Embracing Digital Skills: Now and Tomorrow

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe

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Summary

This policy brief accompanies the summary report of the evaluation of the Rapid Teacher Training programme,[1] which assesses programme effectiveness. The underlying rationale for the programme is to equip teachers to deliver distance education through ICT, and that this will strengthen the resilience of the education system.

Background

There is broad consensus that the teaching profession requires better training and support in new methods of education delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic presented one of the biggest disruptions of education systems in history. In Zimbabwe, the extended closure of schools threatened to reverse hard won gains in areas such as numeracy and literacy. Most public schools did not have the capacity nor the resources to adjust to teaching during the pandemic. Many crisis responses relied on technology, and it was difficult for Zimbabwean teachers to incorporate technology and alternative means of learning (including open, distance and online learning). It appears that in sub-Saharan Africa, only 64% of primary and 50% of secondary teachers have received even minimum training, which frequently does not include basic digital skills.[2]

It would, therefore, appear prudent to attempt to equip teachers with the requisite educational technology skills. Against this backdrop, UNESCO (Regional Office Southern Africa) and Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education developed a professional development programme for teachers to support the continuation of teaching and learning during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

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[1] Summary Report: Evaluation Of The Rapid Teacher Training (2022).
https://doi.org/10.53832/opendeved.0266

[2] International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, "COVID-19: A global Crisis for Teaching and Learning", available at https://teachertaskforce.org/knowledge-hub/covid-19-global-crisis-teaching-and-learning

Findings

The Rapid Teacher Training programme sought to develop and enhance digital literacy skills among teachers. While a range of technologies were introduced, including learning management systems, teachers related most to low-tech applications, such as WhatsApp. This was partially because WhatsApp can be easily accessed, even in areas with poor connectivity. Teachers embraced this low-tech option and were able to use the application across multiple tasks, including formulating lesson plans, group discussions, assessment activities and submission of assignments. Building on their previous skills, teachers gained increased confidence in using the app.

Policy recommendations

To build upon the momentum created by the Rapid Teacher Training programme, and mitigate against future disruptions, the following options could be pursued.

Focus on low-tech tools. The use of low-tech tools such as WhatsApp (on Android and on KaiOS) has proven to be easily accessible, efficient, and productive. Policymakers should explore ways to promote and expand these platforms.

Determine avenues for monetary and non-monetary incentives. The question of teacher motivation and incentives requires further investigation. Policymakers should identify strategies that could improve morale.

Strengthen teacher engagement and participation through sustained training and development.

Building a culture of knowledge sharing through platforms like WhatsApp will promote a culture of collaboration rather than competition.

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