

Practice and Impact Brief: Learning during COVID-19 school closures

Communities of Practice and School Leadership

This is one of a series of Practice and Impact briefs drawn from Childhope’s experience implementing Excelling Against the Odds (EAO), partnering with CHADET in Ethiopia with support from UK Aid through the [Girls’ Education Challenge](#). EAO was implemented from 2014 to 2021 by Childhope and CHADET in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The aim was to improve the quality of primary and secondary education for over 16,400 girls in Arsi, South Gonder and South Wollo. This Practice and Impact brief captures the learning around communities of practice which provided teachers with safe spaces to discuss pedagogical, student and wider school issues, and how school leadership has supported this work.

1. Background

The Communities of Practice (CoPs) of the ChildHope-CHADET project, Excelling Against the Odds (EAO), provided teachers with a ‘safe space’ to discuss pedagogical, student and broader school issues. In addition, the CoPs allowed teachers to engage in supportive, peer-mentoring activities. EAO developed strong leadership models through workshops that supported the CoPs and delivered pedagogic development training for teachers.

From the start of the UK Aid-funded GEC project, EAO has worked in 77 schools across three zones in two regions of Ethiopia; Arsi (Oromia region), South Gonder and South Wollo (Amhara region). The project directly supported 16,481 girls, close to 500 teachers, and each school's principal and vice principals.

2. Communities of Practice

EAO established a CoP¹ in each school. Membership of CoPs comprised teachers only, with no managers or school leaders as members. This was to ensure a ‘safe space’ for open teacher dialogue. The school leadership team supported the CoPs by providing stationery materials, rooms etc, while making sure that regular CoP meetings took place.

The CoPs operated at two levels:

1. **Teacher-led, solution-focused, informal, open meetings.** Teachers were free to frame their discussions and set their agendas. Topics ranged from difficulties with implementing alternative pedagogies to student behavioural issues, planning and assessment.
2. **Peer mentoring element.** Teachers formed pairs and carried out weekly/bi-weekly observations, mentoring each other and working towards peer developed personal development plans.

109 Communities of Practice established across **77 schools**.

Teachers’ **peer mentoring programme** established in each community of practice.



Teachers in a CoP meeting

¹ Influenced by the [theories of Etienne Wenger](#) and the [Situating Learning theories](#), of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.

3. School Leadership



Principals and vice principals in leadership workshops

At the same time, ChildHope-CHADET introduced a series of leadership workshops, for school principals, vice principals and Woreda government education officials, from all three project zones. The training explored themes such as the difference between leadership and management and different leadership styles. The training also asked the participants to identify their leadership style and the most appropriate style to achieve positive change. In addition, the workshops focused on leadership matters such as vision setting and alignment with the project vision, the use of data to improve the quality of teaching, and the setting up of an informal principals’ network to

share information and good practice.

A key emphasis of the workshops was how principals and education officials could directly support teachers towards improvement. This included a focus on understanding what constitutes good teaching, using lesson observations as a

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| Leadership training | 11 Government education officials |
| | 9 CHADET staff |
| Leadership support and mentoring | 74 school principals |
| | 59 school vice principals |

leadership rather than management tool to secure improvements in the classroom, and supporting mentoring and improvement through newly established communities of practice.

4. Benefits and successes

Benefit 1: Creating a culture of change for improvement

The CoPs created a culture of change for improvement. Where project monitoring had previously identified that teachers were not engaged in conversations about the *process* of teaching or education, the CoPs created a space where this became the norm. The teacher-led safe space of the CoP led to a culture of *encouraging* risk-taking and experimentation. The CoPs also built agency within

86% of CoP members have received direct mentoring.

80% rate the quality of the mentoring as ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

93% stated that being a member of a CoP allowed them to reflect on and improve their teaching practices; 48% stated this happened to a large extent.

89% of project trained teachers agreed that the school leadership is committed to supporting children’s learning.

the teachers around the very notion of change and a culture of reciprocity where teachers valued and embraced each other’s work. Previously, teachers had not appreciated the benefit of lesson observations, perceiving them as a ‘top-down’ management tool for management inspections only. Teachers now embraced the peer-observation model as a tool for positive change, rather than viewing them with suspicion. The teacher-led element ensured that the teachers worked towards finding solutions to problems and issues, rather than ‘solutions’ being imposed on them. The teachers became problem solvers.

External Evaluation

The role of good leadership was paramount in supporting the CoPs and improvement. Principals focused on improvement rather than solely focused on data collection for management reporting purposes. Some principals reported they were using the CoPs to share good practice with ‘non-project’ teachers. Others reported they would now only allocate mentors to new or inexperienced teachers if the mentor was a member of a CoP. The small, local principal networks allowed principals to problem share and discuss solutions in an informal and supportive way. The workshops led to a conceptual change of attitude around supporting teachers. Previously, in certain cases, school inspectors had seen themselves as ‘masters of change’. The workshops developed a notion of shared decision-making between the school principals and Woreda education officials.

“[communities of practice] greatly support not only the learning and teaching but they support[s] the school leadership”

GEC-T Impact Film

“CoP is [essential] for peer-to-peer improvement of teaching in school ... If someone tells your weakness, it is not easy to accept rather you develop resistance. But when your peer comments, you know the objective that simply give you energy to go the next step on the ladder.”

“We don’t only discuss pedagogy ... we have also discussed dropout, pupils’ participation, truant students, grouping and many thing[s]. This has improved our teaching practice and support[s] the school leadership as we see wider things or agendas.”

Primary school Teacher feedback on CoPs

Benefit 2: Changing behaviours and creating new working norms

Teachers’ behaviour and the [barriers that lead teachers to resist change](#) stem from myriad issues. For example, ‘habit’, not understanding the benefits associated with change, fear of embracing new ways of working, which they may see as a ‘threat’ to their expertise, and how ‘change’ may affect their internal relationships with colleagues. The effects of these are often exaggerated in more [established or long-serving teachers](#), where adapting to new systems and policies places a strain on their practice, resulting in them ‘reverting’ to practices in which they are comfortable. When the change is rapid and ‘imposed’ on a teacher, this may [result in instability](#), leading to a resistance to change.

School ‘culture’ and the day-to-day activities in schools have a strong [influence on teachers’ behaviour](#) and how they react to change. The CoPs and the leadership workshops helped address issues around working norms by addressing school cultures and creating new norms.

Where the actions of colleagues are a strong [influence on how teachers perform](#), Social Norm Theory and Meme Theory may offer an insight into why the EAO CoPs were successful.

Social norms are considered *“the unwritten rules of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that are considered acceptable in a particular social group or culture providing us with an expected idea of how to behave”*. Yet social norms, go beyond people following a behaviour merely because they believe other people follow that behaviour. **Dr Cristina Bicchieri** suggests that when people chose to adopt a behaviour because they believe other people do, AND because they believe that others expect them to adopt the behaviour, this is a social norm.

The EAO CoPs played a role in creating a social environment conducive to the transmission of behaviours. The visibility of peer observations and the verbal discussions within the CoP meetings aided in transmitting those behaviours. Discussions in CoP meetings and the peer observations

Meme theory suggests that in cultures people reproduce behaviours through the process of imitation. Behaviours spread as one person copies a behaviour from another.

exposed teachers to attitudes and behaviours that they were able and expected to imitate and reproduce. Thus, the CoPs created a micro-culture, within which there would have been an expectation of behaviour change, and teachers will have engaged in pedagogic change as they believed that *others* would have expected them to do so.

Benefit 4: Sustainability

If pedagogic training is delivered in isolation, the effects are not sustainable. As teachers move jobs, they take their expertise with them. Teachers trained in new pedagogic approaches are more likely to ‘move on’ as their new skill



Discussions in a CoP meeting

set makes them more attractive in the employment market. However, the CoP can support teachers in school, plugging this gap through working with new teachers. If the CoPs are expanded beyond project trained teachers, the development and improvement in pedagogy become an ongoing process that will not be affected by staff turnover. As one teacher leaves, replacement teachers become part of the process and culture of improvement.

Benefit 5: Value for money

The leadership and CoP interventions represent excellent value for money and can be considered sustainable.

Leadership: The only direct cost attached to this was the leadership workshops. If good leadership is explored, developed and embraced by school leaders, the positive effects are long lasting. Any positive change and associated benefits resulting from improved leadership continue long after the initial leadership workshops and zero cost.

Communities of Practice: The CoPs are a zero-cost intervention. The only costs associated with a CoP are stationery costs, subsumed into the overall school budget.

Leadership and Communities of Practice: The success of a school-based community of practice depends, to a large degree, on the influence of the school leadership. This primarily is the case in the implementation stages of the CoPs. The costs associated with these two successful interventions are those costs associated with the leadership workshops only. Therefore, as the improved leadership models progress, and with it the success of the CoPs, zero cost is attached to sustainable, long-term improvements.

5. Conclusion

The task for projects undertaking teacher development activities is to be aware of the barriers to change and engage teachers in dialogue to establish the precise nature of the barrier, including why teachers may be finding change difficult.

It may not be possible to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to every school, but the learning from the EAO approach offers areas for consideration. For example, interventions that require a shift in behaviour require more than just training and educating people on the new behaviour itself. Education and the resulting [attitude change may not be enough to change behaviour](#).

Projects may need to consider developing strong leadership models to create a culture of change and consider behaviour change theories. The environment needs to encourage [behaviour change](#) and develop a micro-culture and new social norm, where change is expected. This is challenging but not impossible to achieve.

The CoPs set up by EAO had at least one 'champion' of new behaviours. However, in schools where CoPs are not operational, there may be a need for a '*critical mass*' of 'champions' to develop a new norm.

The role of leadership is crucial to the success, or otherwise, of any long-term improvement strategy. It is the leadership that creates a culture of change and rallies the people behind it. However, changes in leadership style may itself bring about anxieties that influence a teacher's practice. Therefore, just as the EAO CoPs enabled the inclusion of teachers in conversations around improvement strategies, school leadership must develop a culture of shared decision-making and promote a culture that supports ongoing professional development and peer support.