Education Development Trust

THINK-PIECE

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Reconfiguring teacher collaboration

Five key insights from communities of practice in Kenya and Rwanda

About us

Education Development Trust is an international not-for-profit organisation working to improve education outcomes around the world. We seek to improve education – and transitions into work – through expert research on what works, and delivering highly contextualised programmes designed to transform education systems, schools and lives.

Our vision is a world in which all lives are transformed through excellent education. We combine global research and our longstanding expertise with regional knowledge to inform education policy and practice and deliver programmes around the world. Through our work and expertise – which spans from early years education right through to post-school careers – we seek to strengthen education systems, transform teaching and learning, ensure effective transitions into work, and contribute to global responses to key education challenges.

We work in varied contexts all over the world, in education systems as diverse as those in Brunei, Kenya, England, Rwanda and Dubai, and are a trusted partner of governments, academics and multilateral agencies across the globe. Our work helps to drive global understanding of education solutions, and we support global dialogues among international policymakers on education system improvement.

To achieve all this, we draw on our programme of public domain research that highlights 'what works' in education reform and invest in research and development to create globally leading and innovative methodologies, helping to make government ambitions for better education systems a reality. The evidence and insights shared in this report are part of this ongoing commitment to research and development.

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Foreword

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No school or school system can be effective without skilled teachers. So, policymakers need to take very seriously the way they support teachers' professional learning. Traditionally teacher in-service training has taken place in off-site workshops where experts from outside lecture teachers on good practice and expect them to implement their guidance. Research shows that this is an extremely weak mechanism for changing how teachers teach and often a waste of money.

This report is important because it highlights another approach to teacher training that is much more likely to make a difference: collaborative learning through a 'communities of practice' (CoP) approach. These case studies from Kenya and Rwanda show how teachers can learn together using this approach.

In both countries new structures to support teachers learning together were put in place before the Covid-19 pandemic and proved their worth during and after the health emergency. The crisis generated new insights about CoPs in action which are highlighted in this report.

Technology played a large part in the maintenance and development of collaborative networks. When schools closed the CoPs became virtual and made extensive use of WhatsApp so that the professional dialogue could continue. Evidence from both countries shows that leadership at all levels, but particularly from school leaders, played a key role in the continuation of CoPs during the crisis. The pandemic was without doubt a catastrophe but going forward the lessons highlighted in this report can contribute to the transformation of teacher professional learning.

Teachers learning together through communities of practice

Given the significant impact teaching has on educational outcomes, teacher professional development (TPD) is recognised as one of the most effective ways to combat the learning crisis. One approach increasingly being used is communities of practice (CoPs), based on evidence that when teachers learn together as peers, their professional development becomes more effective and sustainable (Cordingley et al., 2015). Communities of practice are collaborative networks that support practitioners in their efforts to develop shared understandings and engage in professional knowledge-building (Hara, 2010). Most of the research in this area has focused on teachers in high-income settings, leaving a gap in our understanding of how CoPs can improve teaching and learning in more resource-constrained contexts.

Education Development Trust's ambitious research study in Kenya and Rwanda (2018-22), Teachers Learning Together (TLT), explored how CoPs can be used in low-resource contexts to facilitate teachers' professional learning and improvement in classroom practice at scale. The CoPs in each country were part of wider educational interventions which were interrupted by the global pandemic in 2020. However, the disruption caused by the pandemic, including the reconfiguration of CoPs in response to school closures and reopening, has presented new research and learning opportunities. The insights in this paper speak to the power of CoPs to impact teaching and learning during crises, as well as practices that might be important in CoP implementation beyond times of disruption.

Communities of practice models in Kenya and Rwanda

The CoP models in Kenya and Rwanda are part of large-scale interventions, both FCDO-funded by the UK government, that aim to improve foundational learning outcomes for all learners in challenging contexts. They do this by offering continuous and practical support to educators with peer learning at the heart of their professional development. At the start of the research, each country had a distinct model and delivery approach to teacher collaborative learning, which was then adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Kenya, CoPs are delivered through the Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu 'Let Our Girls Succeed' programme and are structured in multi-school clusters that rely primarily on support from itinerant instructional coaches. They combine mathematics and literacy teachers and meet once per term. The CoPs are facilitated by an instructional coach who also works with teachers on a one-to-one basis. The coach identifies key challenges and good practice before each CoP, supporting teachers to discuss their practice. CoPs have evolved from the initial cluster-based model into an in-school subject-specific model with a greater facilitation role for school leaders. The CoPs also include WhatsApp groups, which were used before the pandemic for informal communication and to provide updates on meetings.

In Rwanda, CoPs are part of the Building Learning Foundations programme, which focuses on

teacher professional development, system leadership and girls' education. CoPs in this programme are school-based and draw more explicitly on support from school leaders and school-based subject leads. CoPs are subject-based, meet three times per term and are led by teachers themselves, with facilitation by subject leaders. CoP meetings are highly structured, following guided activities provided in a toolkit. School leaders are accountable for monitoring the performance of CoPs and ensuring meetings are conducted effectively.

At endline, we found some adaptations had been made to the CoP delivery models in each country in response to contextual changes due to Covid-19 and updated policy priorities. For example, in Rwanda, the shift to English as medium of instruction in primary schools and prioritisation of learning catch-up prompted the combining of subject-specific CoPs as well as the use of CoPs to work through remedial materials and strategies. In Kenya, the government prioritised teacher professional development at school level and subject panel CoPs became mandatory.

Disruption to communities of practice during COVID-19

Schools were closed in Kenya between March and December 2020 and reopened in January 2021. Schools were closed for both students and teachers, which meant teachers travelled back to other parts of the country during that time as many typically work away from their family and home community. Teachers from private schools were also affected as many faced unpaid leave. Therefore, formal in-person CoP meetings ceased during the period of school closures and did not recommence until May 2021. This was in line with government policy which did not require teachers to continue their CPD engagement with the programme. However, despite no official obligations, we found that many teachers continued to collaborate through pre-existing WhatsApp groups as well as phone calls and other informal communication. Once schools reopened, cluster-level CoPs ceased to meet given a policy shift towards a school-based CoP model.

In Rwanda, due to varying regional restrictions at different times, many teachers stayed near their schools during closures and were able to meet in person. Teachers were expected to continue engaging in some professional activities. Although formal CoPs continued in all schools throughout school closures, not all teachers were able to participate. The CoPs also included remote meetings held in WhatsApp groups and sometimes through phone calls. In cases where teachers were more dispersed, mobilisation to attend CoP meetings was coordinated by sector-learning facilitators in consultation with headteachers.

Reconfiguring communities of practice during school closures and reopening

In both Kenya and Rwanda, communities of practice reconfigured to continue collaborating during Covid-19 related school closures. The research from these programmes identified five key insights that illustrate reconfigurations in terms of how CoPs functioned, what they focused on, and enablers that allowed them to do so. CoP reconfigurations not only ensured continuity of professional development and student learning but resilience and adaptation to the new challenges created by the pandemic. Importantly, these insights point to features and approaches for CoPs that might be significant beyond crisis contexts.

Insight 1

Pre-existing CoP structures helped buffer shocks during school closures through continuity of teacher collaboration, motivation, and professional development

CoP structures established before the pandemic were critical to ensuring continuity of collaboration among teachers during school closures. In Kenya, both teachers and school leaders reported that peer learning and collaboration continued in some form (whether through WhatsApp groups, informal communication with the cluster coach or staying connected with colleagues) in more than 75% of schools during school closures, with over 60% of teachers in touch with CoP cluster members who were not from their school.

Qualitative data suggests that CoPs that were well established pre-pandemic were more likely to continue informal communication during school closures.

In Rwanda, over 70% of teachers reported that CoPs helped them stay connected regularly with their colleagues and work. Some of the teachers interviewed conceded that they risked forgetting their work had they not participated in CoPs, with one teacher emphasising that,

> "these CoPs helped me keep focused on my work […] we were still busy running other businesses, but after CoP meeting, I could still feel connected to my work. I managed to help children from my neighborhood because I had remembered things. Lessons were still going on through radio, then using my learnings from CoP, I was able to help the children" (Teacher, Rusizi District).

Particularly important were the virtual methods used in the pre-existing structures. With teachers geographically dispersed, the WhatsApp groups were leveraged as one of the primary modes of communication once face-to-face meetings were no longer viable, particularly in Kenya.

Virtual and other remote modalities not only facilitated continuity of collaboration but also sustained teacher learning and professional development. In Kenya, we found evidence that teachers whose teaching quality improved between baseline and endline were more likely to have continued using the cluster WhatsApp group to keep in touch during the pandemic, compared to teachers whose teaching reduced in quality (x^2 = 5.32, N = 101, p = .021).

Despite being distanced from their colleagues, teachers gave examples of how participation in the WhatsApp groups sustained their learning during school during closures. For example, some teachers acquired skills on how to offer tailored individual support to learners remotely, something they had not learnt before the pandemic, while others developed guidance and counselling skills to support remote learning. A teacher in Kenya noted that,

> "We benefitted greatly from the cluster groups. I gained confidence through the groups, and I am able to handle learners. I have also gained a lot of knowledge in teaching" (Teacher, Nairobi County).

These promising findings that illustrate how teachers continued to learn together through CoPs during times of disruption might be indicative of wider trends. An OECD-Harvard study found that supporting teacher professional learning was one of the key strategies many countries used to ensure continuity of education during the initial phases of Covid-19 disruption. Almost 90% of senior officials and education administrators in the study reported participation in peer networks within schools as a common support mechanism for teacher learning (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Insight 2

Remote CoP approaches catalysed collaboration across a greater diversity of actors to ensure education continuity

During school closures, CoPs in both countries relied more heavily on low-tech, communication in WhatsApp groups and phone calls in lieu of face-to-face meetings. Some schools leveraged remote CoPs to bring in a broader coalition of actors to ensure learning continuity during that time. This included school staff, parents and remedial teachers hired by the programmes to support learning during school closures.

Parents benefited greatly from CoPs' remote collaboration, as school-level WhatsApp groups were used to circulate learning materials to them and monitor children's individual studying at home. Teachers who were members of both the CoP WhatsApp group and the one in which parents were engaged were able to quickly share teaching and learning resources between the groups. Based on feedback from parents, teachers could then follow up through phone calls to monitor students' engagement and offer additional support.

Another important group included the remedial teachers hired by the country programmes to

support continuity of learning. They harnessed the CoP WhatsApp groups to communicate about learning materials and track and provide face-to-face support to learners. A teacher in Kenya explained,

"At one time, I saw a teacher share on WhatsApp a recorded lesson. At another time we had a teacher being engaged to go to radio broadcast and air the lesson through the radio" (Teacher, Marsabit County).

> "The remedial teacher was able to track some of the learners because of help from group members who gave information on whom to consult, or how to get the learners, and he was able to organize them for remedials.
>
> Teacher, Tana River County

Although remote approaches were critical to collaboration, it is important to note that they were only as effective as their spread and availability, even using low-tech modalities. Where teachers did not participate in the WhatsApp groups, they commonly attributed this to lack of smart phones and inability to afford internet. One teacher emphasised,

"I was not in the WhatsApp group, and I am not aware of them. You can see I do not have a smart phone" (Teacher, Kilifi County).

The CoP approach used successfully in Rwanda, where teachers met in person and communicated through remote modalities, illustrates how a hybrid approach can be used to provide multiple points of connection for teachers and collaboration with other actors. More research is needed to understand how hybrid CoP approaches could support wider collaboration beyond times of disruption.

Insight 3

CoPs focused on strategies for ensuring learning continuity and recovery

CoP collaboration in both countries focused on continuity of student learning during school closures. In their CoPs, teachers reported discussing strategies to minimise drop-out rates among the most vulnerable students and helping students catch up in their learning. Some teachers recorded lessons on specific subjects and shared with the groups, while others broadcast lessons through local media channels and the WhatsApp groups to ensure a wider reach to learners.

Remote CoPs also allowed teachers to collaborate with parents to keep track of and support student learning. Learning materials shared with parents in the WhatsApp groups were particularly helpful for learners who were waiting to sit the Kenya primary education examination. One teacher remarked that,

"Learners benefited from the WhatsApp groups. The parents were sent revision questions for the learners to revise. At least learners were able to continue learning even at home, especially for the candidates" (Teacher, Nairobi County).

CoPs were also critical to learning recovery once schools reopened. In Rwanda, over 90% of teachers interviewed reported that they used CoPs to identify ways to better support different groups of learners to address learning recovery. After school reopening, over 80% of teachers at CoP meetings discussed learner needs-assessment and inclusive teaching, and over 83% shared strategies to support struggling learners. One teacher shared that during CoPs,

"We discussed about school reopening in the meeting, during the meeting we put in place measures to help us teaching in that challenging moment. Some of the measures were about management of learners, respecting COVID measures, and learning recovery" (Teacher, Bugesera District).

What is clear from the findings is that pre-existing CoP structures were key to learning recovery after school reopening. In Kenya, 67% of teachers found their previous experience of CoPs useful in supporting learning recovery. Moreover, teachers

whose teaching quality had improved since baseline were more likely to report their pre-pandemic CoP experience as helpful in supporting learner recovery ($U = 1002.0$, $N_1 = 51$, $N_2 = 49$, $z = -2.12$, $p = .027$)[1]. Most school leaders (87%) strongly agreed that participation in cluster meetings was very helpful in supporting learning recovery after schools reopened.

Insight 4

CoPs addressed critical issues beyond teaching and learning, such as wellbeing and inclusion

In addition to facilitating learning continuity and recovery, CoPs provided a way for teachers to connect with their colleagues on a personal level to help address issues of wellbeing at the peak of the pandemic. This included offering emotional support and coping strategies as well as checking in on peer and learner welfare.

In Kenya, where the cluster WhatsApp groups remained active during the period of school closures, more than 73% of teachers report using them to support each other emotionally. In Rwanda, CoPs that were categorised as high and medium effectiveness at baseline[2] were more likely to encourage teachers to support one another emotionally through the Covid-19 crisis. The CoPs were also helpful in encouraging the participation of new teachers. One of the headteachers interviewed noted that,

> "CoPs are helping in the induction of new teachers. New teachers are building their confidence in teaching" (Headteacher, Rusizi District).

In some cases, the CoP groups also shared strategies to support student emotional wellbeing. As one teacher noted,

> "We shared mainly our welfare [...] and also the coping mechanism concerning the learners" (Teacher, Nairobi County).

CoPs also played a key role in ensuring inclusion and were especially useful in targeting support for girls. For those whose cluster groups remained active in Kenya, over 75% of teachers reported discussing strategies to help girls return to school and catch up on learning. This support included holding face-to-face meetings to encourage girls and find out how they were progressing with learning at home. A teacher in Kenya shared that their CoP group

> "discussed the welfare of our learners, especially the girls where we supplied revision materials, and we would communicate where to meet the girls" (Teacher, Nairobi County).

Similar evidence was found in Rwanda where teachers in highly effective CoPs were more likely to report discussing strategies to help girls return to school and prevent drop-out of vulnerable learners.

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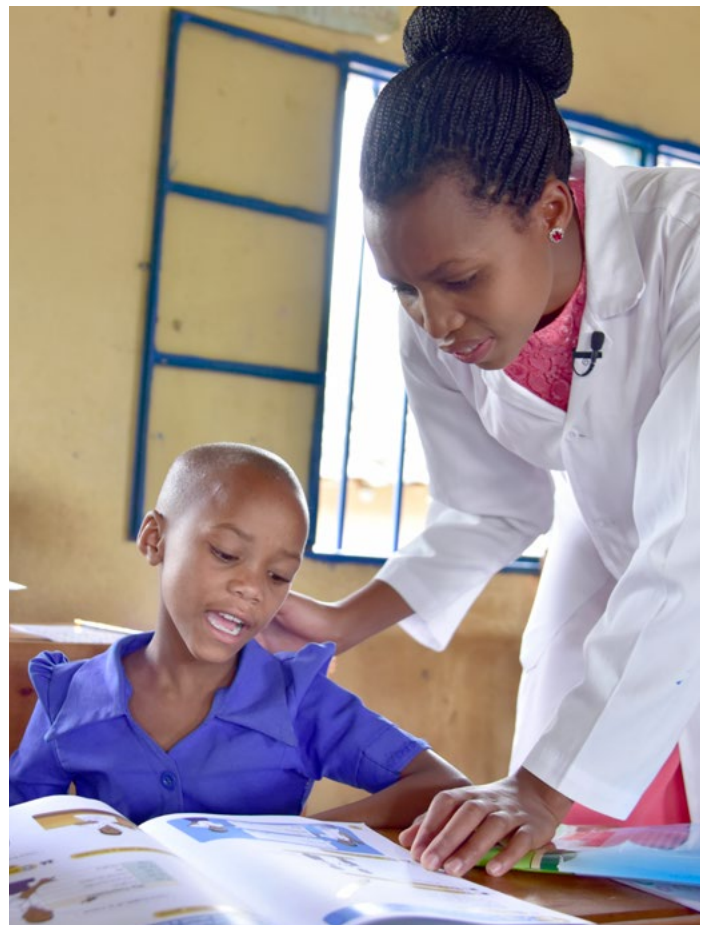
[1] A Mann-Whitney U test indicates that the difference is statistically significant. N_1 refers to the teaching quality improved group and N_2 to the teaching quality reduced group.

[2] During the baseline analysis, CoPs in Rwanda were grouped according to an 'effectiveness scale' derived from teachers' perceptions of effectiveness. CoPs were judged to have high, medium, or low effectiveness.

Insight 5

Strong leadership was a key enabler of CoP continuity

Evidence from both countries shows that leadership at different levels – and especially from school leaders – played a key role in the continuation of CoPs during the period of school closures and reopening, for both remote and in-person collaboration. This is particularly interesting in Kenya where CoPs were originally facilitated by coaches and school leaders had no explicit role. Although school leaders had no formal responsibilities, many were still involved before the pandemic, and some continued to engage during school closures even though all formal professional development activities were suspended.

School leaders were instrumental in setting up the CoP sessions and encouraging teachers to attend during school closures. In Rwanda, the joint effort between school leaders and sector-learning facilitators mobilised CoP meetings and ensured teachers received the resources they needed for those meetings. For example, sector-learning facilitators set up meeting dates, while follow-up on attendance was largely done by school leaders through phone calls.

In some cases, school leaders personally convened CoP meetings or participated in CoPs in order to better understand teachers' needs and assist where possible. One teacher reported that,

> "The head teacher attended the CoP meeting and gave his point of views in the CoP meeting. He was the one who reminded us of the time of the CoP meeting and encouraged us to attend the CoP meeting" (Teacher, Nyamagabe District).

In Kenya, when schools re-opened and collaborative professional learning shifted to focus on school-level CoPs, school leaders were particularly active in enabling the transfer of learning from cluster meetings to subject-panels and supporting teachers to embed learning in classroom practice. A majority of school leaders reported having been either fully engaged in the day-to-day running of cluster meetings (55%) or having strategic oversight of them (37%).

In Rwanda, some school leaders leveraged CoPs to plan for school reopening with teachers, particularly around implementation of Covid-19 prevention measures. One school leader noted that

> "Teachers discussed about the most important things they should do in preparation for the resumption of classes. In CoPs, I reminded the teachers that they should continue to prepare their lessons so that when the schools are reopened it will enable them to do better their teaching work. In CoPs teachers also discussed about how to welcome students when classes are resumed" (Headteacher, Nyamagabe District).

Above all, teacher initiative and leadership drove continued collaboration, especially during physical distancing. Existing CoPs provided the structure through which teachers' intrinsic motivation was harnessed to continue their own professional development.

Considering the CoP insights beyond the Covid-19 crisis

These insights from Kenya and Rwanda illustrate how existing CoPs served as a crucial structure for continued collaboration among teachers and other actors in the face of school closures during the pandemic. Teachers and school leaders reconfigured these structures to meet the new needs emerging from the crisis and ensure teacher wellbeing and professional development as well as learning continuity, recovery and inclusion. After school closures, the CoPs were also leveraged as a mechanism to implement shifts in policy priorities, such as the change to English as the language of instruction in Rwanda.

This research illustrates the CoP's role in resilience during times of disruption, suggesting that governments and country partners should strengthen and expand existing networks where possible. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has started to recede, education systems face continued instability and rapid change. Given CoPs' high impact, they should be considered a critical approach to ensuring sustainability of student and teacher learning.

More specifically, remote CoPs' use of low-tech modalities proved to be a particularly important approach for sustaining collaboration between teachers and with a wider set of actors. It helped to ensure education continuity as well as support for critical issues such as learner and teacher wellbeing and targeted support for vulnerable learners and girls. Governments, researchers and the international community should further explore how remote CoPs can be harnessed to address these issues beyond the Covid-19 context. Greater attention should also be paid to the role of leadership in these approaches, given it was a key enabler of both remote and in-person CoP continuity during school closures and reopening.

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