Educating the African Learner in an Era of Crises: what are the options

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This is my third DETA conference and I'm very grateful to colleagues from the University of Pretoria and the host institution, the University of Lagos for the invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning has been a regular supporter of DETA conferences and we are proud to be associated with you as you undertake to reflect on 'Educating the African Learner in an Era of Crises'—I have tried to explore the options in this presentation prepared jointly with my colleague, Dr Betty Ogange.

Most of you know the Commonwealth of Learning or COL well. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government with our headquarters in Vancouver, Canada and a regional office in Delhi.

Our mission is to help the Commonwealth Member States and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to quality education and training.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

This aligns our work closely with SDG4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all. SDG 4 has several targets: one, quality education must lead to effective learning outcomes, two, we must focus on developing skills for employment, entrepreneurship and global citizenship, and three, the need for having qualified teachers in place to achieve these targets

In this presentation 'Educating the African Learner in an Era of Crises: what are the options?', I will first look at five crises that impact education and the teaching community and provide an overview of who the African learner is. This will be followed by some of the ways in which the teaching community is responding to the crises. I will then give you a brief description of COL's various contributions that could be of interest. Finally, I will suggest three strategies that could

help us improve teacher education in SSA. You too will have the opportunity to propose concrete actions that will help us to collectively address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

First what are the key crises that we are confronted with? Let me refer to five.

Climate change is no longer a distant threat. Every year nearly 40 million children have their education disrupted by natural disasters or disease. When cyclone Idai hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe this March, 600 schools were damaged with an adverse impact on hundreds of thousands of children.

We are witnessing unprecedented levels of migration and displacement today. This puts a great burden on the education systems and on the teaching community. Many countries in Africa are struggling to fulfil the international commitment to respect the right to education for all. The educational needs of nomadic communities or refugees have to be met and but are our teachers trained to address the challenges affecting displaced or nomadic learners? Uganda needs 7000 additional primary school teachers for refugee children. In Dadaab refugee camps, the teacher pupil ratio could be 1:56 in primary schools and due to scarcity of resources, four children have to share one textbook. In Chad refugee camp, 30% of the children from Central African Republic, Nigeria and Sudan are illiterate.

There were 264 million out of school in 2017, with the highest numbers in SSA. SSA has 21% children who are denied the right to education. The majority of the African population lives in rural areas and these children are twice as likely to be out of school as compared to their urban counterparts.

But even when children are in school, are they learning? The World Bank estimates that 56% of the children in school are not learning. In West and Central Africa, less than 45% of Grade 6 students achieved competency level in maths and reading. Similarly, in South Africa, the majority of Grade 4 students could only demonstrate the capacity of those in Grade 1. In addition, there is the problem of teacher absenteeism and even when they are present, are they performing to full capacity? One study showed that public school teachers exhibited higher levels of both presenteeism and burnout than teachers in private schools (Ferreira & Martinez 2012)

Teacher education programmes tend to prioritise general knowledge over pedagogy and in SSA, teacher education programmes are too short compared to Asian countries. We don't seem to have made the transition from teacher centred to learner centred approaches and very little attention is paid to developing teaching capacity to address the needs of different types of learners. And as a World Bank study points out, 40% of the teachers in SSA do not have mastery of their subject. These then are five major crises that governments are trying to address—what role can the teaching community play in mitigating some of these challenges and facilitating the success of the African learner?

Who is the African learner that we serve?

Africa has a population of 1.2 billion and it continues to grow. By 2030 there will be an additional 170 million children in need of education and training.

Young people under 18 constitute 47% of Africa's population. The number of youth is expected to double by 2055. Which means that this young continent will need increased capacity and resources, both human and infrastructural to absorb the large numbers.

Even today, existing numbers of primary school age children do not have access to schools. Countries such as Liberia, Eritrea, Sudan Djibouti and Equatorial Guinea have the highest percentage of out of school youth. In addition, 23% of all girls are out of school as compared to 19% boys.

Most African learners study in a language different from their mother tongue. Several studies support the importance of learning in the mother tongue at the primary stage. Even parents can play an active role in their children's education if conducted in the mother tongue. Teachers often are not very proficient in the second language and there is a dearth of textbooks in the local languages.

What is the African learner's access to ICTs as compared to the global population? The average internet use in SSA is approximately 22% as compared to over 48%. The real growth in the last decade has taken place in mobile use, which stands at 72%. Globally, mobile subscriptions have touched 103%.

Looking at all these data, we can conclude that the African learner is young, out of school with the majority living in rural and remote areas. The African learner often comes from resource poor communities, learns in a second language and has limited access to technology.

How does the African learner compare with the millennial learner? The millennial is a digital native for whom doing is more important than knowing; they prefer multi-tasking; want instant feedback, believe in collaboration and team work and are increasingly becoming producers rather than simple consumers of knowledge. Would the young African learner answer to this description?

How can we respond to the needs of this diverse and changing constituency of learners within the context of the crises that we face today?

The first response would be to increase the numbers of teachers. In SSA, 2.2 million teachers are needed to address the growing demand. In addition, 3.9 million more are needed to replace those leaving the profession. 70% of countries worldwide face acute shortages of teachers, rising to 90% at secondary level.

Added to this is the issue of quality and untrained teachers. While Rwanda has the highest number of trained teachers at 93% and Malawi at 91%, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda need to work proactively to increase the number of trained teachers.

Can in-service teacher training help address the issues of quantity and quality? One study shows that when teachers receive in-service training conducted off-site, they are less likely to apply the knowledge and skills learnt to their classroom practice (Pryor et al 2012). Another study shows that professional development based on collaboration has the greatest impact (OECD, 2019). A case can then be made for school-based teacher development using collaborative approaches.

John Hattie of the University of Melbourne looked at 65,000 research papers on what contributes most to learning. He found that class sizes, uniforms, and streaming of students by ability make little difference to student learning. What really matters to student performance is teachers' expertise and what they do in class.

Let me share the findings of a preliminary study that COL conducted here in Nigeria regarding the Child Friendly Schools (CFS) project that it had worked on jointly with UNICEF. A 2-credit compulsory course on CFS was made mandatory for all pre-service teacher training in 150 colleges of education in Nigeria in 2015. The study focused on two groups: CFS trained teachers in 4 treatment schools vs. non-CFS trained teachers in 4 schools (4 urban, 4 rural).

The CFS trained teachers showed better classroom teaching and pedagogy. There was no consistent evidence that the training led to improved student performance in English tests—however, there was an improvement in maths results. The challenges identified were large class sizes, dearth of resources, classroom space and lack of incentives and support for teachers.

Because of the numerous variables and external factors, it is difficult to trace a direct impact of teacher training to teacher quality and learning outcomes. Evidence from various studies conducted in Nigeria clearly (e.g. EDOREN 2018, EDOREN 2015, UNICEF 2013,) indicate that contextual factors such as lack of textbooks and other teaching learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, lack of adequate support for teachers, low teacher pay and unsatisfactory teachers' condition of service are serious challenges and make it impossible to make significant improvements in learning outcomes or even improve subject content knowledge of pupils.

An OECD study found that certified teachers and most forms of professional development have a limited impact on student performance. So what kind of training do teachers need?

A study from South Africa shows that 71% teachers participate in courses and seminars. The teachers surveyed expressed a particular need for training in special needs and multicultural and multilingual settings. What kind of professional development would work?

According to Fryer from Harvard, teachers need managed professional development. This means that teachers are given clear guidelines on how to change their practice, receive regular feedback and are mentored by highly skilled teachers on an ongoing basis. One-off teacher training workshops have little impact and COL is adopting a holistic and in-depth approach to teachers' professional development.

Let us look at how COL has responded to the five crises that we referred to.

COL worked with Nigeria's National Teachers Institute to develop a Green Teacher programme which ensures that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children from the early stages. Similarly courses on climate change have been integrated into teacher training programmes in Kiribati.

COL provided support to the Federal College of Education Yola, Nigeria to train nomadic teachers on constructivist pedagogy. Today, the National Commission for Nomadic Education continues to conduct a number of activities that have impacted on the education programme of nomadic groups in the Nigeria.

COL's open schooling model is being implemented in several Commonwealth countries to bring out of school youth into the educational mainstream. The current approach is moving from a print- and venue-based model to a digital- and partly-venue-based model, where teachers are still key to providing some face-to-face support. These teachers need to learn how to shift from being content deliverers to being facilitators of learning in resource-based learning approaches

Utilising Open Educational Resources (OER) is a cost-effective and scalable approach for teachers' professional development. COL developed OER for English Language Teaching, a free resource to improve the quality of English teaching. This free content on English Language Teaching has been used to train teachers in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Teachers have indicated that students are already demonstrating better learning outcomes. The teachers and the students in the classes are the same—but what is new are the teaching resources which are making the difference. Another COL initiative, the TEL MOOC accommodates the teacher's busy schedule as it offers flexibility with options for learning the content, which is available as readings, videos, discussions among other options.

COL developed the Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration or CCTI to complement the UNESCO ICT competency framework. This is an advanced course for teachers and school leaders in integrating ICT into school management and teaching and learning. Another COL initiative is its C-DELTA programme for improving digital learning skills for both teachers and learners and is being implemented in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda.

COL has developed resources to support exchange of knowledge on pedagogical practice through in-school, national and cross-national Communities of Practice, for improved learning outcomes in Sierra Leone.

A school-based teacher development programme for Upper Basic and Senior Secondary Schools is being implemented in The Gambia

In partnership with the University of Fort Hare, South Africa, COL is supporting the capacity development of academic staff at the Faculty of Education to enable them to provide mentorship to teachers in secondary schools.

The COL approach has been threefold: to influence policy at national and institutional levels through advocacy, to develop and share resources as OER and to build the capacity of institutions and individuals to offer better quality teacher education.

In conclusion let us look at the steps we need to take to negotiate the road ahead. Let me refer to three.

First, teachers need to become lifelong learners who are constantly renewing their skills and competencies to stay relevant to changing demographics and technologies. But a critical change will occur if we move beyond simply acquiring skills and competencies to transformative learning. This would mean not just adapting to changing circumstances but acquiring the ability to change circumstances.

According to Mezirow transformative learning enables us to make our own interpretations rather than act on the beliefs, judgements and feelings of others. We need to make our own

interpretations—transformative learning develops autonomous thinkers. Teachers who are autonomous thinkers will produce autonomous learners who continue to learn throughout life.

Second, teachers need to harness the potential of technologies for their personal development and for teaching and learning. A study in the US showed that only 17% of the teachers were digitally ready while the majority were either cautious clickers or reluctant to use technology.

If we have to leave no teacher behind in SSA, we must use technologies that are both appropriate and affordable. The content must be designed for low-bandwith situations and we need to develop and share OER in local languages; use social media to engage our students and foster peer to peer interactions either online or using blended approaches.

The teaching community is still not drawing upon high quality OER to strengthen the teaching-learning process. Hundreds of free repositories are available and a survey conducted by COL showed that teachers were not aware of the available resources and where to find them.

When asked about the benefits of OER in the same survey, stakeholders said that the use of OER reduced costs, provided access to quality content, led to continuous quality improvement and saved time. If we used OER to develop low-cost textbooks, would we not be able to put a book in the hand of every African learner?

Fortunately there is an increasing awareness among governments on the value of OER and ICT in Education where several African countries have developed ICT in Education policies. In fact Nigeria has developed a national OER policy for HE—Mauritius and Zambia are developing national level policies. There are several instances of institutional OER policies and strategies in place.

The third step is to establish communities of practice. Technologies make it easier to set up and sustain such communities which must be based on shared values, respect for different views, willingness to share, trust and collegiality.

In fact, collegiality goes beyond camaraderie, fellowship and fellow feeling. We must observe the duties of collegiality in a spirit of respect so that the duty can be transformed into a virtue.

Teacher development programmes need to focus on three essential literacies as proposed by Robert Aoun. First, the human literacy, will help teachers to make ethical choices, develop empathy for their learners and equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Teachers must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us and interpret it meaningfully for their learners. Technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Teachers must be able to use technology effectively to deal with the digital natives that they teach.

Let me now leave you with some questions that you can discuss in your groups and share your three to five top recommendations with us all.

Let me also invite you to visit the COL website and make use of the various resources that we have developed with you and for you.