Emergency-proofing schools

How can education systems prepare for uncertainties?

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The unprecedented school closures due to COVID-19 were a shock to many teachers, parents, and students, who were not equipped for home-learning over a long period of time. It is important that lessons are learnt, so that schools are better able to react quickly and effectively in response to any future disruptions.

Teaching from a distance has been a new challenge for teachers who are used to delivering face-to-face lessons in a room full of students. Schools have had to use technology to adapt, helping students continue to learn as well as possible at home. But this has not been hugely successful, with students in the UK working just 2.5 hours a day on average, and many doing much less or even none. We don’t know exactly what the knock-on effect of this massively reduced time in school will be, but it is likely that students will be behind academically compared to what would be expected if normal school had continued.

In light of this, schools shouldn’t simply go back to normal when students return - there is work to be done to improve education systems for further unforeseen circumstances.

The EdTech Hub published a report by the Education Development Trust on lessons learned from supporting education in conflicts and emergencies. Recognising that schools may well close again, whether due to further disease outbreaks, climate change, or conflict, the report says that now is the time to prepare. Building systems that support continuity of learning remains an ongoing challenge for the future, not just for the present pandemic. One of the report’s concluding recommendations for policymakers is to develop education technology resources to support shock responses in preparation for future emergencies.

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The report also recommended teacher training on good practice in remote education – both for synchronous learning, where the teacher and students engage in real time, and asynchronous learning, where students work independently. While there is limited evidence around what works in remote teaching, rapid reviews (such as from the Education Endowment Foundation and the EdTech Hub) have summarised what we do know, and it is likely that new evidence will emerge following the pandemic.

Providing teachers with up-to-date evidence and strategies for remote teaching in advance of future emergencies will allow them to act more quickly, confidently, and effectively when the unexpected happens.

Given the increasing attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers during the pandemic, preparatory measures should focus on learning opportunities that reach those who are most affected by school closures. The absolute minimum measure should surely be access to technology at home for all students. In England, laptops (and internet access) were pledged to some disadvantaged students during the pandemic, and yet seven weeks later, there were reports that many had not received them. Without laptops and internet access, any education technology infrastructure that is built for shock responsiveness will not reach all students.

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Developing education technology infrastructure with a view to future emergencies will have additional benefits outside the context of emergency school closures. Access to laptops and the internet broadens opportunities for homework and extracurricular learning in those who ordinarily have no or limited computer access at home.

Schools that are well-equipped to teach remotely will be better able to support students who come to school less regularly due to disability, for example. When severe weather prevents some students and teachers from attending school, teaching and learning will be able to continue smoothly if remote learning infrastructure is set up well.

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Any reforms should be very carefully considered and not made hastily. Teachers, students, and parents should all be consulted – now that they have experienced life during an emergency, they will know where changes are most needed. It is important that the opportunity is taken for lessons to be learned and changes to be made, so that schools are prepared to continue educating during unforeseen future emergencies.
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