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Supporting teachers and education personnel during times of crisis

Introduction

By mid-April 2020, almost every country in the world had implemented nationwide closures of schools and other educational institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, [affecting over 1.57 billion learners](#), representing over 90% of the world's total enrolled student population. These actions, while essential to contain the spread of the disease and protecting public health, could precipitate a global learning crisis at all levels of the education system. During the crisis, the focus of the educational response has been on ensuring learning continuity through the mobilization of a range of no-, low-, and high-tech resources and modalities, to bring learning content from school settings into learners' homes.

What is sometimes overlooked is that at the heart of these responses are millions of teachers, principals, and other education personnel who are the frontline workers for the education sector during any crisis, and who have demonstrated high levels of commitment and creativity in the face of COVID-19. [At least 63 million primary and secondary teachers alone have been affected by the pandemic](#) to date. Further, disruption to regular learning has impacted students at teacher training institutions, threatening to exacerbate the existing global shortage of qualified teachers in the future.

UNESCO therefore advocates for the protection and support of teachers, principals, and other education personnel, and for recognition of their efforts in the response to the current health crisis and beyond.

Defining the topic and related key issues

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers across the globe have had to scramble to help their students navigate the world of distance learning, often without sufficient guidance, training, support, and resources. In low-income countries in particular, many teachers who have been unable to teach remotely during the current crisis, including contract and para-teachers, face mounting concerns about income and job security. In some parts of the world, teachers have been called on to physically staff schools to keep open key channels of communication with caregivers and communities, and to provide face-to-face education for the children of essential workers, including health workers, as well as for vulnerable children, thus putting their own health at risk to ensure that learning can continue.

Future teachers have also been impacted by the crisis: trainee teachers are among the learners affected by school closures, having not only lost access to face-to-face tutorials and in-person supervision at teacher training institutes, but also to essential practical teaching experience in the classroom. Even before the crisis, the world was facing [a shortage of qualified and trained teachers, with an estimated 69 million new teachers needed](#) to meet rising demand to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. The short- and long-term impact of the current pandemic on teachers' capacity to provide quality teaching and improve learning outcomes will therefore be significant unless the professional development needs of current and future teachers are addressed as part of the COVID-19 response.

In addition to prioritising the protection, safety, and wellbeing of learners during the current crisis, governments and other key partners have an ongoing [duty of care to education personnel](#), as set out in the [ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers](#) (1966) and the [UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#) (1997).

The UNESCO Teacher Task Force has expanded on what this duty of care means in the context of COVID-19 in a recent [Call to Action](#), which calls for governments and other key partners to:

- Preserve employment and wages;
- Prioritise teachers' and learners' health, safety, and wellbeing;
- Include teachers in developing COVID-19 education responses;
- Provide adequate professional support and training;
- Put equity at the heart of education responses; and
- Include teachers in aid responses.

For the duration of the crisis response and beyond, it will be vital to find ways to sustain and nurture teachers' professional networks, as well as the relationships between teachers and learners, their families and communities, in order to ensure the success of distance learning as a stop-gap measure before schools are ready to reopen. Further, it will be important for all stakeholders, including teachers and principals, to come together to reflect on, research, and systematically evaluate what interventions have worked and why, and where gaps remain, and how these can be addressed, to support more inclusive and equitable education systems that are resilient and responsive to future challenges and provide quality education for all.

Lessons learned from past practices and the current crisis

- **Reliable disaggregated data on teachers' needs and capacities and gaps in education provision are essential to effective crisis response:** Taking a crisis-sensitive approach to education workforce management involves building a comprehensive understanding of the teachers and other personnel who make up that workforce, as well as identifying where there are gaps in education provision.

Such an understanding not only allows governments and other partners to target particular groups of teachers and to more effectively tailor their support based on capacities and needs, but also to develop both short- and longer-term plans to address teacher shortages through data-driven teacher allocation. Unfortunately, in many countries around the world, data on teachers are fragmented and unreliable, or simply not available, making the development of effective crisis response strategies difficult, as has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the current crisis also represents an opportunity to begin collecting more comprehensive disaggregated data on teachers to inform the ongoing response and future education development strategies.

- **Job security and timely, adequate compensation help to ensure teacher motivation and retention during times of crisis:** Education systems that pay teachers well and on schedule are better able to recruit and retain qualified teachers, who report higher rates of job satisfaction and morale. In crisis contexts, paying teachers in full and on time is therefore crucial to ensuring that teachers are motivated to continue their important work, particularly as many of them are educating other people's children, even if it involves putting their own wellbeing at risk. A number of countries, including Uganda and the Philippines, have recognized the importance of adequate, timely compensation during the current crisis, making arrangements for teachers, such as early release of salaries, bonus hazard remuneration, and clothing allowances. Special consideration will also have to be made to determine how best to retain female teachers, as teaching is frequently a female profession, particularly at lower levels of the education system, and the continued engagement of female teachers is critical to ensuring girls return to school. Not all countries are able to mobilise the necessary financial resources during crisis, especially as teacher salaries tend to make up the lion's share of educational expenditure. While teacher salaries are typically not included as part of development aid, it may prove necessary to advocate for international assistance to support teacher compensation and job security, as has been provided through the [World Bank Group](#) to support health professionals during the current crisis.
- **Teachers need access to relevant, quality professional development and support during crisis:** Teachers and education personnel need access to relevant, quality professional development and support to be able to continue teaching in crisis contexts. While schools remain closed, much of this [professional development and support is being delivered through distance learning in various forms](#), including open educational resources (OERs), massive open online courses (MOOCs), and, where internet connectivity is a problem, public television and radio. In an attempt to provide support to educators at this time, UNESCO has collected a number of [resources for teachers to create their own digital content](#), and the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) is opening its [virtual campus](#) to teachers. MOOCs can be used to transform teachers from crisis-affected communities into teacher-educators by providing a platform for producing and disseminating knowledge and good practices based on teacher experiences, as has been demonstrated by past research.
- **The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that both initial and in-service teacher education are in need of reform:** Lessons learned from online training programmes in crisis contexts suggest that teachers have to understand and feel comfortable with the technology used in order to realise the full benefits of the training. Unfortunately, even in more stable contexts with adequate infrastructure and connectivity, many educators lack even the most basic ICT skills, meaning they will likely struggle with their own ongoing professional development, let alone with facilitating quality distance learning. In general, there is a global need to build an understanding of the e-readiness of educators and schools, and to modernize teacher education through curricular and pedagogical innovation to meet the needs of a post-industrial, knowledge-based global society. While distance learning cannot replace teachers, this crisis has highlighted that both initial and ongoing teacher education are in need of significant reform, allowing teachers to develop more learner-centred

practices and the use of ICTs for pedagogy, digital literacy, and data assessment to support curriculum differentiation and enable more individualized learning.

- **It is important to support teachers' wellbeing, social-emotional competencies, and resilience before, during, and after crisis:** Emerging research on teachers in crisis contexts has highlighted the importance of building the social-emotional competencies and resilience of teachers. Those who have built up their own psychosocial skills and who have access to regular professional debriefing and learning sessions with internal counselling services, are better equipped to provide psychosocial support to their students and help them navigate the uncertainty and anxiety that accompanies this crisis. Even in more stable contexts, failure to build social-emotional competencies can lead to stress and burnout, particularly among younger, more inexperienced teachers, which in turn can lead to absenteeism and attrition and poor teaching quality. For the future, these social-emotional skills need to be better integrated into initial and ongoing teacher education.
- **Supporting teacher initiatives and communities of practice will lead to a more effective crisis response:** Teachers around the world have highlighted the importance of collaboration and professional relationships with colleagues to improve their teaching practice. While the nature of the current pandemic has made it difficult for teachers to engage in face-to-face activities with peers, there are many examples of teachers connecting virtually to support each other through peer professional and psychosocial support, including [mobile coaching and mentoring, even in crisis contexts](#). A number of governments have recognized the importance of supporting teacher initiatives during the current crisis, for example, Costa Rica, Croatia, and the Philippines, who are [utilizing virtual platforms to provide support to teachers, and to progressively give them more responsibility for learning content](#). Governments and partners are well placed to strengthen the professional network between teachers with the support of national teacher organizations, as well as international bodies, including [Education International](#) and the [Teacher Task Force](#). In fact, Education International has released a [Call for Global Solidarity and a Human-Centred Approach to the Crisis](#), along with the Teacher Task Force's [Call for Action](#) in response to the pandemic.
- **A human-centred approach to the COVID-19 response is essential in ensuring that the relationship between teachers and learners is maintained:** Perhaps the greatest challenge posed by the current crisis to education access, quality, and equity is physical distancing, which makes it more difficult for teachers to maintain close relationships with learners, particularly those from the most disadvantaged groups. A number of countries are attempting to use WhatsApp and other forms of social media and messaging to [build and sustain networks between educators, students, and caregivers, for example, in Italy, Costa Rica, Iran, and Uganda](#). The importance of a human-centred approach to the current crisis is essential, both in the short-term, and in the longer term, when countries will need to evaluate and balance the risks and benefits to teachers, students, and families when determining when and how to reopen schools.

Key principles and practical tips for designing policy interventions

Overarching principles and guidance for the continuing COVID-19 response:

1. Inclusive education systems should consider the needs and rights of all learners and teachers, particularly the most vulnerable. Teachers and other education personnel are more than service providers; they are rights-holders, and potentially powerful agents of positive education reform, and should therefore be included in the formulation of the response to the COVID-19 crisis.
2. The first principle of humanitarian response is to do no harm. During this current crisis, countries need to carefully consider the potential risks to the safety, health, mental and emotional wellbeing,

education, and livelihoods of teachers and students of a given intervention before implementing it. This principle applies to decisions about when and how to reopen schools.

3. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) [Minimum Standards for Education](#), which were developed based on the experiences of thousands of education stakeholders working around the world, provide valuable guidance on how to respond to education during and after crisis. Specifically, the INEE Minimum Standards provide guidance on [Teachers and Other Education Personnel](#) and on [Teaching and Learning](#), but also on ensuring the participation, health, safety, and wellbeing of learners, educators, and communities during crisis response and recovery.

Practical tips on data collection on teachers' needs and capacities and gaps in provision

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Identify and document teachers' capacities and their professional, financial, and social-emotional needs.
 - ✓ Identify and document where there are gaps in education provision and learning to be urgently addressed once schools reopen.
 - ✓ Where possible, disaggregate available data on teachers by gender, location, and other parameters to better understand and address the differential impact of the pandemic on teachers.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Systematise the collection of disaggregated data on teachers through the development/maintenance of a teacher management information system (TMIS), to ensure policy-makers, planners, and practitioners are better equipped to make data-driven decisions in response to future crises.

Practical tips on compensation and job security

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure timely payment of salaries and benefits, including for teachers who are unable to work due to problems with health, care responsibilities, and/or internet connectivity.
 - ✓ Ensure hazard or bonus pay for teachers providing face-to-face instruction for children of essential workers and for teachers in no-tech contexts making home visits and consider how to provide additional support for teachers with childcare responsibilities.
 - ✓ Identify contract teachers/para-teachers who may be mobilised to support learning provision during school closures, and work to formalise arrangements with them.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Explore and advocate for sustained financing of the education sector, inclusive of the teaching workforce.

Practical tips on professional development and support

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Where possible, designate official platforms for the sharing of relevant resources and support.
 - ✓ Work with teacher education institutions and teacher organizations to select, develop, and distribute guidance on curriculum, essential subjects, and assessment of learning during crisis, and to train teachers on accelerated/remedial education approaches once schools reopen in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

- ✓ While schools are closed, ensure principals, teachers, and other education personnel are provided with relevant guidance on the remote provision of key lifesaving messages to students.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure principals, teachers, and other education personnel are sensitized on the risk of future COVID-19 outbreaks and on key prevention measures.
 - ✓ Invest in high-quality initial (pre-service) teacher education reform, including the development of a strong component on using ICTs for pedagogy and preparedness training for delivery of distance education, but also on education in emergencies/conflict and disaster risk reduction.
 - ✓ Invest in high-quality in-service teacher education reform, including the development of a strong component on adapting to new technologies as well as preventing, preparing for, and responding to crises.

Practical tips on providing psychosocial support to teachers and other education personnel

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure that teachers and other education personnel have access to resources to help build their own social-emotional skills during the crisis.
 - ✓ Set up a helpline or other support mechanism for teachers to access counselling support and refer/discuss child protection concerns.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure that social-emotional competence is included in pre-service teacher education as well as in formal ongoing professional development.
 - ✓ Establish formal units/mechanisms tasked with providing counselling support and advice for teachers and other education personnel at multiple levels, including the central government level and the school.

Practical tips on supporting teachers' professional relationships and including them in crisis response

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Consult with international, regional and national teacher organizations, as well as education leaders at decentralised levels, including principals, to ensure that teachers' voices and needs are represented in the crisis response, especially in decisions pertaining to the design, implementation and monitoring of distance education approaches and in the policy discussions and planning regarding the reopening of schools. Particular attention will need to be paid to ensure equal representation of women and men in the decision-making process, and that minority and marginalised voices are included in the discussion.
 - ✓ Consult with teacher education institutions to explore how to ensure continuity of supervision and professional development and support during school closure.
 - ✓ Facilitate communication between teachers (within and across learning institutions) by providing access to virtual platforms and/or through social media.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure that communities of practice and other professional relationships between educators are sustained in the long-term through adequate financial, institutional, and human investment.
 - ✓ Create thematic learning communities inclusive of teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, researchers, and policy-makers to support the continuous generation of new knowledge for teacher policy and practice.

- ✓ Evaluate and document lessons learned from interventions (including through teacher research), according to what worked and what didn't and how we can be better prepared for future crises.

Practical tips on supporting relationships between teachers, learners, and caregivers

- *In the short-term:*
 - ✓ Designate staff members as communication focal points, facilitate communication between school staff and learners and their families, and provide official updates on the crisis response from school leadership to members of the school community on a regular basis.
- *In the medium- to long-term:*
 - ✓ Ensure up-to-date contact details are available for all members of the school community, including staff and students, particularly those deemed most vulnerable.
 - ✓ Formalise communication mechanisms, including mechanisms for following up with at-risk learners.
 - ✓ Solicit feedback from learners and their families on their educational experiences during school closures and provide formal opportunities for learners and their families to share their concerns about education moving forward.

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About UNESCO Education Sector's Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by UNESCO's International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP) and Section for Teacher Development, with support from UNESCO Offices in Santiago and Beirut.

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