

Insights: What Students Need Now

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The pandemic has caused a level of disruption to the learning and social-emotional wellbeing of young people around the world that is unprecedented outside of times of war. Educators and policy makers around the world are debating what we should focus on now to ensure that this disruption does not create a lifelong burden for this generation.

Over the past several months, we have engaged in a conversation across the Teach For All network around the question of “What do students need now?” While many voices in this debate are focused on remediating learning loss and spreading ed tech innovations, and some are also focused on improving the provision of social-emotional learning in and around classrooms, an additional theme came through most saliently from our network that we are not hearing as loudly in the global debate:

Students need teachers who view them as equal partners, and foster their ownership and agency over their learning.

While many school systems around the world are making decisions on students’ behalf around what they need in order to catch up lost learning, they are only rarely involving students in the decisions that affect them. We need to open up spaces that are typically reserved for adults and involve our students as equal partners in decisions at the school and system levels.

We also need to support teachers to foster student agency and ownership over their own learning at the classroom level. Educators across our network are telling us how central this is to students’ engagement and motivation, keeping them interested in their education and seeing its relevance to their lives. They are also seeing how empowering students speeds up their learning. And they are convinced that there is no way to prepare students to shape a better future without treating them as leaders today.

Perspectives from our network:

“We need to shift our role from delivering content to facilitating learning, using project-based activities focused on children’s ideas. We need to unlearn that the power lies only in the hands of teachers and aim attention to collective leadership, learning from each other and paying attention to the complexity of the learning process where the two main roles, student-teacher, must be interchangeable.”

– Mălina Luciana Flocea and Ionela Munteanu, teachers, Teach For Romania

“Are you willing to consider that a fifteen year old, while preserving the most beautiful part of their inner selves, can also exercise leadership beyond your wildest expectations, and help change education today?”

– Franco Mosso, CEO, Enseña Perú

“Students’ voices need to be heard and their actions need to be seen. We need to listen to what they want to learn, what they want to be, and respect their decisions.”

– Noppamart Kamsaen, teacher, Teach For Thailand

“As a result of COVID-19, many more students are dropping out of school, and the idea of memorizing more content for exams is not convincing them to come back. Instead, we see students energized by being able to do something to make a difference for themselves and their communities – now. The great opportunity we have in front of us is to reshape education from a process of depositing knowledge into children, into a process that develops leaders who will lead themselves, and us all, towards a sustainable and equitable future.”

– Chan Soon Seng, CEO, Teach For Malaysia

“Our students know what they need. We need to listen to them.”

– Gabriela Monteza, Head of Training, Enseña Perú

"Meeting a child's potential is to put the power of learning in the child's hand. It requires a deep knowledge of who the child is, the developmental needs, the social circumstances, and what they are actually interested in."

– Nnaceesay Marenah, CEO, Teach For The Gambia

“In a war-torn country like Afghanistan having hope for a better future after completing school and university seems a dream far-away. For our children to still have hope and return to schools they need to see change and impact every single day. They need a teacher who helps them identify their potential and build trust in themselves that they are improving every single day and they themselves are the hope for building a better future for themselves and all the nation.”

– Arman Rahmatullah, CEO, Teach For Afghanistan

“Things that I [went through] in my 10th grade are completely different from what my students experienced so why don't we actually ask them: 'What do you need and how do you want your future to be shaped?' considering they're seeing so much with the pandemic and raging war?”

– Oindrila Sanyal, teacher, Teach For India

Implications for our work:

- We will conduct student and teacher hackathons to produce guidance for teachers on how they can foster student ownership and agency in their classrooms
- We are developing simple guidance for educational leaders about how to center student voice and leadership at school and system levels