Headteachers
Sector level and also supported by
Sector Education Inspector

Teachers
School level

Teachers participate in Commiunities of Practice, supported by headteachers

Figure 2: A triple helix design: professionals at all levels are engaged in collaborative professional development

It is important to note the schools do not exist in a vacuum and education leadership does not occur in isolation – instead it is a 'multi-level distributed process'.[25] In other words, school leaders and teachers can only realise their full potential when they have the full commitment of leaders at all different levels of the system. In a resilient system supportive middle tier or 'behind the scenes' stakeholders, such as district officials and coaches, empower professionals and make room for these collaborative spaces. They coordinate and liaise with higher, central level stakeholders in order to support school leaders with their professional development and cluster groups – good examples are the LLLs in Rwanda and the coach role in Kenya (see case study section above).

Key Reflection 4:
Data from the frontline is critical for effective and adaptive crisis leadership at all levels

The three programmes provide insights into how collaborative networks share information and use data. Reliable school level data is often lacking, especially in fragile or crisis affected lower- and middle-income settings, and where it exists, is not always readily accessible by schools. Yet, data on individual students and frontline issues is needed for an equitable and effective response to crisis and a critical part of an adaptive, resilient system. During the pandemic, collection of student and community level data by school management committees in all three countries helped to both inform the response and build the capacity and confidence of school leaders to set goals.

The cluster meetings attended by headteachers in each country enabled and empowered school leaders to use data to better understand the immediate needs of their students. The comparative nature of the discussions – with headteachers noting the similarities and differences between their own and other schools' practices and performance – meant that student and community level data was central to discussions. In addition, the meetings were used to identify effective ways of collecting the data itself.

In Rwanda, school leaders, supported through the networks, collected data on vulnerable children in their school localities, as part of the Back-to-School approach following Covid-19. Schools undertook local area mapping, splitting catchment communities into smaller groups and identifying those families and children most in need. The cluster groups then problem-solved around the data, developing solutions to reach these children. This ground-up information was critical for informing school action plans, for example enabling the early delivery of home learning materials. In addition, data-based school improvement plan drafts developed in one meeting were used as a basis for discussion in the following PLC. In Kenya, individual school

performance data was the baseline for leaders to understand the current situation, set realistic goals and hold each other accountable to their new performance contracts and action plans. Similarly, in the UK, SPP enabled school leaders in the UK to use an evidence-based enquiry framework to contextualise and articulate their school improvement journey.

The act of using data collectively around a common purpose also had an effect on the leaders themselves and their interaction with data, thus building further resilience in the system. Leaders built their capacity around how to use data to adapt to crisis, contributing to the creation of learning-driven culture. In Rwanda, 'how to better use and collect data' was a common agenda item for PLC meetings, even before the pandemic, leading to a shift in attitudes among headteachers in their approach to data ahead of school closures:

> " Headteachers became more serious and started analysing the performance data in their schools, and they discussed with their teachers. All of us acknowledged that we have a role to play in the problem of repetition and drop out. We decided that we should correct ourselves and we shall put it in our 'imihigo' [performance contracts] for this year.
>
> – LLL, Gicumbi District, Rwanda

Similarly, in the UK, some schools used their 2021 peer review cycle to collect data around new issues, for example, investigating how digital technologies contributed to improving school curriculum, teaching and learning and wider school efficiencies. This data is helping the Focus Multi-Academy Trust in the north of England to decide what to 'adapt, adopt or abandon' from the range of new practice developed at speed during the pandemic.

Lastly, in Rwanda, PLCs have also enabled a strong data-driven feedback loop between frontline practitioners and policymakers during the Covid-19 response. Data from PLCs is shared with the education authorities at national level to inform policy development and to identify whether further local interventions are required.

Key Reflection 5:
Professional networks can help foster connections with families and communities who in turn play a critical role in resilient education systems

Overcoming isolation was critical to an effective crisis response during the pandemic and as this think-piece shows, collaboration between leaders was more powerful than one leader acting alone. But leader-to-leader connections were not the only relationships strengthened by the CoPs, PLCs and SPP networking. The networks also enabled schools to better connect with communities and families. These connections were particularly important to have in place ahead of the crisis – during school lockdowns parents and carers became the gatekeepers to the students and homes became the new classrooms, so building strong teacher-parent relationships was more important than ever.

The networks led to a shift in attitudes among school leaders in Rwanda and Kenya towards parents and caregivers. Headteachers previously did not see the value in engaging with families and had reported low expectations of parental interest and support. There was also a lack of knowledge about how to start engaging parents and what might be a successful approach. Networks permitted this previously ignored challenge to be brought to light and

school management committees supported headteachers to connect with parents.

In Rwanda, LLLs and NLLs via PLCs encouraged headteachers to plan visits to families rather than just sending letters and SMS to parents in order to identify 'hard cases' during school closures. Lists of vulnerable students were shared with village leaders for follow up, and for strategizing on the support needed from the school community. One headteacher set up parent visitation groups, responsible for reaching out to parents, either in person or via phone, whilst schools were closed. The check-ins made sure children were aware of and actively following radio and TV lessons, and to check on welfare. Equally, pre-existing connections between schools and communities were critical to the success of the radio lessons in Kenya. Radio lessons and timetables were put up on village noticeboard and community leaders distributed materials personally to children's homes. This was supported by CoPs which worked together to share information about the schedule of radio lessons with parents and discussed the effectiveness of the virtual teaching strategies.

> " Before PLCs the headteacher would sit alone and design and implement and monitor activities. Sometimes these activities would not tackle the real issues and burden him alone. Now parents are involved. We worked with parents and teachers to prioritize reducing the dropout rate of children from 8.4 to 3 in 2019 school years which was a main challenge at school and before 2019.
>
> — Nizeyimana Edouard, Headteacher, Rwanda

In the UK headteachers established virtual parents' evenings to maintain a good school-home connection and maintain a level of normalcy. In 2021, schools taking part in SPP used the peer review cycle to assess how new technologies and approaches such as this was leading to reduced workload and creating efficiencies; these new ways of working are now being considered as possibilities for embedding into post-pandemic practice. Professional collaboration in this case did not only provide answers during the crisis, but possibilities for improvements in the longer-term.

Networks play a key role as a platform to pool and harness local resources and motivation across wider stakeholders, such as parents and caregivers and local leaders in the community. As success stories emerged at the meetings – such as some headteachers stating they obtained permission from village leads before approaching households – other leaders gained confidence and were able to replicate good practice. Headteachers realised the value, learning and practical support parents and communities could bring to providing holistic support to students in times of crisis. Research shows that resources and solutions are distributed across many actors locally, including across schools, and other actors such as parents, the community and local businesses, but inter-organisational collaboration means organisations can increase the flow of information in a network as well enabling schools to access a larger pool of resources than they would on their own.[26]

Improved relations also led to increased parental and community engagement with school issues. Most parents reported positively on the radio lessons designed to involve parents in Kenya and allowed issues such as pupil attendance and drop-out to be addressed more effectively. In Kenya too the increased engagement led to more women being engaged with school management committees. Thus, the process of collaborative learning, adaptation, review and improvement does not only build teacher and student outcomes, but can have an effect at the system level, by providing a platform for school leaders to consider wider factors impacting school effectiveness such as family and community influence.

[26] Muijs (2010)

Conclusions

There is no rulebook for responding to a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, from our case studies, we can see that collaboration among school leaders has significant potential to support a resilient response when it is needed most. We saw how networks which were collaborative, adaptable, trusting and self-improving were highly effective in supporting crisis leadership. We argue that school networks should therefore be supported not only as a means to an end, but as a desired end in itself in supporting resilient, sustainable school systems.

Networks strengthen the important connections between individuals. Through the cluster meetings and peer review structures, many school leaders supported by the GEC, BLF and SPP programmes had good working relationships with other leaders before school closures. The bonds, trust, habits and mechanisms already in place reduced risk of isolation when the pandemic hit and enabled collaboration to continue naturally. Solutions and innovations were discussed in real time and best practices shared openly. The networks also reduced unhelpful 'competitive' attitudes between schools which may have prevented collaboration at this critical time, instead allowing nimble new ways of thinking and the ability to problem-solve at speed: a cornerstone of resilience. Relationships characterised by high trust and frequent interactions led to improved student performance and were 'a life-line in chaos'.[27]

As a result of the regular communication and constructive review processes among groups of headteachers, schools were able to address the more complex sides to the pandemic, too. This included how to work well with families and how to ensure the most vulnerable children were reached. Equity, wellbeing and community connection became regular themes of the meetings. The networks' bottom-up, non-hierarchical structure meant they could provide flexible and well-adapted responses to the crisis.

With minimal initial top-down guidance, schools were forced to react themselves, and school leadership was reconfigured accordingly.[28]

There is great potential for professional networks globally, but findings from a review of evidence from 25 countries indicated that only around a fifth of teachers reported participating in mentoring or collaborative work. Based on our insights from these three case studies, we have the following takeaways for policymakers and education practitioners:

1 Invest in network structures across schools which are owned and led by school leaders, and put in place strategies to support and institutionalise networks within education systems to increase reach and participation.

2 Build the skills and capacities of school leaders that are key to running effective leadership networks, such as coaching, communication and trust.

3 Continue to invest in data that is collected and owned by school leaders, and consider the potential for professional leadership networks to contribute to data-driven decision-making during crises.

4 Recognise school leaders as important agents of change across clusters of schools and school communities, and support and formalise their role as leaders in their communities.

5 Ensure strong linkages between school leaders and other education leaders at the middle tier such as coaches and district level professionals and ensure middle tier actors provide school leaders with the support and respect to succeed.

6 Recognise the value of online collaborative networks, particularly in times of crisis; invest in the technology needed to support more flexible and virtual ways of working to improve ease of meeting and enable leaders to connect across wider geographies.

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Appendix 1: Case study sources

The case study evidence in this think-piece is based on the following main sources.

UK case study:

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Rwanda case study:

Al-Fadala, A., Amenya, D., Fitzpatrick, R., Godwin, K., Kirby, J. and Korin, A. (2021) Lessons from Rwanda's response to the COVID-19 crisis for the future of educational leadership. Insights from a learning partnership between Education Development Trust, Education Commission, WISE and Rwanda Education Board on promising leadership responses to COVID-19. https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/our-research-and-insights/research/rwanda-learning-partnership-insights-on-school-and

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