



**Webinar: The Educational Response to COVID-19 in South Asia**  
**The Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute**  
*Panelist Transcript*  
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**Moderator**

- **Dr. Jennifer Leaning**, Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

**Panelists**

- **Dr. Caroline Buckee**, Associate Professor of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
- **Dr. Sheila Jasanoff**, Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies, Harvard Kennedy School
- **Dr. Victoria D'Souza**, Professor of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Harvard University

*COVID-19 has shut down traditional education programs throughout South Asia, from primary education to higher education. This panel discusses the unique challenges the region is facing in the education sector, such as access to technology and the potential long-term effects of distance learning.*

**BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION:**

**Chelsea Ferrell:** I'm Chelsea Ferrell, the Assistant Director of the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University. The mission of the institute is to engage through interdisciplinary research to advance and deepen the understanding of critical issues relevant to South Asia and its relationship with the world. As part of this engagement, the institute is running a series of spring and summer on a number of topics related to COVID-19. We're so glad you joined us today and please consider joining us for our remaining seminars.

A couple of housekeeping items for today, today's session will be recorded. During the Question and Answer session, you can submit questions directly to moderators via the Q&A function on Zoom. Due to the large number of attendees at today's seminar, we unfortunately will not be able to cover all questions. There will be a short survey automatically sent to you at the end of this session. We would ask that you kindly fill this out.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce the moderator of today's panel Dr. Zainab Qureshi. Dr. Qureshi is the Director of the LEAPS Program, Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) at the Harvard Kennedy School. She oversees implementation at the RISE Program, Research on Improving Systems of Education in Pakistan and is currently working at education response to the Covid-19 crisis there. She has previously worked for various organizations across the education sector in Pakistan, implementing low-cost education delivery programs and designing alternative models for low-income schools. Thank you for being with us today, Zainab.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Thank you, Chelsea. Thank you for having me. Hello everyone and welcome to this panel discussion on education responses to Covid-19 in South Asia. Since we are talking about South Asia, I'd like to take a minute and begin by talking about some tragic news coming from South Asia. Actually, in the last two, three days, first we had the cyclone that hit Bangladesh and India, that has taken a lot of lives and a heavy toll there, and this morning we heard about a tragic plane crash in Pakistan with a 100 people onboard. This is still a developing situation, so we don't know the extent of the damage yet. But you know, it's important to understand that South Asia is grappling with issues beyond the coronavirus crisis right now. And, coming to Covid-19, Covid-19 has shut down schools all across the world, it has shut down schools throughout South Asia, primary schools to higher education. The region suffers from a bunch of unique challenges in any case, it has suffered

from a learning crisis for decades before Covid-19 hit. Covid-19 is expected to further cause learning losses and exacerbate the education crisis across all countries in South Asia.

To discuss these issues further, and to give us their thoughts and events and responses countries, we have with us two distinguished professors from Harvard University today. Professor Fernando Reimers is the Ford Foundation Professor of Practice in International Education and the Director of the Global Education Innovation Initiative, and of the International Education Policy Program at Harvard University. Professor Fernando Reimers has repurposed a lot of his work since Covid-19 and had to actually do a lot of response work to the coronavirus crisis across countries, across the world. So, we'll be super excited to hear from him about what he's doing, what he's seeing, and how countries are responding.

Professor Asim Khwaja is the Director of the Center for International Development and the Sumitomo-Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development, Professor of International Finance and Development at the Harvard Kennedy School. He is also the co-founder of the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan and has also worked on education amongst other issues, especially in Pakistan for a long time. Very excited to have you both onboard, and to begin this conversation, I'd kind of like to frame what we are talking about with two sort of main overarching questions. And the first I guess would be what do you think are going to be both the short and the long-term consequences of Covid-19 on education in South Asia, and what are countries doing to respond to this? How are they preparing to mitigate some of these effects that they are bound to face. I'd like to invite Fernando to go first.

**Professor Reimers:** Thank you very much Zainab. Let me just share my screen so that I can share a few slides. Can you see my screen now? So, on that link at the top, you have a section of our website where we have placed the materials we have produced on how it is that Covid-19 is impacting education and how governments are responding. And essentially, I'm going to talk about three things we have done. One is a survey that we conducted about seven weeks ago now to identify the early impacts, the emerging needs generated by Covid-19 emerging responses. We have, I'm in the middle of analyzing a follow-up survey right now. The second thing we did was to create and annotate, to curate at least annotated resources to support online learning. And the third bucket of things we are doing is to produce a hundred case studies of innovative responses to sustain educational opportunities and I will just be introducing those right now.

So, what we found six weeks ago is that most schools shut down schools and that they were unprepared for this crisis and the response one could anticipate from that was a tremendous loss in educational opportunity and the exacerbation of all kinds of inequality gaps. At the beginning most governments essentially told the schools 'you figure it out' and provided very little support. That has changed, what I'm finding to my surprise in the analysis in the second survey is that throughout the world, in most countries, governments really have stepped up to figure out ways to sustain educational opportunities in very little time, in very creative ways and that there is really an emergence of innovations.

These are, I'm going to share first the responses of that survey for the 99 different countries that participated. So, here you have what we identified as critical needs as you might anticipate. How do we continue academic learning for students? How do you provide professional support to teachers? How do you ensure their wellbeing? How do you support students who lack the skills to learn independently? How do you ensure their wellbeing? So, these were the needs that respondents to that survey, which included not only government officials but teachers, and administrators at the school level anticipate. They also anticipated very challenging priorities, essentially being how we are going to sustain academic learning? How we're going to provide support for teachers? And so on, and we asked them about implementation challenges and of course at the very top was the availability of technological infrastructure, students' emotional health, making sure there was a right balance between digital and screen-free activities and so on.



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Now, I've extracted here from that survey the responses of South Asia. These are small samples, these are the countries from which we have respondents in those surveys, and as you can see there are small numbers, but the feature is not very different for South Asia. So, these are results, what are the critical areas, very similar to what we saw for the entire 99 countries essentially, sustaining academic learning, sustaining well-being for students, ensure support for parents, for teachers and so on. Challenging issues, very similar set of priorities as for the school sample and the same with implementation challenges. I do have to say that this crisis has been a real moment of truth because it has helped to do two things I believe. One, this will help us appreciate the importance of schools, I've heard so many, over the last decade, kind of dismissed importance of schools, what do they do? I've heard so many things that in today's context are irresponsible. Give every kid a laptop, things would be done deal.

You would just place the student in a public sphere and they will teach themselves what they need, and I have a sense that everyone around the world, especially parents is realizing how important the institution is. So, I think that's a real silver lining of this crisis, maybe we're going to be less irresponsible coming out of that and are going to say let's try to make these institutions work because they definitely are doing something that parents are very poorly-equipped to do on their own and it is absolutely untrue that if you give a kid a laptop they will teach themselves what they need.

Now, in that survey there are some unexpected positive outcomes and that's what I want to talk about. I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish and talk about this crisis necessarily having a lot of silver linings and not more than five million people have been impacted but 3,30,000 people have lost their lives and that we're in the middle of this thing and many more will die, and the livelihoods of many have been impacted. But there are, as in every crisis, there are opportunities and that's what I want us to focus on at the moment. So, look, this was seven weeks ago, the respondents, 333 respondents to that survey were saying 'look we have seen new partnerships emergence in public-private partnership.' Essentially, the best responses that I have seen are the responses where educational leaders say 'we need everyone who has anything to contribute to come together and contribute.' And they're very good examples of that, multi sectoral coordination, more societal interest in education, a lot of silver linings more pedagogical economy for teachers, which is not a bad thing necessarily. More autonomy for students to manage their own learning, for those who can seize up to the opportunity, this will be a good thing.

In that first report we basically said listen every educational institution needs to have some kind of plan for educational continuity because this is not going to be a summer holiday, this is going to be protracted situation and even as schools try to come back and to resume operations, nobody knows how that is going to work. I wouldn't be surprised if they come back only to have to dismiss the students again. And so, these were the recommendations we made at that point.

The second product we produced was to curate online resources, knowing full well, we knew that from the survey online learning at best is serving 20 percent of the kids. There are two ways in which organizing that information is helpful, number one, if you can address the needs of the 20 percent of the kids, you free up the capacity of the state to concentrate on the remaining 80 percent. And second, these online resources can inspire people to look for other ways that have greater reach learning from what already exists online. But producing a curated list of resources is not enough, you have to organize it in some way, and we did here was to use a 20 percent of skills frame to organize these resources, to basically say in a context like this it is especially important to attend to the whole child, attend to their entire wellbeing. If you exclusively focus on the academics and you ignore the emotional wellbeing of these kids, you're going to make a bad situation worse because many of these kids live in homes where there are just too many people for the space available, where the people earn a living on a daily basis. So you can imagine what the stresses are, and to basically put the pressure on those parents to say you have to keep with the content is actually increasing to the stress. The most important thing is to say is the kid okay and how can you make the wellbeing greater for the kid and for their family. And, I'm going to come back to that because some of the good practices we are identifying are exactly about doing this, with very poor kids. But in this online list of



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curated resources that's what we did, is we organized and — exactly by the extent we provided a balanced curriculum.

What we are now working on is spotlighting good examples of education practices, and I'm going to briefly refer to two, they are not yet published, but you see on the top here the link where you're going to find them. This is a partnership, we have dealt with the OECD, the world bank, and an organization called the [HundrED.org](https://www.hundred.org/) and our aim is over the next month, a hundred of them. And I think we have right now, we have done about twenty but we have only published five, takes a while to get these out. But I want to talk today about two of them, which pertain to the region and which I also think highlight very important lessons. So, Indian, Reality Gives, I'm going to talk about Reality Gives, it's an organization that works with extremely poor kids in the slums of Mumbai, and I want to talk about the response of Madhya Pradesh Digital Learning Enhancement Program, which is a result of a phenomenal public-private partnership. So, Reality Gives is a community-based non-profit that basically teaches English to very poor kids in India and they realized even before the government shut down schools on March 16 that they were not going to be able to reach the kids in a very long time and so they said okay, how do we continue working with them? So, they created a phenomenal mechanism to reach these kids through WhatsApp, and instead of focusing only on English, which is what they mostly do, the first thing they did was let's focus on Covid response, public health messages for those kids and their emotional wellbeing and mental health wellbeing because you can imagine that if you live in a place where there are so many people, essentially crowded in a living space, the first need is mental health, is your wellbeing. So, that's what Reality Gives is doing, they basically expanded their team, they have a bunch of social workers, psychologists understanding what are the needs these kids are facing and in real time using WhatsApp as a delivery mechanism to make sure that these kids can cope with the situation as best as they can. And they are still teaching them English, to me it's a very good example of how an organization that is very clear about who they are serving can respond in a very short period of time using appropriate technologies. I've been surprised in these hundred cases, how many of these use WhatsApp, I didn't know how much reach WhatsApp had, and I didn't know the power WhatsApp had to deliver curriculum.

In Madhya Pradesh, this initiative is one that I'm especially proud of because a) it was led by a graduate of the IP program that I direct, Aditi Nangia at the Central Square Foundation media, but she didn't do this alone. This was a result of a partnership that preexisted Covid-19, it was a partnership between the Boston Consulting Group, the Central Square Foundation, the Kaivalya Education Foundation, UNICEF, the Education Alliance, and what they did, as soon as the government shut down the schools is they said okay we need to create an alternative delivery mechanism. And they realized that there was not a single channel that was going to reach all the kids, that they needed to use multiple channels that included online for those who can be reached by online that included WhatsApp for those who could be reached that way, and they included radio by the way, which is a means of delivery, and educational television that has existed for a long time come and that has come in very handy. There are obvious limitations with radio, at the moment the kids in Madhya Pradesh are receiving two hours a day in radio instruction in math and science and you might say well, how good is it to have this one-way channel? Well, for many kids it's not very different from what happens in schools normally, in fact it may be better because the quality of the programming is better than the quality that you would get we have all kinds of teachers teaching math and science. And this program is now scaling throughout various states in India, a very good example for me, a valuable story here is that not only you can produce an alternative way of delivering but that it is a public-private partnership and that can help you develop that innovative response and that you can scale that kind of thing very quickly.

There are other innovations and I do think the message for the region is that this is a tremendous opportunity for across organizations and across countries that if there ever has been a time when it makes sense to think of the world as a laboratory, this is the time because there is no reason why everyone needs to reinvent the wheel and that's what we are trying to do with these partnerships with the OECD, the World Bank and HundrED is to try to identify good practices and quickly transfer them from one place to another.





So, for example, I want to talk about two practices generated by the network, the Teach For All network, which is an organization, 55 Teach For All-like organizations, by the way the one in Pakistan is doing phenomenal things at the moment. And one of the things that this network does as Teach For America is to basically get recent college graduates, place them in very disadvantaged schools and get them to teach for two years in hopes of helping developing leadership pipeline of people who will then remain committed to working with education, not necessarily as teachers, throughout the rest of their lives. Well, the two Teach For All fellows in Chile, in conversation with these global networks realized we're not going to be able to go to school, what do we do? And their partners in Nigeria said we've begun to produce radio programs using our iPhones recorded, we've recorded these short lessons and we're broadcasting them via radio, so they said let's do the same things initially for their own kids and they produced these very short series of programs in Maths and Science, that were very funny, very engaging. They were so engaging that within a week everyone in the municipality where they work was using them. The head of the network presented that to the Association of Mayors, within two weeks, 241 radio stations in Chile are broadcasting these programs produced by a team of 50 highly-qualified individuals, these are people who are high achieving kids who have graduated from a range of programs who actually know Maths and Science. Well, through this network of 55 organizations that are alike, the Teach For Peru is not doing the same thing. So, there is a team of people in Teach For Peru that is doing this for the hardest to reach kids in the entire country. And I think the message here is that this is the time in which having a global network that makes it possible to learn and not a global network as in the big developmental organizations that operate at 30,00 ft or 300,000 ft from the ground but a global network of people who are actually embedded in schools and who are directly working in high-poverty context.

If you have peers in other places from which you can learn in real time and you can figure out how to adapt and reengineer that solution to your context, that's the way to go. Let me give you another example of that, one of the case studies that we will be publishing soon is the why we're using academies' network. Radio education has been for some years in Liberia and Sierra Leone, just that last two weeks, this was adapted in Pakistan and they took a lot of the very same programming which is essentially English, Math and Science and they said we can repurpose that. And in a context where you have nothing else, being able to adapt to something that has already been tested in another place can be very, very helpful.

Let me finally conclude taking about after the pandemic. To my surprise, I have discovered that this time is a time when a lot of people are thinking about the future. So, just serendipity, I have scheduled to publish three books which have nothing to do about the pandemic on the surface, but they have everything to do with reinventing the education system. And I knew they were going to be published in the last two weeks and I said this is the worst possible time to publishing these books, who's going to read them. Well, this book, Educating Students to Improve the World, published four weeks ago has been downloaded a hundred and two thousand times since it was published. Our book which is a comparative analysis of educational reforms in eight countries, published two weeks ago has been downloaded 58,000 times and we've been hosting seminars to discuss them. And I've been surprised that people at this time are thinking about how do we need to reinvent education but the way I've come to understand is this pandemic has made it very obvious a) How important education, is how important formal education is and the extent to which there are some things we should be doing differently. There are some capacities we should be developing that we have not been developing and so that's my hope going forward. My hope is here some links to a discussion yesterday attended by thousands of people is that maybe in this tragic moment, in this time of loss, there is an opportunity for us not just to sustain an opportunity, which is essential, educational opportunity, but to reimagine how are we going to do that looking forward. I don't expect any of this to be easy but I think conversation like this one are exactly one of the ways to stimulate — . I'll stop here, I will stop, basically saying that to me the pandemic is the quintessential adaptive education challenge and one — adaptive challenge is that nobody knows how to solve it. That's the difference with a technical challenge, so we can depend on what's been done before. There is one thing we know about this challenge is that there are some things that will make it more likely that you will solve it, and one of them is



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humility, the awareness of which you don't know and the recognition that you need others to solve it. And so, creating opportunities for different people to come together, for people who see different aspects of the education system, for people in the public and private sector to collaborate make this more likely that you can have the necessary creativity to solve the problem than facing the crisis with an arrogant mindset that presumes that you know how to solve it. And, I have seen just us with the health response, this is making very visible, the difference between good leadership and bad leadership. The leadership that ignores the fact, the leadership that ignores the evidence, the leadership that actually makes it difficult to collaborate is the leadership that actually has produced more deaths than were necessary. On the contrary, the leadership that is humble, the leadership that doesn't deny the reality, the leadership that doesn't lie and the leadership that invites collaborations across all kinds of institutional divides is the one that has produced the better outcomes. I'll end it, I'll end here.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Thank you very much Fernando. Thank you very much for that fascinating presentation. I'd like to, the way we'll do the format is that I'd like to maybe invite both of you to present first and then we'll go into the Q&A session, and address questions to you. So, I'd like to invite Asim, would you like to go next please?

**Professor Khwaja:** Great. Thank you so much, thank you Fernando for those comments. There's a lot of overlap between what he said and what I will say. So that's great Fernando set the stage. Before I begin I did want to acknowledge is Zainab said this is a really tough moment as we speak for Pakistanis and my heart goes out to a lot of people who may have lost loved ones at this time with the crash and also the events that Zainab said in Bangladesh. I think these are trying times for a lot of us in the region, so both because of Covid and because of our response to Covid, because of other things that may be happening, so I just want to acknowledge that as much as we're discussing kind of these educational outcomes for us to respect and recognize the costs that people are facing. So I hope they all come out of this stronger despite the tragedies they may be facing.

So, with education in Covid, I wanted to make three broad points, and let me first just state what those points will be and I'll spend a couple of minutes on each and then I hope later on in the discussion, we can expand on these issues. So, I think the first point, and this is also kind of be, will also be the arc of the response, first is recognizing the severity of the issue. I think there's been a lot of focus obviously on health outcomes, but you should think of education as having potentially much more persistent and longer term outcomes in some of the other things we're thinking of. Especially given the burden of the impact on education which is being on the youngest of our countries and hence our future. And so, the first point I want to make is recognize how significant this issue is. This is a call to policy makers, the citizens, the non-profits.

The second point I want to make is perhaps, I don't think it's fair to critique people at this point but I do think it's legitimate to raise concerns, is the idea of whether online education or response currently is adequate. And I'm going to argue what I think are potentials over here but also recognize the shortcomings. I think it's very important to do that and not delude ourselves about what we are getting. This is true both in countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, South Asian countries. But it's also equally true as in the wealth countries, including the US. So the second point I'm going to make is the kind of limits we are currently in terms of online education. And the third point, I don't want to end up with a critique, I very much see hope in terms of what we can do. So, I want to end talking about the opportunities to rethink education, to reimagine education, we were just discussing and what those may be and I want to give some tangible examples of those things that I'm beginning to see happening but things that I would love to see that I don't see as much as yet.

So, let me now go through these three big bucket, so the severity of the problem, the response to what we are currently doing, and we could be going via the opportunity that maybe, the silver lining that may be in this dark cloud that we have. In terms of severity, let's be very, very clear. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that even short-term shocks like these in the large scheme of things, three to four months of school closure seems like a short-term shock. These will have long persistent



impacts and impacts which exacerbate inequality. So, both the average level of learning will drop, but also the difference between the haves and the have-nots will get worse. Now, why am I saying that with such surety, I'm going to draw on work that colleagues of mine have done, this is Tahir Andrabi and Jishnu Das has a great paper looking at the impact of the earthquake in Pakistan and what they find is the earthquake shutdown schools on average for about fourteen weeks and they find is they follow those children about four years later, and what they find is while schools have reopened, attendance is back on line, you know the observable metrics of education seem to have recovered, learning has not recovered. These children are basically a year and a half to two years behind in learning where they should have been. So, when you compare kids who are affected close to the earthquake with those who are not, and this is already in a case where learning levels were poor to begin with, so the fact that when you have poor learning levels and you can still get a year and a half to two years' drop in education is really profoundly shocking and worrying. That's emoting I want to underscore, this shock is similar if not worse in nature to the earthquake so the best evidence we have now will suggest effect, unless we do something about it, will be long term persistent in a way, and you know for those who care about growth and think about things like that, in a way that will affect growth, not just education. This will affect the productivity of your future generations and it's not in one region, it's your entire country. So, I don't want anyone to walk away not understanding the gravity of the situation that we are in. I don't want to scare people, but I want to highlight this as a fundamentally important question. Also, what they find in the same paper, is these differences are exacerbated by preconditions. So, for instance, you come from a household where your mother is educated, these losses are less severe, in fact, in some cases, non-existent. However, if you come from a situation where you don't have an educational environment at home, these losses are more significant, which means that you will increase, these are already unequal situations, you're going to exacerbate inequality. So, that's about the worst thing you can do where you drop the mean of something and you increase the variants of it at the same time, and so I want for us to realize that. Now, that sounds like doom and gloom. I don't want us to leave with that impression, but I can, as I repeat, I want us to recognize and devote resources therefore to address this. So that's the first point.

The second point, which I mentioned and I want to elaborate on now is the online response. Look, the reality of it is, and Fernando has said this earlier there are some great efforts going on, I don't want to at all sound negative on them within the Pakistani context, the national television is airing TV shows for kids to be, for those who don't have internet access, just have TV access. There are some great online efforts going on in Pakistan, Zainab should talk when you get a chance in the discussion about what you guys are doing at IIm Exchange, which is kind of online education. There's lots of efforts like that. That said, we should not delude ourselves these efforts will either supplant what was happening normally, they will not, they absolutely will not. They will not in the US either. I think we should realize most of our children will have lost about five to six months of education despite what we are doing. We need to admit that and accept it and not as I said delude ourselves about it. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be doing stuff, but we should recognize what it's capable of achieving and again, this will create inequalities. You should all introspect about your own families, all of us are becoming teachers at home, for those of us who have kids. In fact, if anything, you might be getting some kids getting tremendous scale, a noble laureate is teaching their child now because he is not getting that many talks, he or she, they're spending time with their children. Now that works if you're a noble laureate and if you come from a high SES background but if you're a single mother and if you've just lost your job, and you're trying to figure out where to get food, you're not going to be educating your child. You don't even have devices or technology, and I'm not talking about our parts of the world, I'm actually talking about the US. There was a great article by Dave Deming recently in the New York Times where he talks about this as well. And, so, we need to recognize that this will our response, not only as a shock unequal, our solution is also unequal. In economics, we call this a regressive solution. It's a solution where the haves will benefit more from as opposed to the have-nots and we need to understand this. And, even if you give laptops, even if you give tablets, which a lot of schools and districts are trying to do in rich places, even then access is not equal, understanding is not equal, familiarity is not equal. So, we need to recognize this.



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So, with online education, I am hopeful but I'm also skeptical about what it can achieve and I think educators need to understand that. So now, you might say Gosh man, this is getting more and more depressing, it's not. I think what Fernando said earlier is very much true. Look education is like any machine, like finance, these are fields which have very strong views, we have armors, and some of these armors are great, some armors are not so great. The legacies of old ways of thinking, there is a big chink in this armor right now, a bog gaping hole in the armor, and that's always an opportunity. Whenever people are willing to rethink that's a great opportunity, great progress can happen in moments of crisis because it opens up our way of thinking, it alleviates our blinders that we wear. I think this is precisely that moment, I think we can look back at this moment in history and say you know what Covid was terrible and tragic but it forced us to rethink how we educate our future generations and the reforms which we did in Covid had payoffs for the next 50 years. I mean, I don't want to sound overly now, you're like this guy is completely flipped, he must be bipolar, but I really do genuinely believe in that. I think this could be a moment where we could look back and create legacies about how education should be. Let me mention two, and one draws heavily on Fernando's work, on 21st century skills. We are thinking of educational response as a very defensive response, let's try and teach the stuff we usually teach and make it online, okay. You try to fit a cylinder in a square peg or something. But why not think differently? A lot of the literature that we have suggests and again I'll allude to Fernando's work, which is that non-cognitive skills which is an odd word to use and I prefer 21st century skills, which Fernando you use. There's lots of skills which are kind of think of it as great confidence, independence, creativity, motivation, values, love about education, love about learning, think about things like these, which are implicitly taught in schools but not explicitly.

Think about the set of skills like that which are naturally taught through technology. Technology is good at some things, fabulous at some things actually, so instead of trying to replicate that traditional form of education, think about the set of skills, particularly those which have high return in the labor market. Dave again, I have mentioned Dave and Fernando's work, Dave has also worked on this as well, which will have long term skills, and see if you can use technology to impart those skills. Let me give you one example, Zainab will laugh at this because she knows this is a pet peeve of mine, pet peeve in a good way is I'm obsessed with competitions for kids. I'm obsessed because in the US, you realize a lot of education happens in an extracurricular sense. You have History balls, Geography balls, Science ball, you name it, there's a competition for anything, and it's usually run by parents, it's all on volunteer basis. These are critical, this work by Diana Moreira, really nice work in DC San Diego which shows that in Brazil when you have a kid win a Maths competition, other kids in the classroom of that kid do better because that kid creates a role model effect.

Imagine in our context, PTV is doing these things, Pakistan Television, let's have online competition, let's celebrate our children who are successful. This is easy to do, kids are there and it could be in any subject, in South Asia there is a tradition in Pakistan of poetry used to be called Baek Bazi, you would recite poems, verses, and you'd pick the ending letter of the verse would have to started off by the next verse. These are fun competitions, do them. they will build a love of education at a time when kids are, when everyone is online, the whole world is watching. Imagine if your village, your daughter who is 6 years or 7 years old wins a competition, what will happen in that village, what will happen in that community? I guarantee you her video will go viral on WhatsApp, on Facebook, and that's going to excite the next generation. So, for me think about in the now, think about things like that which inspire a generation and build these kids and they are very doable. This is easy to do, there are some brilliant people doing things like these who are desperate to do, this all can be done virtually, you don't need to, you can be socially distancing and still do these things.

The second thing, and I'll end over here, is this is in the now. What about when schools reopen, Fernando mentioned this as well. I think there is a great opportunity there as well. So, what's the opportunity? We can either be blind and reopen and just hope you know what you were in grade one before, you're just going to be promoted to grade two and we'll just kind of work it out. Please do not do that. The reality is your kid would have lost a lot, you don't know how much they would have lost, especially given their differences. So why not start the school year with a deep, diagnostic exercise? Use technology to do it, allow teachers, look, what's our dream in education? Our dream in education





is to go back Socrates, and Aristotle. Our dream is education is to personalize educational journeys for every child. This is where when parents are phenomenal, when elders are phenomenal, this is what they are doing at home, they are giving each child a personalized education journey. If we can do personalized educational journeys in our schools, we can not only cover up the six months of loss, we can go far beyond that. And normally, there is a resistance to doing it because we teach in a certain way, but this is the beauty of the chink in the armor. If we can say, guys let's start with diagnostics and bring technology in for every teacher in every poor community, we enable them to do this themselves. Simple tests, simple ways of doing it and we give them group lesson plans. So, if you find out you have 20 children in your classroom, one of them just doesn't really remember fractions, the other doesn't remember grammar, the other doesn't remember poetry, whatever the issue with the child maybe, you start creating group lessons tied to each of those. You don't have to completely individually because it's very costly, but you can definitely do subgroups as well.

Again, this work, Michael Kremer, Esther and colleagues have some great work on tracking in Kenya, where if you teach to the child's ability. Blanc Richard has written about this as well, teaching less can be teaching more sometimes as long as you target education to the child's needs. This is also the beauty behind Khan Academy and others, there's a dream that we can do so. But I think this is an opportunity for us to empower our educators, private schools, public schools, non-profit schools because they are desperate by the way. They need to figure out how to get back in the game. If we give them this opportunity, give them the tools to do so and start with this mindset of diagnosis and once you get this diagnostic in people's mindset, you can repeat it. You can tell teachers do a basic diagnostic, start teaching to each group of children based on their needs. Two months later, do another diagnostic, and I'm using the word diagnostic different from testing.

Tests signal your worthiness to the world, play an important role, we all have different colleges and universities because of some tests we took but diagnostics are even more powerful because diagnostics help you understand what you don't know and help target resources to that. The more we can get teachers into this diagnostic mode, curriculum providers into a diagnostic mode, regulators into this diagnostic mode and we repeat it. We will be able to not only address children's needs but if we don't quite get the right way of teaching fractions, we will figure it out. We'll try something else. So, this repeat diagnostic process where we're not blaming the child for not knowing, we're helping the child's problem areas and we're also helping teachers figure out what is an effective way to teach. Teaching is a really hard thing, we all teach, Fernando teaches, I teach, it's incredibly hard. If you could give me some tools to figure out this lecture had a bigger impact than that lecture, I'll give more of the good lecture, but I need to be able to learn that. And so for me those are the two moments of great hope, which is being able to rethink the kind of skills we can teach, particularly skills which we ignore, which to use Fernando's terms would be 21st century skills and second, to turn our mindset into a personalized educational journey where we do regular diagnostics and learn about how effective our own teaching and teachers will be. Let me stop. Thank you so much.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Thank you Asim, that was great. So, to summarize what I hear what both of you said, we're dealing with two different, we need to deal with two different kind of problems, one, on the one hand we need to deal with what to do when schools are closed during the Covid pandemic with distance learning solutions and remote learning solutions, and the second one is what to do when we go back to school and how we need to prepare for that. And so, let's start with the first one first and we'll delve deeper into the second part.

On the first part, with the distance learning piece, Fernando I'll ask this question to you first. You mentioned a whole bunch of initiatives that are happening, you mentioned innovations that are happening. I guess the underlying question remains is the equity question and it comes out over and over again and I don't know if there is a good answer to the equity question on just there are people who have access and there are people who don't. So, how, I know you mentioned some of what, if you focus on some you have to have resources for the government to focus on others but what is that focus on others, and are we seeing innovation on children who may not have access to some, to digital media. So that's my question to you, and I will also follow that up with another question



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directed to you from Professor Jacqueline Bhabha who says, 'Great presentation, has there been any attempt to evaluate impact on kids using different strategies, do we know the extent to which children in Chile, Peru and Pakistan have absorbed the Math and Science lessons that you were talking about because without that information it is hard to know the effectiveness of these strategies and it's hard for governments and others to see which strategies they should be promoting in a time like this. So, over to you.

**Professor Reimers:** Look, I think here it is important to distinguish two goals. If I were simply interested in understanding what is happening and how Covid is going to impact education, I could tell you right now it's going to exacerbate inequalities in every possible way imagined. Period. But I'm not interested in just understanding it, I'm trying to minimize the suffering and the loss that this is going to cause. And, so, it's an old idea that I picked up from Karl Popper, the notion of reflexivity, sometimes when you study something and in how you study, you change something. And that's what I am doing with these positive deviances, I'm not trying to delude myself into thinking oh the world is like that, I know how bloody hard it's been to find these positive deviance but I'm trying to create a pizza effect, actually beholding on what Asim described as competitions. I think you can extend the same reasoning to competition across states, so for example, when I write a case study about the city of Sao Paulo or the city of Bogota, and I tell you what they are doing is exemplary in building these partnerships in opening up opportunity for innovation, the subtext of that is why is the city of Boston not doing that? Why has it been so bloody difficult to study in US districts, which I have tried to do, I will tell you. Why are the districts that refused to be studied, to be analyzed?

Look, I think this is a time when we all should become a little bit less patient with things we have become accustomed to, and one of the things we have become accustomed to in education is discourse that education is corruption, is the capture of education to serve private aims of all kinds, including the aims of the all kinds of adults and not of the children. And, this is a huge risk with this pandemic that on the one hand we are making the case from our attention to education more resources but that has to come hand in hand with a promise of greater accountability. I'm not willing to say I want more money for education to fill the needs of politicians who are appointing their cronies to advance their careers in education. This has to, we need context to create that makes visible good government and bad government by comparison. So, back to the inequality, I'm with you, I know what we're going to in a much more difficult, in more unequal world. I'm trying to do something that will increase the cause to those who do nothing and accept that reality and that we'll recognize good leadership. So, for example, I talked to you about the two young graduates of Teach for Chile who basically had done what the government hadn't done. What I'm hoping this crisis will do, in part because we can spotlight them, is at the end of the goal, say this is the leadership that we need and why did we have bad governments when we did, why did we have governments who didn't do what they did in others. Politicians may want to fabricate all virtual realities that they want but at the end of the day there is the discipline of the facts. When you look today at the number of people who have died per capita in different counties, different states, different countries, you can very clearly tell that some places had good leadership and some places had bad leadership. This is not the time to have the conversation but I'm hoping we will have that conversation and I'm hoping when we have that conversation we will be able to learn and recognize and elevate those who actually made a difference at this time, so I'm hoping I'm answering, I'm operating out of Karl Popper's theory of reflexivity, saying this is the time where we have to decide what is it that we're trying to do when we're studying. And what I'm trying to do is I'm trying got create some competitions of sort. I'm trying to create a pizza effect that will elevate and make visible those who are actually making a difference in sustaining opportunities and that perhaps we'll increase the cause to those who are sitting on their hands.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Thank you Fernando. Over to you with the questions also continuing with the equity theme from the audience actually which says, your example about competitions, is that not also an extreme instance of unequal baselines because who are the kids who will win, who are the kids who would even participate, what happens to the kids of single parents or unemployed parents? How does this not, does this not also exacerbate inequality? The question goes on to say why not incentivize solidarity instead of competition, thinking of collective ways to add value to the community ,



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collaborative projects where kids can work together etc. through technology and our second and somewhat related question from Professor Tarun Khanna is some of the approaches to solutions presented qualified partnerships and collaborations to advance 21st century skills are things that people have been talking about for a long time, so is this just a moment for these things to be pushed through or are we now identifying new things that need to happen as a result of this unprecedented shock.

**Professor Khwaja:** Excellent questions, both Jackie's earlier question and Tarun's questions. So, Tarun, I'm just going to reply in a way an entrepreneur does, which is ideally this is a thick market opportunity and when you have a thick market opportunity, in other words, both the seller and the buyer available, innovation will happen. And so, the two questions to me are answering both, I answer to that. The first instance is absolutely there is a market opportunity here and because there is market opportunity, you will see innovation as long as we facilitate and allows that market opportunity to happen. So, I'm very optimistic in that sense.

Two, Jackie's question I think is spot on. Let me respond in two ways, one, when you think of these competitions, this is the beauty of the US competitions, I've also been fascinated by, we always mostly hear about the national spelling bee winner or the Geography bee winner but they're local competitions, they are town competitions. They are competitions in the same SES type level if you will and even winners of those small competitions which don't necessarily get featured on national TV and other like, actually have a lot of positive return to that as well. So, I think competitions at smaller and smaller levels, and segmented levels can still allow merit to emerge, it won't fully solve the problem in ways, but it definitely goes a fair bit in doing that. Second, I love the idea of team competition, solidarity, so there is a way to build, why am I so stuck on competitions? We have to realize people love winning, there's no way around it. It's a deep desire within us to demonstrate success. Now, can you do it in a way that has a more kumbaya feel to it? Yes, there are ways to do it but I don't think we can fully take away, and maybe the winning is in a way, where everyone can be a winner. I know there's sense in which we can do that, to the extent we can do that great, but I don't think we should shy away from that because ultimately education is an act of us excelling. I think if you can redefine it as us improving beyond what we are capable of personally and defining successes and wins relative to what we could have done ourselves, benchmark things differently. I think a lot of these inequality type issues can be addressed, not perfectly but to a reasonable extent.

There's a couple, I'll take one of the questions I'm looking at the chats as well about kind of technologies and usage of smartphones and like, absolutely, but again be careful if you only have smartphones, unequal. We need to do things which feature phones can access as well because not everyone has a smartphone. So, you should be careful a bit about that. Zainab, I'm going to direct a question back to you, there's a question on RCTs, data and learning, and you should respond to that. And also, there's a question by Minahil on is everyone doing personalized education in Pakistan.

**Dr. Qureshi:** I see that. I have one more question on this theme before we jump to data and teachers because I do want to get your inputs on that also. And that is the question about parents, this is open to both of you. A question asks what are some successful strategies to build capacity of parents and caregivers to support children's learning, especially 21st century skills and non-cognitive skills at home. And again, when parents are not literate or educated, how do you do that? How do you do distance learning effectively? I would just like to say as a parent who is fairly educated, it's hard, it's very, very hard. So, what do you guys think about how to build capacity of caregivers at home?

**Professor Reimers:** I would encourage you to read the case study we have done about the city of Bogota because the city of Bogota began, when they shut down the schools, trying to deliver the curriculum through alternative means and very quickly they realized that was the wrong law. That they shouldn't try to reproduce the school in their home, what they should instead is to think about their home as the new ecosystem where learning was going to take place and what they have to do is to use the channels that they had to strengthen that ecosystem. So, they basically began to build



curriculum that drew on activities that happen in their home, and said how can we engage, how can we make the kinds of activities that are happening in homes, educational activities and make that the curriculum. How can we, for example, they began to create programming that made it possible for families to discuss books which were read not by families but they got, Madhya Pradesh did the same thing by the way. They have these TV education programs where you have very prominent figures, in the case of Madhya Pradesh, it was the chief minister who began this program. In the case of Bogota, they looked for sports figures and celebrities and so on, and they read books and the activity is not to read the books, the activity is to get the family to discuss what they did. This is something that in ordinary times schools don't do, you can assume you don't need that for the school to function but I think that'll pivot as we realize that this is not a two-week phenomenon, that we have to rethink the delivery channel is the right pivot to do that. Having said that, it's incredibly difficult to do what you are describing because the impacts of this pandemic are multi-pronged, it isn't as if the only thing that has been impacted is the school and everything else is going dandy. It's that the families are stressed, it's that they have no way to earn living, it's that you have a relative who is sick. So, this is a moving target and so I'm not saying by any means it's easy but I think that the mind shift that the city of Bogota went through is the right mind shift.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Let me say two quick things for this if that's in order, just to complement Fernando's view. First of all, no offense Zainab, I'm not worried about parents like you, and I actually think parents like you, you're right, the tools are hard. I'm really worried about parents who basically are at the bottom of the pyramid in many ways, in terms of their ability, their capacity, their resources. And there, there's good news, the good news is the following, I'm going to be slightly cynical, so I apologize. The good news is the following, which is, there's work that we did a while back, Tahir and others and Jishnu, it's a paper called What Did You Do All Day which will show that even if the mother isn't quite educated as long as she has some awareness of education, those kids are learning and more and households where the mother is educationally aware, functionally illiterate, but educationally aware. What do I mean by that? That mother knows enough to be able to say look, I don't know how to teach you, but I'm going to make sure that you pick a copy, pick a textbook and do something on it. Even if you're scribbling on it, I can distinguish scribble from something which looks sensible and as long as I'm enforcing that, that's a mindset change. That change doesn't require a lot of capacity. So, if we can impart for those parents the ability, let's not be unfair on them, let's not say hey you should be teachers, no they can't. They don't have the time, they don't have the resources, they don't have the capacity, that's unrealistic. But if we can say, you don't need to be teachers but you need to be educationally aware and signal to your child the desire for you to have them learn and do better. That is extremely valuable. That's one.

Second, we keep forgetting, we don't have a shortage of people in our parts of the world. That's one beauty we have, we have lots of people. We have lots of women, especially women, who're giving private tuitions in our villages, in our communities. Look, what's the one market that hasn't suffered from Covid and has done really well? Guess what, it's online Quranic education which our kids are getting by religious scholars in Pakistan who are up on Skype at like 1 AM, after right about, before the great start the fast or right after it, teaching our children. That market has not suffered at all because of Covid, it's going perfectly fine. We have lots of women who are talented in our villages, in our communities who can help your child, and at a fairly modest fee. In fact they don't even charge you a fee, the state should just say you know what, we're going to facilitate them, we're going to give them online digital access for free, we're going to have these women compensated and these women can guess what give localized and personalized education, we have several million of them. So, I want to be careful about this as well, let's deploy their talent, and that'll generate employment by the way. And by the way, if you count those numbers in, we worry about labor force participation for women, guess what, if you get that going, you get a huge positive dent in that, which has its own positive multiplier effects when you see these women in villages teaching and earning a meaningful livelihood through one of the best vocations in the world, which is educating our future minds.





**Dr. Qureshi:** Thanks. And that actually is a great segue into the second piece that we wanted to talk about, which is policy. Which is when schools reopen, what needs to happen? What are governments doing to prepare for when schools reopen because from everything you said so far, there are going to be multiple challenges that they will have to face. There are learning losses, there are huge disparities within classrooms, within one classroom where different kids stand differently. How should governments be thinking about this, and do you know of any good examples of how people are preparing to reopen? Over to either of you.

**Professor Reimers:** Let me say a word, I think this is going to be my last comment which relates to when schools reopen and right now. And, I want to bring this topic home to universities because it's clear to me that the real binding constraint to alleviating this educational suffering caused by pandemic is institutional capacity. So, when you try to solve that question, where do you have capacity? I think we have an absolutely underutilized resource in universities around the world. There are 20,000 universities and if 20,000 made it their business to say I need to be part of the solution to this problem, the governments by themselves do not have the capacity to figure out, and they don't in most places. They sort of don't in this country, they know in every other kind that I have to identify and curate good curriculum, to figure out a way to develop effective ways to prepare parents or teachers, to figure out delivery mechanisms. If those 20,000 universities understood that it is their responsibility to be part of the solution now and afterwards, we would go a great way in alleviating that concern. And, I think the real elephant in the room, the real question is why aren't universities doing this, why is this activity that we're doing right now a little bit exceptional even in the context of the larger Harvard University. This is totally unacceptable that a time of crisis, at a time when humanity is experiencing a one in a century devastating event, the most privileged educational institutions are navel gazing, are protecting themselves under privileges instead of asking what can I do to help those who will never have a chance to set foot in this university. So, I think that's what governments should do coming out of this, recognize that they cannot do it alone, open up every opportunity for collaborations and I think, look, I think it's wonderful that Teach for All, on whose Board of Directors I serve, a network of 55 volunteer organizations is doing tremendous things but it is unacceptable that they should be doing more than 20,000 universities. It is not right, and so I think what governments should do is learn that the solutions at this time came from making it possible to build these coalitions where everyone who had anything to contribute came forward and said this is how I can be part of the solution.

And I believe, look, I look at the health sector with great envy because in the health sector what do I see? Tremendous coherence where you have on the frontline the nurses and the doctors doing heroes' work but behind them you have the academy, you have our school of public health, our school of medicine, you have industry and you have great coherence in having an institution that is actually helping make sure we address that. We don't have that in education and the big actor that is missing in action is the universities. So, I think what we should do is ask ourselves, how are we going to be part of the solution.

**Dr. Qureshi:** That's fantastic Fernando. Asim, when you address this, I'd also like to add, Fernando said universities are missing. I feel like we haven't talked much about teachers either, so when you, I mean where do teachers fit into the solution and how do you see?

**Professor Khwaja:** I don't have much to say except echoing what Fernando said, he said it really well. So, I wanted to second that. I do think we have an opportunity to really contribute in a way and I think to your point about teachers, my only comment there is, we should recognize that there's not just current teachers but there's potential teachers. I think we should recognize that there is a, and I alluded to this earlier when I said these women giving tuition in places. I think we need to create an enabling environment for not just the current teachers to be able to expand their stretch. Look, we've all now done Zoom classes, I have a hundred kids, the difference between that and a thousand isn't much to be honest, and so the idea that we are all online now, we should leverage that. We should tax ourselves and we should say, you should speak more, you should teach more, how to do that, and schools are beginning to do this, universities are beginning to think about it. We reluctantly



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entered the online world but now we are all there, I guarantee you every single teacher knows how to use some form of Zoom or like now and we're getting more and more adept at it. And, we're learning some good side state here, people who don't normally speak are speaking on Zoom because they can chat and so that changes the nature.

In terms of policy, I think the only thing I will add what Fernando said is this is an opportunity, view it as an opportunity, don't be defensive, kind of go on the positive offense as well, trust that you can achieve even more because to me when you are defensive, if you can make your target hey gosh, I wish I could get 60 percent of what I normally get, well guess what you're going to get 10 percent. Make your target I'm going to get 200 percent because I'm going to be even more, maybe you get 110 percent. I want us to think that way, and that means opening up, that means asking for help when you need it, that means asking for help from non-traditional people, from civil society people, from NGOs, private sector people. You talk a lot about in your works and the op-ed you wrote in the Dawn, which is great, you talk about private schools as a compliment, as a critical, you know, should the government create supporting infrastructure to them? Given that 40 percent of education in Pakistan in those schools, if they die, what's going to happen to those kids? So, should we also have the financial strategy? But you know thinking through the government being a platform player if you will, a player which provides this core infrastructure to enable others is the right way to think about it. I did want to mention in one of the comments Ethan had a great question and I wanted to give it credit, peer learning. And Nathan talks about how peer learning is important, absolutely right. You know, when you come to Harvard, sure we teach you stuff but you really learn a lot from your fellow students, that's the reality of it. And Harvard is great because Harvard has great peers. Our faculty I think is decent, but I think what we really excel is at we have phenomenal students and those students teach each other, it's like beautiful. It's so easy being a teacher here because your students are teaching each other. Can we create online world where that happens? Particularly worlds where we can connect peers who are atypical peers, in the sense your typical peers are your socioeconomic physical group. Can we get smart kids who are currently sitting around and say hey, what if you can become a peer to some kid in a poor country. Can we facilitate that? I think technology can be fabulous for peer education but far more importantly it can create peers who normally would never have been peers, and those are really powerful friendships, those are really high delta as I would call. Those are friendships which you take someone from a particular state of their existential world. Tarun leads this program Crossroads, where first gen kids come to the Middle East. Think about programs like that we can now create with the technology we have and I think Fernando, you're right, places like Harvard should be at the forefront of doing that.

**Dr. Qureshi:** Thank you very much, Asim. Thank you very much, Fernando. It was a pleasure to talk to both of you, I wish we had more time, we could probably go on talking about this for another hour. I would like to now hand back to Chelsea to wrap up this panel. Thank you very much.

**Chelsea Ferrell:** Great, thanks Zainab. Thank you for joining us today and a very big thank you to our moderator and to our panelists for the insightful discussion today on this very important and very timely topic. The recording of today's session will be made available on our website in coming weeks. We have two more events coming up on the Covid-19 South Asia series: South Asian Entrepreneurship during Covid-19, which will be on Friday, June 5, and the Labor of Fashion, the global Covid-19 crisis in the politics of resistance in Bangladesh, which will take place on June 12. We hope you join us for these future events. Thank you and have a great day.