Strengthening Inclusion in Learning through Empowerment of Rural School Stakeholders in Pakistan and Afghanistan: Piloting and Testing Community-Based System Dynamics View Poster.

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The following is a project update written by Jean-Francois Trani, PhD.

“Why don’t our teachers teach us the same way?”

Energized with a pen in hand, the little girl in grade 3 asked a tired facilitator an iteration of our initial research question – “What factors influence the actual learning of all children in your classroom”- at the end of an intense 4-hour Group Model Building (GMB) workshop with five other girls. This session in September at a primary school in Kabul – one of the 600 sessions we plan to do across Afghanistan and Pakistan over the course of 3 years – aimed to elicit factors that influence the child learning experience, create causal connections, identify systematic feedback loops and, finally, suggest action ideas. Regardless of country, province, or gender, this same question has been asked by students over and over again, highlighting the need across the world for child centered teaching methods, especially in low-income countries.

In a 2017 UNESCO Institute for Statistics report, 617 million children and adolescents – or six out of 10 globally – are not reaching minimum levels in literacy and mathematics. Our research investigates if poor learning outcomes can be overcome by promoting school community participation in the education process.

In 2015, we developed the initial idea that Community-Based System Dynamics could change the way we educate children in primary schools by asking them – as well as parents, teachers and school committee members – what changes they want to see in the classroom system to learn better. Community-Based System Dynamics (CBSD) is a participatory approach promoting local ownership in the process of deciphering and changing complex systems from the feedback perspective of System Dynamics, and we hypothesize that strengthening existing school accountability mechanisms through this method will enhance inclusion and the learning experience of disadvantaged children.
However, we took a bet by delving into uncharted territory: do 9- and 10-year-olds understand the rules of the system well enough to engage in such workshops? Our observations until now have astonished us: the young students’ stimulating questions, their passionate engagement during the workshops, and their eagerness to participate and explain what factors impact their learning in the classroom have shown us that not only can they indeed succeed in participating in these workshops, but also that their outputs are as complex and intuitive as the adults’.

And we are not the only ones invigorated by their dedication! Anyone who assists the workshops – from donor agencies, to education ministry officials, to teachers themselves – is fascinated to see how children strive successfully to define the problem.

A teacher, looking at a connection circle done by children in grades 3 and 5, gasped in admiration and surprise: “Our students can do that?”

The representative of a donor agency in Pakistan told us, “People in the Ministry of Education think students should just sit and listen. We need to show them this”.

An NGO partner education officer in Pakistan leading the facilitation team with group of illiterate mothers of students from a Hindi minority found it “mind-blowing” as the mothers used drawings of variables to design a diagram of a complex system of learning. One such mother, who was sick from a toothache, came directly from the field where she had been cultivating since early in the morning and refused to take the offer of resting after two hours of the workshop, emphasizing that “this is the opportunity for us to say what we have to say, and it will not come again!”

Key goals within CBSD practice is to build capacities of those involved within the processes to better understand their mental models and the connections and feedback present within their environment, as well as feel empowered to find meaningful interventions that resonate with them, allowing them to participate in the change that they want to see. In just a couple of months, it seems that we are on track to win our bet. In the schools where we operate, stakeholders – especially children – have identified ways to change the system, from teacher training in child-centered methods to raising awareness about –and support vulnerable children from minority or poor backgrounds or those with special needs. The next step: implementing what they decided and see what works!

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