



Mary Helen Immordino-Yang

Right, so you don't need to reinvent the wheel everywhere. There's a lot that can be shared and learned and adapted to your own context. People need to build it for themselves even if you're building exactly what you have across town, you still need to build it for yourself to own it and to really understand it. You don't just adopt models in life to do what you're told. Well, you can but that's like "enforced mediocrity". That's better than nothing but it's not great and it will never be great. So, when an assessment when is well done can help give people ideas. it's a jumping-off point for conversation.

It's a source of integrated, synthesized and consolidated information about what's known, what's being done, how it seems to be working in which context and why we think that might be and they can take that and sit with it and figure out what might they be able to do and how might we know it's working? And what do we value and want for our young people and for teachers and how are we going to give them the opportunity to engage in a fully authentic way with that? So it's a source of integration of information for people, so they don't have to start from the drawing board every time. They can get ideas, they can borrow, they can learn and then they can sit with it and understand for themselves what it needs.

Rebecca Merkley

Great. Well, thank you very much for chatting with us today.

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang

Thank you for having me. It was my pleasure.

Reimagining education: *What stakeholders in education want?*

ADITI PATHAK, MAHATI KOPPARLA, SONAL CHANDRAKANT CHHEDA



Aditi has more than 12 years of experience in the field of Education for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship, Teacher Training, Curriculum development and Programme Design and management. At UNESCO MGIEP, Aditi is currently managing online courses on Climate Change and SEL for middle school students.



Mahati Kopparla received her Masters Degree in Applied Mathematics from the University of Hyderabad, India. She completed her Ph.D. in Mathematics Education at the Texas A&M University. Formerly, at UNESCO MGIEP, she worked towards incorporating project-based learning and social-emotional learning into school science and mathematics classrooms. Mahati is currently Researcher at the University of Calgary, Canada.



Sonal graduated from Teachers College, Columbia University with a degree in International Educational Development. She has five years of experience in the education sector as a high school teacher, program evaluator, curriculum developer, and policy researcher. In the past she has worked with WFUNA, UNICEF and Expanded Schools, a New York-based nonprofit. At UNESCO MGIEP, she is working closely with the Head of Policy in identifying strategic entry points for engaging with the UNESCO Member States and support the implementation of SDG 4.7 in India and Asia-Pacific.



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1. Purpose of education is defined here as the broader aim, meaning, reason and the end goal of education. Focusing on the “why” of education, participants were encouraged to think about why people go to school or college or get an education.

2. Learning experience is any interaction, content, curriculum, pedagogy, assessments, use of tools and technology and other aspects that constitute teaching and learning processes. Focusing on the “what” and “how” of education, participants discussed things they like and dislike about these aspects.

3. Learning Spaces are the physical or virtual spaces — be it the classroom, home, street, playground, online, etc. — where learning takes place. Focusing on the “where” of education, participants shared the realities they face and their hopes for what an ideal learning space is like.

How did we gather key stakeholder voices?



Virtual Roundtable

Based on the major themes identified, we prepared a survey and a semi-structured discussion protocol that were iteratively improved through consultation with external experts. We used a mixed-methods approach with the data collected using Focused Group Discussions and the Survey. Focused Group Discussions (FDGs) conducted with parents, teachers and students helped us gain an in-depth view of the various perspectives, while the survey provided a wider global outreach. The virtual FDGs were conducted between August and November 2020 in the five UNESCO regions with two discussions in each region for each stakeholder group. In total, 32 FDGs were conducted with 170 participants. Administered in English on Paperform from October to November 2020, the online survey was filled out by 556 respondents. It must be noted that selection of participants in the FDGs was limited by their familiarity with the English language and that qualitative nature of the study meant that data consisted of individuals’ views and opinions and did not necessarily represent the educational realities of that region.



TAG

Talking across Generations on Education or TAG is a youth-driven intergenerational dialogue on education initiated by UNESCO MGIEP. It involves two phases: a month-long online discussion followed by a second phase where key insights from the online discussions are revisited in a live moderated dialogue bringing

together selected youths and senior decision makers. During the online dialogue phase, more than 1,000 global youth from over 50 countries left close to 2,000 comments that drew out their experience and views on education. Limitations included over-representation from one region, namely South Asia (and especially India), and the use of English as the language for dialogue which prevented active participation from Latin America and Francophone Africa. Outreach was limited to only those having access to social media and internet, thereby excluding the most disadvantaged youth.

What key stakeholders say? Consensus and dissonance

Virtual Roundtables and TAG dialogues revealed that going to school or college has come to be seen as such a normative experience for all the stakeholder groups across the world—for many, an unexciting yet indispensable one to secure future financial security and fit into society. Yet, key stakeholders from children and youth to teachers and parents still shared strong faith in education as a key to holistic development, empowerment, and social and emotional well-being, as well as a frustration that the education system in its current form is not doing enough to achieve them.

While they all agreed that education needs to be reimagined, there were differences in their conceptions of education. For example, for teachers in Asia, Middle East and Africa, education was conceived primarily as a tool for empowerment; in Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, it was considered as a tool for social and environmental change. For female youth in Africa and South Asia, college was considered a symbol of freedom and source of respite from the restrictions put by their families—a journey from the “inward-looking” environment to an expansive and diverse one. Indeed, education can be a transformative force both at individual and collective levels—and the rude wake-up call of the COVID-19 pandemic gives us an opportunity to reorient education towards advancing well-being for all.

1

The purpose of education must be reimagined to allow it to impart relevant knowledge and skills:

There was a consensus view that the education systems are focusing more on academic skills. When asked about the reasons for going to school/college or sending their children to school/college, 48% of the survey respondents said that the primary reason was to gain knowledge and over 25% responded that it was to contribute to the society (see Figure 1). A deeper conversation has revealed that what



The education systems of today have emerged from the needs of the industrial revolution and have hardly evolved since then, or so it has been argued, while the world has moved from an industrial to a so-called ‘knowledge society’ and is transitioning to an ‘intelligence-based’ society. In many places across the world, classrooms, curriculum, teaching, testing and the overall aim of education seem to remain a reflection of the past. They might have been modified over time, but the foundations of education systems and how learning is organized seem to be largely unchanged and far from ‘future ready’. The notion of an intelligence-based and AI-driven society has evoked, to some observers, a sort of dystopia familiar in science fiction. While the ongoing pandemic has made us all feel like we are living in a Sci-Fi film, it has made us see clearly that our education system is largely ill-equipped to shift to alternative means of instruction and cater to the needs of the learners in the face of the ongoing health crisis and impending apocalyptic scenarios of environmental crises.

The unprecedented disruption to education systems — which has affected more than 1.5 billion school students and youth worldwide — has given a renewed impetus

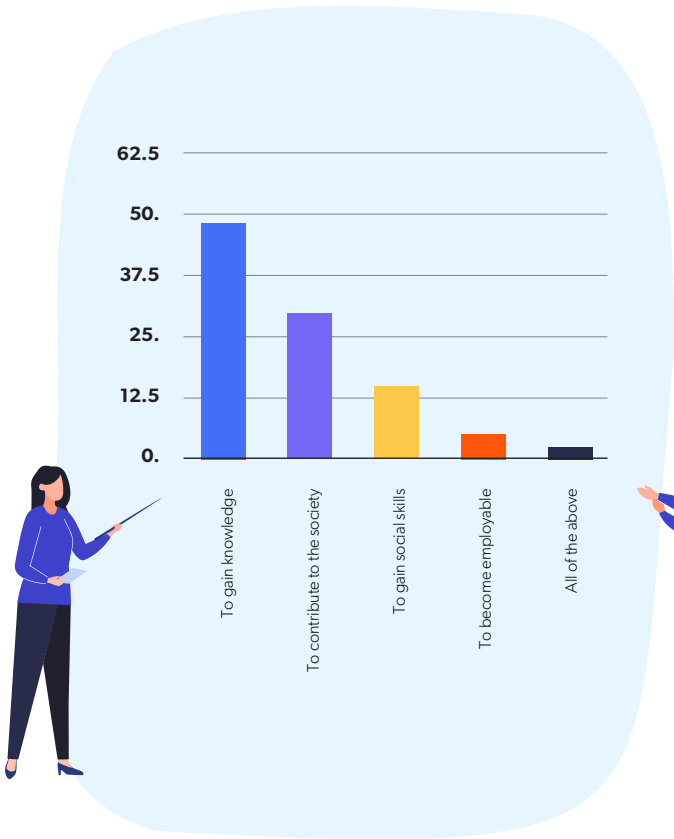
to the urgency of reimagining education to shape our future’. Harnessing knowledge, education and learning for the future of humanity and the planet is surely one of the most important policy debates of our lifetime. To advance public debate on the futures of education, key stakeholders — students, youth, parents, and teachers — cannot be left on the sidelines. UNESCO MGIEP organized a series of virtual round tables, youth dialogues (TAG, see below), and an online survey to gather views of key stakeholders on the theme of ‘Reimagining Education’, in line with UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative and UNESCO MGIEP’s International Science and Evidence based Education (ISEE) Assessment. In this article, we focus on the following three themes that key stakeholders deliberated:

In many places across the world, classrooms, curriculum, teaching, testing and the overall aim of education seem to remain a reflection of the past.





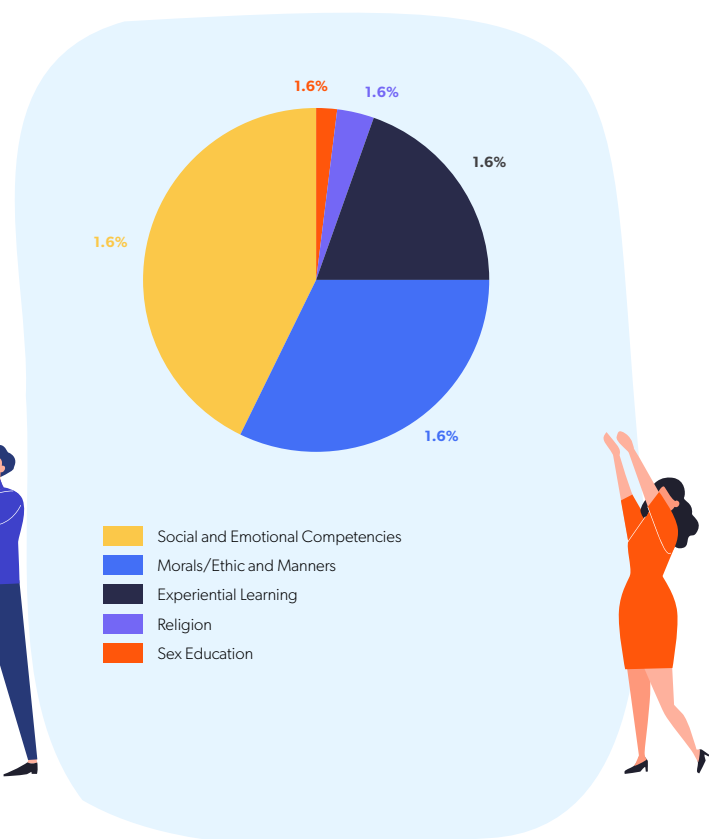
Figure 1: Why do we or our children need to go to school/ college/university?



students and youth are seeking as “knowledge” does not necessarily align with what the schools/colleges are currently imparting. For example, about 43% of the survey respondents felt that social and emotional skills should be taught in schools and over 31% felt morals and ethics should be taught (see Figure 2). Youth in TAG^o dialogues called for practical entrepreneurship and vocational education as suitable substitutes to college or university to gain relevant skills. In similar vein, 40% of the survey respondents answered that they would want schools to integrate real-life and practical topics such as taxes and financial literacy, cooking, career readiness, etc. in regular teaching and learning (see Figure 3). Students and youth would also want to have conversations about sexuality, gender, and world cultures among others, but most reported that schools or colleges were unable to address these wants in a meaningful way. Students and youth also wanted formal education to give them exposure to music, art and sports and to enable them to connect meaningfully to the world and parents felt the same way.

Most stakeholders embraced the role of a school or college in supporting socialization and fostering skills to navigate the changing society, asking for more explicit

Figure 2: What should be taught in schools?



emphasis on building empathy, tolerance for diversity, and emotional and relationship management skills.

However, they were not confident that schools and colleges can support them to achieve their goals. Their disillusionment with the current form of formal schooling and its role in their lives was manifested in comments such as “we go to school or college because everyone does so”.

Moreover, statements like “going to schools is a mindset passed from generation to generation” force us to re-examine the fundamental purpose of education. The common perception was that there is a mismatch between what students want to know and what formal education systems are set up to do.

Whereas there were concerted calls for making education more relevant and allowing them to keep pace with the changing needs of society, voices calling for education as a common good were not loud. Youths from lower socio-economic backgrounds from South Asia and Africa observed that college exacerbates structural inequalities through high tuition fees and other barriers. However, reflecting the fact the majority of participants in this type of

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exercise tend to come from the privileged sections of society, few stakeholders raised concerns about the role of education in reproducing social and economic inequalities. The failure of education in serving as a social equalizer or a democratizing force was largely unacknowledged.

2 Assessments must be reimagined to make educational experience less stressful and more meaningful:

When asked in the survey if they would like to change the examination system, over 75 percent of the respondents answered “Yes”. In FGDs, several teachers from all five regions viewed assessments as essential tools to identify and address gaps, but they were unhappy that the education system had become test-centric and teachers, schools and even countries were evaluated based on students’ scores. Some teachers cynically characterized the use of high-stakes exams by governments as an attempt to “create some sort of assurance to people outside that the education system is functioning well”. As highlighted in figures 3 and 4, stakeholders felt that assessments in their current form need a serious rethink and teaching can be improved by incorporating experiential and interactive learning and learning about real-life and practical topics, rather than focusing on ‘teaching to the test’.

There was a consensus view that matriculation exams and competition are causing enormous stress and anxiety for students and teachers, but there was divergent views on how much harm this does to students. Some parents from the Middle East and Asia Pacific were happy with the status quo, as reflected in comments such as “we turned out to be ok.” Learners felt the pressure around assessments originated from adults and was imposed upon them, although many parents in FGDs did advocate for assessment tools that are “fun”, “engaging”, and maybe even “game-based” and include more observational and reflective aspects to give a holistic picture of learners’ development.

There was also a shared sentiment that the focus on competitive examinations and standardized tests to measure learning and quality of education systems has made education impractical. Instead of such a one-size-fits-all approach, learners called for more individualized experiences that can shape their personal as well as professional lives. Stakeholders saw assessment and evaluation systems that measure and highlight learners’ strengths and weaknesses and avenues for improvement as more fruitful than those comparing their test scores with others.

1. Attewell, P. (2001). The first and second digital divides. *Sociology of Education*, 74 (3), 252-259.
2. Reich, J., & Ito, M. (2017). *From good intentions to real outcomes: Equity by design in learning technologies*. Irvine, California: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

3 Learning spaces must be reimagined to foster student learning, engagement and well-being:

During the current pandemic, technology has enabled many learners to not only receive instruction but also remain connected with their peers. Reflecting the COVID-19 situation, stakeholders recognized that technology plays an important role in education, with the majority (over 56%) of the survey respondents answering it plays an “indispensable” role (see figure 5), and that it can enhance the teaching-learning process in innovative ways, with over a quarter of the survey respondents answering technology enriches learning (see figure 5) and over 13% responding that enhanced use of technology should be added to a learning space to support better learning. While technology has a great potential to provide opportunities for self-paced and self-directed learning and serve as an equalizing force, in FGDs, parents expressed concerns about increased screen time, lack of engagement between students and teachers and the resultant impact on student wellbeing and even data privacy. **Unsurprisingly, issues related to access — and what that means for learners in a competitive professional environment — were a grave concern for all stakeholders.** Yet, few have reflected on how the digital divide disproportionately disempowers learners from low income communities and countries not only in terms of access to digital infrastructure and online tools (known as ‘first’ digital divide) but also in terms of their use (‘second’ digital divide)¹, with evidence increasingly suggesting that new technologies tend to be accessed and used in ways that benefit privileged learners and widen socio-economic disparities.²

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Virtual Roundtables and TAG^o dialogues revealed that the role of learning spaces in ensuring student well-being often remains unaddressed. Stakeholders called for physical learning spaces which are well ventilated and vibrant, with comfortable temperature, flexible seating, less noise and appropriate teacher to student



Figure 3: How can schools improve their teaching methods?

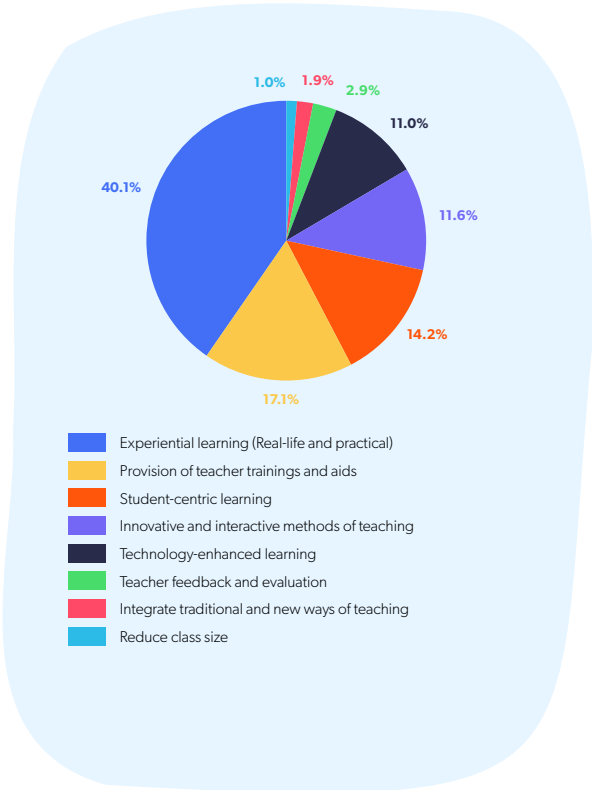


Figure 4: What would you like to change about the examination system?

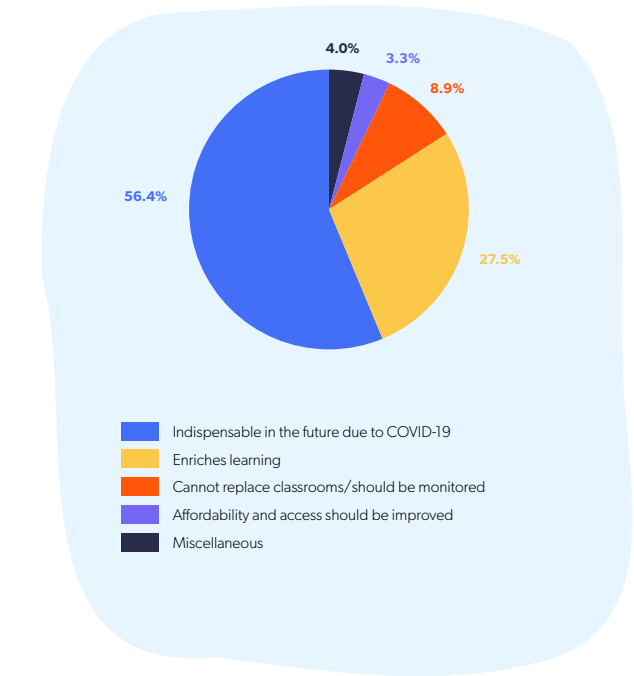
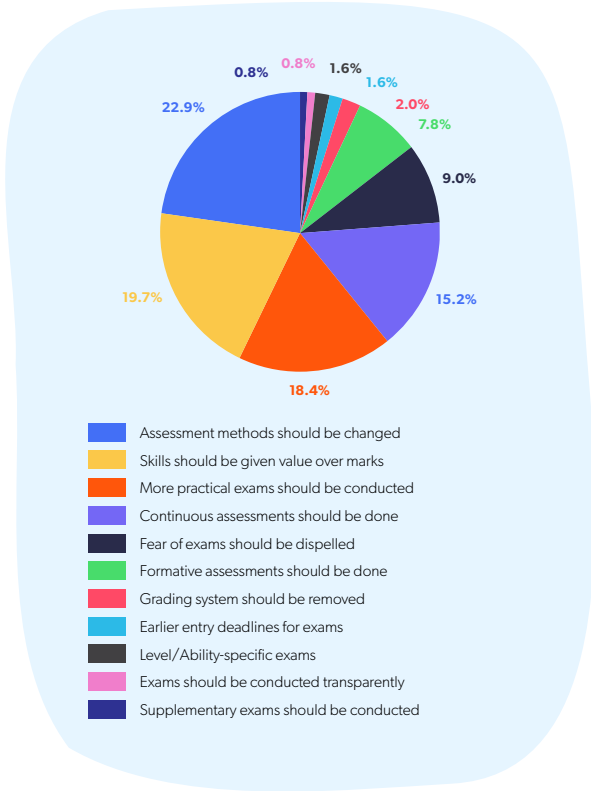


Figure 5: What is the role of technology in current and future learning spaces?

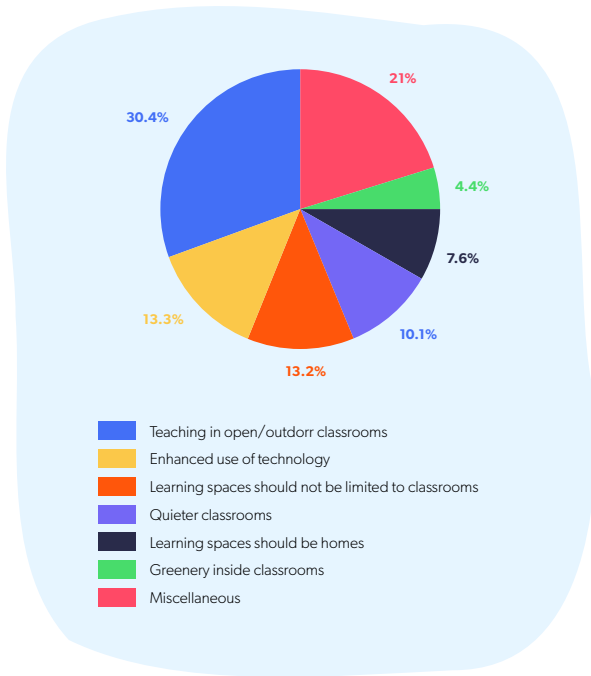


Figure 6: What would you add to a learning space to support better learning?

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ratio. Stakeholders also highlighted that learning spaces must be ‘safe spaces’, where students can express themselves without any judgement and are able to interact and collaborate freely with their peers. Positive student-teacher relationship was also highlighted as an integral part of the learning spaces that helps students feel they ‘belong’ to the learning space. The importance of such relationship was also expressed through the high number of respondents who were dissatisfied with teachers’ attitudes towards them. While technology may be taking the front seat right now, teachers are indispensable in curating learning experiences that have impact on learners beyond schooling and in the cognitive and social development of the learners. Negative comments and bias from the teachers can have a devastating effect on students’ self-image and confidence.

Teachers, on their part, acknowledged the ‘emotional well-being’ of the students should be addressed but they felt they were constrained by an archaic system and lack of support that made it difficult for them to address individual student needs. There was a gap between learners’ perception that teachers are indifferent to their needs and teachers’ frustration with their inability to help students. This gap needs to be addressed through more dialogue between the two groups on the one hand, and education reforms which begin with the acknowledgement that teachers are overworked and need more pedagogical, psychological and other support on the other. Such support to teachers is especially important in the ongoing and post-pandemic context in order to allow them not only to use technology effectively and ensure lessons are engaging but also to manage their own emotions and develop positive relationship with students.

What key recommendations can be drawn from stakeholder voices?	
	Reform curriculum focusing on making learning relevant for the students and providing scope for the students to gain practical knowledge and skills, including social and emotional skills. Provide avenues for all-round development for all students.
	Reform assessments to implement comprehensive and continuous evaluations so that they can support student learning, truly assessing learning gaps of students while reinforcing their strengths.
	Invest in teacher capacity development to enable teachers to curate holistic, blended and transformative experiences for their students, as well as to enhance their own and their students’ well-being.
	Invest in school and college infrastructures, including technology-related ones, to create a more conducive and hybrid learning space, as well as recognize non-traditional spaces and avenues of learning as formal learning spaces.

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