A new approach to Africa's education crisis

by Jack O’Sullivan
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Distance learning at home is helping thousands of young women to complete their education and go on to train as primary school teachers. Could Africa’s teenagers benefit more generally from such opportunities to finish their secondary schooling?

Primary education in many African countries is in crisis. A massive expansion in free or compulsory schooling to age 11 has led to classes of up to a 180 in some rural areas that are beset by teacher shortages. Existing problems have been compounded in countries such as Sierra Leone where civil war and Ebola have decimated the numbers of primary school teachers.

Meanwhile, there is a separate crisis at secondary level, particularly for girls, most of who fail to complete their secondary schooling because of domestic duties, early pregnancies and marriage, and sexual harassment at school. More boys finish, but their secondary drop-out rate also remains high. Additionally, some countries have secondary places for only half of those leaving primary school. Such inadequate access to schooling – compounded by a lack of relevant curricula – means that young people often lose out and their countries’ respective economies are badly damaged.

“Helping young women to finish their own schooling at home, so they can train as teachers, is helping to solve the teacher shortage. It also prompts a pressing question: should a ‘Distance Secondary School for Africa’s Teenagers’ be created to give everyone a second chance? ”

There are many hurdles that adolescent girls face particularly in rural secondary schools in some African countries, says Kimberly Safford, Senior Lecturer in International Development and Teacher Education at the UK’s Open University. "Perhaps, you’ve been up since 5am to draw water, gather wood, make the fire, and cook breakfast. You’ve walked five miles to school. You may have been harassed on the way by some boys on motor cycles. You feel scared.

“Maybe, you’re late for school so the teacher gives you a humiliating punishment, yelling at you and making you sweep the school yard. He might say something like, ‘Education is wasted on you. Why don’t you just go and get married?’ You’ve never had a female teacher. You’ve never even seen one. If you start your period at school, you’ll be sent home – there probably aren’t suitable toilet facilities. Your teacher has hinted that if you want good grades, you’ll have to have sex with him. Your parents need you at home. They can’t afford the fees. They’d like you to get married. It’s
hardly surprising that only a third of girls finish secondary school in some countries.”

**Remote technology can fill gaps in learning**

An innovative, large-scale solution to both overcrowded primary classrooms and poor secondary school completion is showing considerable success. It’s been pioneered by the Open University, which was founded in the 1960s to develop distance learning at a tertiary level. The university has created distance learning materials in Malawi and Sierra Leone to help young women finish their secondary schooling at home. That means they can then go on to train as primary school teachers.

So far, the Open University, collaborating with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), has recruited thousands of these young women who had been unable to finish secondary school. It’s designed distance learning materials in core subjects like English and Mathematics, so they can pass school exams after studying at home.

The young women typically have weekly tutorial sessions with about 20 students, led by secondary school subject teachers and there are revision camps before the exams. Learning materials are printed. However, in India, the Open University is training primary and secondary school teachers using low cost data cards, preloaded with materials, that can be inserted into inexpensive tablets and unsophisticated mobile phones that have a reasonable screen size. Neither of these options requires internet access.

Kimberly Safford says: “We see no reason why this approach cannot be trialled with secondary schools students more widely because, even in the poorest most remote parts of Africa, people have mobile phones and we know that access to technology can be a motivation to study. You can be out in the back of beyond in Sierra Leone and find mobile phone-charging and top-up stations. Everywhere you see ‘Moni nay u fon’, which means ‘Top up your phone’.”

**Programme trains thousands of female primary teachers**

As well as studying for their school leaving exams, the young women, aged between 18 and 24, also work as Learning Assistants in local primary schools. One year later – qualified academically and with useful work experience – they go on to primary teacher training college. Thousands of young women have used this route already in Malawi. Sierra Leone has adopted the programme, with 500 young women starting teacher training last month (September 2016) and another 500 hopefully starting the Learning Assistant programme, supported by Plan International. Other African countries are exploring this model of distance study combined with work experience.

Recruiting teaching assistants (which are rare in Africa, unlike in Europe and the US) is not just helpful to the young women involved. Research in these contexts has also shown that extra teaching support in the classroom improves learning by reducing the pressure in over-crowded classrooms and giving attention to pupils who may otherwise be ignored. It brings up-to-date ideas about child friendly learning into the classroom. It also addresses the gender imbalance in primary schools where most teachers are male.
“Distance learning could be a viable alternative for many African countries which are struggling financially to provide on-the-ground infrastructure and teachers that can offer young people a conventional secondary education.”

Having more women in schools has increased attendance of girls and decreased corporal punishment, explains Kimberly Safford. It also provides role models for girls and for boys and has reduced the numbers of pregnancies and harassment for girls.

“These young women gain status from being Learning Assistants. Children and parents call them ‘Miss’ or ‘Auntie’,” she says. “They lead assemblies and take the register. We’ve written a handbook for them that helps them support reading and mathematics, how to help children with special needs, how to provide positive discipline and other issues such as how to communicate with parents. Typically, the head teacher mentors them.”

Distance secondary school for Africa’s teenagers?

This novel approach and its success prompt a pressing question. Could we transform the educational opportunities for young African women and men more widely by providing distance secondary learning at a large scale? Should a “Distance Secondary School for Africa’s Teenagers” be created to give all of them a second chance?

Ms Safford explains: “Even for small farmers or market traders, the benefits could be considerable from having the chance to finish their education from home. Being literate provides lots of benefits. For example, it improves health and life expectancy. It’s self-evident that it also means you can read government information, instructions on medicines, on farm chemicals and equipment. Numeracy makes it possible to get involved in trading and harder to be cheated in financial interactions. And education opens opportunities for many more jobs.”

There have always been “correspondence courses” available to African students, some of them online, but these have been private enterprises, linked typically to passing exams set by Western exam boards. There are also one or two African countries, such as Namibia, that have some distance provision for secondary pupils; some of these are moving online. However, a “Distance Secondary School for Africa’s Teenagers” could address poor access to schooling more comprehensively across those regions that have compatible curricula and similar examinations systems, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

Such a development could be expensive, perhaps requiring international aid to fund materials and mobile devices. However, existing mobile phones and platforms could be used. Additionally, there may be scope for market-based solutions and governments could play a part in funding, for example, the digitization of content. The Open University’s project in Malawi, funded by the Scottish government and in Sierra Leone, financed by the British government and Plan International, shows there is a willingness to support such developments.

Distance learning could be a viable alternative for many African countries which are struggling financially to provide on-the-ground infrastructure and teachers that can offer young people a conventional secondary education.

Ms Safford says: “The overwhelming response to our initiatives in Malawi and Sierra Leone show
that this is a valued route to education and training. People volunteer to do it. In both countries, FAWE conducts widespread public awareness campaigns so that husbands, fathers and communities understand the importance of girls finishing their education.”

Universities across the world are busy producing ever more tertiary MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) for undergraduates. Perhaps they should also focus, like the Open University, on building the secondary skills of those they hope to recruit. This may involve, like any such large initiatives, significant problems around working at scale with different education systems that have different, and perhaps incompatible, content and curriculum. But the need is there and educationalists are beginning to sketch out some fresh approaches.

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