

RESEARCH REPORT

Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development

Date February 2021

Authors Tom Power, The Open University
Alison Buckler, The Open University
Margaret Ebubedike, The Open University
Martha Tengesha, The Open University
Mbuso, Jama, World Vision
America Ndlovu, World Vision
Jane Mukoyi, World Vision
Mashudu Ndou, World Vision
Simbarashe Mubaira, World Vision



THE WORLD BANK



About this document

Recommended citation Tom Power, Alison Buckler, Margaret Ebubedike, Martha Tengenasha, Mbuso Jama, America Ndlovu, Jane Mukoyi, Mashudu Ndou, and Simbarashe Mubaira (2021) *Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development (CHILD): A Study of How Mobile Phones Were Used to Recruit and Equip Community Volunteers to Support Children's Learning During Covid-19 School Closures in Zimbabwe*. (EdTech Hub Research Report) DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.4557015](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4557015)

Licence Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.
You — dear readers — are free to share (copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format) and adapt (remix, transform, and build upon the material) for any purpose, even commercially. You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

Available at <https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/HZRHPN15>

Notes This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express special thanks to EdTech Hub for the grant that enabled this research. Our gratitude goes to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for the UK aid funding that enables the work of the IGATE-T Education Programme in Zimbabwe, providing the context of this study. The Management Team of the IGATE-T project, under the leadership of Janelle Zwier Marongedza and Teresa de Sousa Matoso is appreciated for their patient guidance and support throughout the research. Appreciation also goes to the district teams of World Vision Zimbabwe and Care International Zimbabwe, for their dedication to girls' education during the Covid-19 crisis.

Thanks also go to those directly involved in the research, including The Open University research team, the World Vision Monitoring and Evaluation Team, the IGATE-T technical team, and the district field officers that participated in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. We thank Claire Hedges for managing this CHILD study and Professor Bob McCormick for guidance, encouragement, and critique throughout the research process, both from The Open University. Thanks also to the EdTech Hub peer reviewers, who provided feedback on an earlier draft of the report.

Most of all, our sincere gratitude goes to the Community Learning Champions, caregivers, and communities that have welcomed the opportunity to work together, finding new ways to support their children's learning during challenging times. We especially thank the Champions who generously and openly shared their experiences and insights with the research team.

Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms	5
Definitions of key terms	5
Executive summary	6
Introduction and context	6
Research design	7
Research Findings	8
Conclusions	12
Recommendations	13
1. Introduction	15
1.1. Context of the study	18
2. Research design	21
2.1. The research team	21
2.2. Participants and sampling	22
2.3. Methods	23
2.4. Analysis	24
2.5. Data themes	25
2.6. Representation of data	26
2.7. Ethical considerations	26
2.8. Limitations of the research	27
2.9. Positionality of the research team	28
3. Findings	29
3.1. Mobilisation of the Community Learning Champions programme	29
3.2. Ways of working	33
3.3. Perceptions of impact	53

4. Discussion	60
4.1. Promoting and leveraging concepts of community	60
4.2. Flexible ecosystems of support for learning	62
4.3. Available technologies and sneaker-ware for last-mile education	63
5. Conclusions	64
6. Recommendations	66
7. References	67
8. Appendices	72
8.1. Appendix A — Telephone questionnaire	72
8.2. Appendix B — Examples of daily learning activities	80

Abbreviations and acronyms

CLC	Community Learning Champion
DFID	Department for International Development
ECD	Early Childhood Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
IGATE-T	Improved Gender, Attitudes, Transition and Education
SDC	School Development Committee
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Definitions of key terms

Community Learning Champions (or **Champions**): volunteers resident in local communities, who voluntarily support children's learning during school closures — mainly by facilitating access to, and supporting the use of, daily learning activities by children.

Daily learning activities (or **Activities**): maths and literacy tasks designed by IGATE to support children's learning at home or in Learning Circles. The Activities are a temporary crisis response intended to actively mitigate against loss of learning during prolonged absences from school and to help children maintain their identity as learners. They are not intended as an alternative to, or replacement for, regular schooling or non-formal education. (See Appendix B).

Community Learning Circles (or **Learning Circles**): informal Learning Circles for small numbers of learners, who meet together and carry out daily learning activities facilitated by a parent, caregiver, or in some instances a peer.

Executive summary

“The community came to me and said ‘Mrs Dumisilele, should we let these children fail because of Covid? Are we saying this is the end of everything because of Covid?’ That is when I started to negotiate with them. I said ‘OK, if you are willing to let your children come to my house, I will teach them.’”

– Community Learning Champion

Introduction and context

During the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, governments instructed schools around the world to close their doors to learners. By mid-March, 107 countries had implemented national closures (Viner et al. 2020) with many others following, and still more closing clusters of schools in particular areas (UNESCO 2020). Record numbers of children found themselves ‘out of school’, and UNESCO predicts ‘devastating’ impacts from long-term disruption to education (Giannini and Albrechtsen 2020).

An equitable educational response to the Covid-19 pandemic must recognise that, in low- and middle-income countries, most children are offline (Haßler et al. 2020; Kim and Rose 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa ‘for many of the most marginalised school-age children — i.e. those in very rural settings and or from very poor households — even radio and TV may be inaccessible’ (Bell et al. 2020). How then to support alternative arrangements for learning?

Early in the pandemic, IGATE-T¹ Project partners — World Vision, CARE, and The Open University — realised that most children in their target communities did not have household access to online learning, mobile-internet, TV, or radio. The project couldn’t even distribute print materials during the lockdown. They wondered if it might be possible to remotely recruit and support a small

¹ IGATE-T is a Girls Education Challenge project, funded by UK aid and developed in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, to improve literacy, numeracy, and life skills for over 70,000 marginalised girls from 318 schools across Zimbabwe.

number of 'Champions' of girls education, via their mobile phones. If daily learning activities² could be shared with the Champions via WhatsApp or SMS, Champions might find ways to help as many learners as possible use the activities. The activities themselves would not be 'mobile applications' but brief written instructions for literacy or numeracy activities, that could be shared or carried out with or without the use of the mobile phone. The project team imagined Champions could use the activities for 'Learning Circles' (small informal learning groups facilitated by the Champions) or share them with caregivers for use with children at home. The daily learning activities were not an attempt to replicate school but a temporary crisis-response, to mitigate loss-of-learning during prolonged absences from school and help children maintain their identity as learners.

The IGATE-T project began exploring this approach, developing WhatsApp support networks in four of their nine project districts. The project approached a range of people to take on the role of 'Champion'. Most already had some engagement with the IGATE-T programme and a smaller proportion were recruited through callouts in communities. Some were teachers who were not able to work during school closures or who had retired. Others were involved in formal community volunteer roles. At the time of this study, August to September 2020, 110 Champions were reaching over 1,200 learners. This study examines the experiences of those involved to address the overarching research question:

In the context of pandemic-related, widespread school closures across Sub-Saharan Africa, how can young people in disadvantaged rural communities be supported, locally and from a distance, to maintain engagement in educational activities?

Learning about the work of these Champions is crucial to understanding more about the diverse ways children's learning can be supported and maintained during school closures. Along with sporadic, unpredictable, and uneven returns to school, such disruptions are likely to be features of education for millions of children for the foreseeable future.

Research design

The research team designed the study to support impact through knowledge-exchange by providing a detailed account of both the approach taken and learnings from the experience. The study focused on programme facilitation at different levels and the attitudes, practices, and learnings of the champions as they reflected upon their work.

² For an example of daily learning activities in literacy and numeracy, see Appendix B. *Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development (CHILD)*

Data generation took place during August and September 2020. Champions from all four districts were engaged with the study. Methods consisted of a survey questionnaire (59 Champions), semi-structured interviews (18 Champions) and two focus-group discussions with programme staff (six people in total). The team gathered all data remotely — via telephone, WhatsApp or Skype. We supplemented this data with analysis of conversations from four WhatsApp groups (one for each district) which IGATE-T was using to support the Champions. The research was subject to ethical guidance and approvals from The Open University, UK. Analysis was iterative and collaboratively undertaken by all members of the research team. It was thematic and inductive but naturally influenced by the research questions and the sociocultural lenses of learning, identity and community that underpin the IGATE-T programme and resources.

Research findings

Mobilising Champions

Before the pandemic, IGATE-T had worked extensively in communities, supporting teachers and headteachers directly, and also worked with community members to mobilise families to send their children to school. When schools closed, district teams used different approaches to recruit known volunteers as Champions. Some sent WhatsApp messages to all of the teachers and community engagement volunteers already involved with IGATE-T. Other teams selected individuals they thought had the necessary skills.

Initially, some potential Champions had reservations and naturally wanted reassurance that they and the children were going to be safe. Some had technology concerns and were worried about being able to afford additional WhatsApp data-bundles. Champions were motivated by feelings of compassion, a sense of duty as educators, and their identity as parents themselves.

As a teacher, I felt concerned about the education of the children ... I felt obliged to teach, despite the Covid-19 situation, to create a better future for children. — Community Learning Champion. (A2)

While the Champions' demographics varied, the survey data suggests that most were women in their forties, with previous experience of volunteering in the community and managing multiple family and social commitments. Most of the Champions had no previous experience as educators.

Ways of working

IGATE-T asked Champions to see how they could help as many learners as possible to use daily learning activities. The project sent the activities to Champions via WhatsApp Groups. All of the Champions were able to receive daily learning activities via WhatsApp, and all found ways to share these with local children in their villages.

Survey results showed that most Champions (73%) ran Learning Circles and also shared the activities with caregivers. All Champions interviewed talked about both of these practices in-depth. A third unanticipated approach also emerged. Some Champions also offered one-to-one support to individual students or caregivers, either remotely via mobile phone calls (M7) or when learners or caregivers came in-person to collect or copy-out the activities (J1, J2, M1, M7). Or in one instance, as the Champion cycled around three local villages delivering handwritten copies:

Some parents cannot read and write, and hence they can't assist their own children ... I drop children's work [to their homestead] ... using my bicycle to do door-to-door delivery ... Door-to-door delivery takes long, but at least I get time to explain to my learners before leaving. — Community Learning Champion. (A1)

The interviews suggest that Champions didn't necessarily see *running face-to-face sessions* and the *distribution of activities* as discrete roles. Instead, they wove from these roles rich ecosystems of support for children's learning. As circumstances changed over time, Champions adapted their ways of working to keep children learning.

How champions recruited caregivers

All Champions but one described how community members were passionately concerned about their children's learning and wellbeing — especially during the pandemic school closures. Many caregivers proactively sought out and supported opportunities to maintain children's learning with the Champions.

Community members are really supportive, interested, concerned, as well dedicated to the education of their children. They even came to me consulting about ways in which their children can access learning during this Coronavirus pandemic. This shows their great concern in the education of their children — Community Learning Champion. (A2)

However, Champions also emphasised the importance of working with community leaders to get parents on-side:

The local leadership helped to explain to the parents, and we even invited them to come and observe the learning and parents came to

observe, and they found everything in accordance with the Covid-19 Regulations. They were satisfied and went on to spread the news ... If you [use the leaders] then everything will be easier ... communication reaches everyone. — Community Learning Champion. (M1)

The Champions adopted a fluid approach to communication with caregivers, using mobile phones for WhatsApp, SMS, or phone calls, as well as talking day-to-day in person.

Sharing daily learning activities with caregivers

Champions shared the activities flexibly in a range of ways. The most common approach was to copy activities onto bits of paper and give them directly to children or caregivers. WhatsApp was also used by many champions, reverting to SMS especially for caregivers without smartphones or money for WhatsApp data-bundles.

Learning Circles

Over 80% of Champions surveyed, and almost all Champions interviewed, worked face-to-face with children through Learning Circles. Most of the children attending Learning Circles were primary-age school children. Some secondary-age school children were also participating in some of the groups. Very few out-of-school children attended Learning Circles.

Keeping safe in Learning Circles during Covid-19

Champions reported two main strategies for keeping children, themselves, and the community safe. Firstly, they organised children into small groups so that no more than five learners would come together at one time, e.g., *'I had to divide my students into groups with different time slots because I have many students due to the Covid-19 crisis. Now I have about seventy students' (J2)*. Some champions organised groups based on the children's location, age, or proficiency in basic literacy and numeracy skills. Secondly, Champions promoted the use of face masks, handwashing, and social distancing, e.g., *'On arrival, my learners wash their hands by the gate — with their masks on. They sit a metre apart' (A1)*.

Learning in Learning Circles

All of the Champions interviewed frequently referred to using 'the activities' regularly with learners. Three-quarters of the Champions (75%) allowed between 30 minutes and an hour for each face-to-face session. Most Champions (84%) ran between two and five sessions per week, for each group of learners. Champions, therefore, committed a significant amount of time and energy to their role in running Learning Circles.

Some champions referred to relatively 'open' or 'active' teaching approaches, including encouraging children to ask — rather than just answer — questions, e.g., *'We open with a word of prayer, recap on yesterdays' activity then start activities for the day. I give them time to ask questions where they did not understand'* (A1). Others report making use of peer-support for learning, e.g., *'As for those who did not understand clearly — they get help from those who have understood ... they can get help from others in the group'* (J1). Several Champions report using the activities as a game, e.g., *'I realised that they enjoyed this activity because we did it as a game ... I have also learnt that children enjoy and understand better if they learn through play'* (M1).

Several of the Champions discussed having to adapt or make alternative activities for the very lowest-attaining learners, for whom the daily learning activities were too demanding.

The children I assist, some of them do not even know how to count, you find a grade 6 pupil not even knowing how to add, and I assist them using counters, of which at school they are probably just told to write and the child is not able, and now some have improved because of the use of counters. (A3)

Managing resistance and concerns

There was ongoing uncertainty at district or community level as to whether learners meeting together in small groups was 'allowed'. In some cases Champions (e.g., J2) had been reported to the police. In most cases, IGATE-T project officers helped quickly resolve issues through communication with community leaders. But in some cases, concerns persist:

The community is interested in education programmes, but our community leaders continue to insist that what we are doing is against what has been laid down by the Government. Hence this has seen us conduct lessons in fear. (A6)

During the focus groups, District Coordinators reflected that they could have done more to engage community leaders together with the Champions from the start.

Adapting to constant change

The situation of Champions and Learning Circles was neither static nor uniform — it was continuously changing from day to day and varied from one district or community to the next. Many Champions developed innovative ways of working in response to local community contexts and the project

district teams supported the discussion and dissemination of innovations through the Champions' WhatsApp groups.

Conclusions

All of the Champions were able to receive daily learning activities via WhatsApp, and all found ways to share these for use with local children in their villages. Champions facilitated small-group Learning Circles, offered one-to-one support to learners or caregivers, and shared activities with caregivers to use with their children at home. All Champions but one found community members were passionately concerned about their children's learning and wellbeing.

Dissemination of the activities to champions through low-tech platforms — low-cost mobile phones and WhatsApp — was essential for enabling this approach. Many Champions also shared learning activities with caregivers via WhatsApp — reverting to SMS for caregivers without low-cost smartphones or money for data-bundles. But it was equally essential that children didn't need to use technology at the 'point of learning'. The daily learning activities could be shared and carried out with nothing more than pencil and paper.

Champions most commonly shared the activities by copying them out onto bits of paper which they distributed by hand.

The combination of clear goals and guiding structures without rigid protocols or instructions seems to have empowered Champions and their communities to act together, creating local ecosystems of support for children's learning that are inherently resilient, flexible, and adaptive. The strength of Champions existing community networks and connections, and their ability to build and maintain new ones, was key to their achievement.

There were ongoing safety concerns about learners meeting together. Champions mitigated this by meeting with village caregivers and leaders and by ensuring social distancing, handwashing and face covering. Learning circles were limited to small groups of up to five learners. Some Champions also ran 'demonstrations' so that parents and elders could be reassured by observing how they had minimised risk. Mitigation was often successful but, in some cases, Champions were reported to the police or had difficulty with local authorities. The project could have done more to engage community leaders and local officials from the outset.

When proposing this study, the research team initially focussed on the immediate short-term context. Six months later, schools were just beginning a phased re-opening. Re-opening is unlikely to mean an immediate return to pre-Covid patterns of education, with learning returning to its original boundaries of lesson time and the classroom. We anticipate an ongoing need

for more fluid and mosaic approaches that incorporate learning in school, at home, and in the community for many children and for some time to come. This report highlights a novel approach to building formal frameworks that facilitate informal, flexible ecosystems for children's learning that could work in tandem with formal schooling and could be scaled up to provide more substantial learning activities for a more substantial number of children.

Recommendations

The research suggests the following considerations are critical in mobilising community volunteers to support children's learning during emergency school closures:

1. Remotely recruiting local volunteers who have access to smartphones and who are willing to share and promote the use of offline learning activities within their communities. Projects should seek to identify people who are already active, known, and trusted champions of education within the community.
2. Developing learning activities that can be distributed via available mobile technologies — through platforms like WhatsApp or even SMS — and which can also be shared and completed offline, via paper and pen, or even word of mouth.
3. Providing support and structure through the provision of simple learning activities and simple messages about their desired use. Frame the volunteers' task as an 'open-ended' challenge — with sufficient space for volunteers and community members to exercise agency and autonomy in crafting local responses and responding to changing circumstances.
4. Seeking to work in partnership with community leaders from the outset, to promote children's safe engagement in learning activities. Leverage existing community networks — such as village meetings — to promote participation and raise public understanding of, and support for, risk-mitigation strategies. In particular, promoting small group sizes (i.e., five learners) and encouraging volunteers to reassure caregivers with demonstrations of Covid-safe learning in Learning Circles.
5. Fostering volunteers' sense of 'belonging to something bigger'. For example, WhatsApp groups or field visits can provide opportunities for endorsement and peer support. Local officers should also be available to support volunteers, remotely or in-person, to discuss challenges or to communicate directly with community leaders or officials when required.
6. Finally, those planning such responses should be aware that what begins as a short-term crisis response might lead to longer-term changes. The participants of this study voiced hopes that some of what

they have learnt may feed into improved understanding and practice in schools, and closer partnerships for learning between the school, caregivers, and the community.

1. Introduction

“I will continue helping children learn even when the schools open. As long as I am living. As long as I am alive I will be assisting the learners. I won’t stop because this is who I am now.”

– Community Learning Champion (J3)

During the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, schools around the world were instructed to close their doors to learners. By mid-March, 107 countries had implemented national closures (Viner et al. 2020) with many others following, and more still closing clusters of schools in particular areas (UNESCO 2020). Record numbers of children suddenly became ‘out of school’ — a state previously used to refer to the most marginalised children, usually in the poorest countries. But — at individual and national levels — poverty, resources, and social and economic capital have had an enormous influence on the extent to which children and teenagers have been able to continue learning during the pandemic (Van Lancker and Parolin 2020). The risks of long-term negative impacts are more significant for children from low-income households in low- and middle-income countries (Lagakos and Yam 2020; Viner et al. 2020; Deutsche Welle 2020). It is predicted that girls will be hit hardest by the global school closures with ‘devastating’ impacts from long-term disruption to their education (Giannini and Albrechtsen 2020).

Yet questions about when or how to reopen schools are highly complex in such settings. Schools and communities may have limited resources for infection prevention. Higher proportions of the population live in multi-generational households, many have limited access to sanitation or clean water, and health provision is often fragile or inadequate. Large proportions of the population are often dependent on subsistence incomes. The return to school has been uneven for many children in lower-income countries, and at the time of writing, many are still not attending (Chingono 2020; UNICEF 2020). Some learners may return to some schools for some of the time. But any return to schooling seems likely to be partial, fragile, and contingent. Many learners will continue to be ‘out of school’, or only partially ‘in school’, for some time to come. Understanding more about different ways learners can be supported during this period is one of the biggest education priorities of a generation. This study attempts to contribute to this understanding.

A starting point is that an equitable educational response to the Covid-19 pandemic must recognise that, in low- and middle-income countries, most children are offline (Haßler et al. 2020; Kim and Rose 2020). Therefore, policymakers and educators must also find ways to provide learning opportunities offline. Broadcast media such as radio and TV may reach some of the world's children but in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, household access to TV is not common or equitable '... for many of the most marginalised school-age children i.e., those in very rural settings and or from very poor households — even radio and TV may be inaccessible ...' (Bell et al. 2020). How then to support alternative arrangements for education and help maintain children's identity as learners?

In addition, learning opportunities are not created just by giving children educational materials — they need time, space, and support for learning. Evidence from the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone (Plan 2016) suggests that without such support, most children will not have sufficient literacy and numeracy skills, confidence, motivation, or time for self-study to be successful. Many children in Sierra Leone struggled with the language and pace of educational materials and broadcasts, finding them inaccessible without the support of adults or peers.

By March 2020 the IGATE-T³ project partners — World Vision, CARE and The Open University — had begun to consider whether it might be possible to work remotely with a small number of known 'Champions' of girls' education in rural Zimbabwe, communicating through voice calls, text, and WhatsApp. If daily learning activities could be shared with the Champions via WhatsApp or SMS, Champions might find ways to help as many learners as possible use the activities. It was imagined that Champions might bring children together, in small numbers, for informal 'Learning Circles'. Or Champions might share the activities with caregivers to use with children at home. The activities themselves were not 'mobile applications' but brief written instructions for literacy or numeracy activities, that could be shared or carried out with or without the use of the mobile phone (see Appendix B for examples).

IGATE-T did not intend for daily learning activities to be equivalent to, or a replacement for, 'regular' schooling or non-formal education programmes. They are a temporary crisis response designed to be deliverable by non-educators with minimal support or to be used semi-independently by children who are not yet fully proficient in basic literacy or numeracy skills. The projects' intention was to actively maintain literacy and numeracy skills that

³ [IGATE-T](#) is a Girls Education Challenge project, funded by UK aid and developed in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, to improve literacy, numeracy, and life skills for over 70,000 marginalised girls from 318 schools across Zimbabwe.

might otherwise be lost during a long absence from school and to sustain children's identities as learners.

The team began piloting this approach in early April 2020, developing WhatsApp support networks for the informal study of basic literacy and numeracy skills, in four of the nine project districts. A range of people was approached to take on the role of 'Champion'. Most already had some engagement with the IGATE-T Programme and a smaller proportion were recruited through open calls in communities. Some were teachers who were not able to work during school closures or who had retired, others were involved in formal community volunteer roles. By May 2020, approximately 100 *Community Learning Champions* ((CLC) henceforth Champions) had volunteered to help and were reaching over 1,000 children in disadvantaged rural communities. In addition to sending activities via WhatsApp, the project sought every opportunity to share material supplies including soap and buckets for sanitation, reading and numeracy cards as additional learning resources, and revision guides for children preparing for exams, although the distribution of these materials was initially uneven and ad hoc, often 'piggybacking' on the delivery of humanitarian aid.

When fieldwork for the study began in August 2020, there were approximately 110 Champions, two-thirds women, who were reaching around 1,200 children, including 684 girls in the four pilot districts. IGATE-T is in the process of upscaling the CLC approach to other districts and communities. At the time of writing (late November 2020), some 339 community Champions have volunteered, estimated to be reaching approximately 6,000 children. The project hopes to reach 6,000 primary children and 8,000 secondary children, mostly (60%) girls, through daily learning activities by the end of 2020. This rapid-response but rigorous and in-depth study is an attempt to better understand the initiative, to share learnings across and beyond IGATE-T, and to provide urgently needed, nuanced recommendations for others working to support out-of-school children in similar contexts during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

The overarching research question is:

In the context of pandemic-related, widespread school closures across sub-Saharan Africa, how can young people in disadvantaged rural communities be supported, locally and from a distance, to maintain engagement in educational activities?

This was explored through three sub-questions:

1. *What strategies were used to recruit and support Champions and young people in rural communities to participate in an informal education initiative during school closures?*
2. *How did adults and children use the learning activities provided and what are different stakeholders' perspectives about the ways and circumstances in which these strategies were effective?*
3. *How significant is the role of technology in the delivery and use of the learning activities?*

1.1. Context of the study

Since Covid-19, it is estimated that 56% of children in Zimbabwe do not have access to learning materials at home and 62% do not feel their caregivers can support their learning (UNOCHA 2020). Many efforts to reach children rely on technology. A global, legal hackathon supported by the UK's Financial Times newspaper led to a collaboration between UNICEF and Zimbabwean education and technology stakeholders, which launched a 'learning passport' for young people linked to an online platform providing free education resources and a learning tracker (Bell 2020). The UNOCHA Education Cluster supported the launch of a Mobile Learning Platform targeting 2,500 children in Chimanimani and providing 380 weekly radio lessons for children at Early Childhood Development (ECD) level to Grade 7 (UNOCHA 2020). Turning to WhatsApp in particular as a learning tool has been a common response globally; Jordan and Mitchell (2020) highlight a range of pandemic-responsive WhatsApp-based education initiatives including formal delivery of learning materials in Bhutan, Jamaica, El Salvador, and Peru (World Bank 2020), as well as Ministry-level encouragement for teachers to engage their learners using the platform in the West Bank and Gaza and Kyrgyz Republic (Center for Global Development 2020). But importantly, Bell et al. (2020: 1) suggest that while such initiatives can form the 'backbone of remote learning programmes', relying on them alone will exclude millions of the most marginalised children. They propose that mass production of print-based materials may be the 'only alternative'. In this study, we explore another possibility: localised distribution and mediation of online materials by community volunteers.

Education access and support is an even greater challenge in rural areas where education provision is challenged by remoteness and connectivity disruption, and an increased likelihood that caregivers might not have had the opportunity to be educated themselves, and therefore struggle to support children with formal learning activities (Brink 2016). Rural areas are home to minority groups who already feel excluded (geographically, linguistically, and

culturally) from the formal schooling system (Phiri et al. 2020) and communities who may question the relevance of formal schooling to their livelihoods, aspirations, and genuine opportunities for their children's future (Mukwambo 2019; Ansell 2002; Uleanya et al. 2019; Theunynck 2009). This can be exacerbated by limited or ineffective communication between the school and caregivers (Myende 2013).

Oyinloye (2018) categorises two dominant narratives around the relationship between schools and communities in rural sub-Saharan Africa: a 'missing' narrative that assumes communities should and will automatically share the values and aims of the formal schooling system, and a simultaneous 'deficit' narrative that assumes a lack of interest in, commitment to, investment in, and even a rejection of these same systems. While there are studies that highlight the complexity of these relationships (e.g., Buckler 2015; Albaiz and Ernest 2020; Stefanski et al. 2016), and which showcase the potential benefits of top-down, formal community participation in school structures, systems, and construction (Heneveld and Craig 1996 in Kendal 2007; Theunynck 2009) there is very little research available that focuses on the roles of communities in supporting non-school-based education initiatives, and even less on how communities can be mobilised to support learning in times of crisis. With nearly 72% of secondary school learners in Zimbabwe living in rural areas (Mukwambo 2019), and many rural schools struggling to meet the sanitation and staffing requirements set by the government in advance of schools opening, there is an urgent need to explore this in more depth.

Although researchers in the field of health have written about the lack of literature on volunteer communities in relation to health and emergency initiatives in low-income contexts (McMahon et al. 2017; Abramowitz et al. 2015; Loth et al. 2020; Hunter and Ross 2013), there is considerably less literature available on volunteers in the field of education and particularly in response to crises. The health literature reports a growing consensus that both community-level public health initiatives and health crisis responses work best when they 'mobilise existing sources of social capital or encourage development of new sources of social capital' (Gregson et al. 2004: 2120). Abramowitz et al. (2015: 1) describe how local innovations in Liberia 'effectively contained' the Ebola epidemic. Their research challenges deficit narratives around local traditions and practices (perceived to spread Ebola through ignorance or unwillingness to adapt) to show how rapid community responses demonstrated the supple nature of traditions in light of rapidly changing 'formal' public health messages; outcomes which non-community members would have struggled to have implemented. McMahon et al. (2017)'s research in Sierra Leone reaches the same conclusion and calls for the more systematic engagement of volunteers to ensure even more rapid and coherent responses to future crises.

Other studies focus on why people choose to engage in local health volunteer activities. In a pan-African survey of palliative care volunteers, Loth et al. (2020) found key motivators to be altruism, a sense of civic engagement and professional experience. Cash and material rewards were also factors, but secondary to intrinsic motivations. Omoto et al. (2010) suggest that people's existing attachment to their community is a strong predictor of their likelihood of engaging in volunteering activity. Akintola (2011) explored the motivations of AIDS caregivers in South Africa and found that religion was a significant factor that models of volunteer motivation from high-income contexts often neglected. They also found that many volunteers were using the experience strategically to fulfil career goals or as stepping-stones to another career or another level of their existing career. In this study, we utilise Akintola's (2011: 54) definition of volunteering which 'involves committing time and energy to provide a service that benefits someone, society, or the community without expecting financial or material rewards'.

The study draws on these three strands of literature: the potential for technological responses, community attitudes to education, and volunteer mobilisation as they interrelate in rural, Zimbabwean communities during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

2. Research design

As researchers and as practitioners our work is framed through sociocultural lenses (e.g., Wenger 1998). This study was interested in the interrelation of learning, identity, and community: i.e., how the Champions developed in the role and how this led them to adapt the role to suit the children and families they were supporting. These ideas around professional learning and activity already underpin the IGATE-T materials. We also drew on the work of Gray and Stevenson (2018) who apply a sociocultural frame to the study of volunteer identity, arguing that this has tended to be framed through an individual lens, even when the process and intended outcomes of volunteering have a social element. They illustrate the role of the volunteer organisation in shaping volunteer learning and identity, and how the cultivation of a cohesive shared identity can help volunteers move through difficult times in their role. Given the crisis-response context that the Champions are working in, we were particularly interested in exploring this further. The implications of these framings on the data will be explained in more detail in forthcoming academic journal publications, but it is important to outline here that they were central reference points throughout the research.

Logistically, the study was designed within pandemic-related travel restrictions and social-distancing measures. It focused on learning activity in four districts in Zimbabwe: Chivi, Insiza, Mangwe, and Mbrenywa. All of the data was generated remotely via mobile phone or Skype. The study combined a Champion survey, qualitative interviews with a group of purposefully selected Champions, focus groups with IGATE-T District Coordinators, and analysis of WhatsApp interactions between Champions and Coordinators in each district. While these instruments generated the core data set, this data was contextualised ethnographically (see Cottica et al. 2017) through multiple, iterative online discussions across the extended research team who have extensive collective experience working in rural communities in Zimbabwe.

2.1. The research team

The research team consisted of three UK-based academics from The Open University and three World Vision technical staff and field officers based in Zimbabwe. The team worked in pairs throughout the study, with each pair consisting of one person from each organisation. This was in line with our commitments to cross-team learning and an intention that each member of the pair would contribute different experience and expertise across the stages of the research process. Teams were named after the first-name initial of the Zimbabwean team member (A, J, M).

2.2. Participants and sampling

Several groups are involved in the CLC initiative, including IGATE-T District Coordinators who remotely support the Champions via WhatsApp and other means, the Champions, parents, caregivers, and children who take part in learning activities — in their homestead or Learning Circles.

Champions — the main focus of data generation — were recruited for the study by District Coordinators through the existing WhatsApp groups. The telephone survey was opportunistic, reaching as many of the 110 Champions as we could within the time available — a sample of just over half (59) Champions was achieved, with 18 of these taking part in subsequent in-depth interviews. Sampling for in-depth interviews was purposeful, based on the survey data, attempting to include the four Champions who said they were no longer active in this role, reflecting the two-thirds female gender balance, having an even mix of Champions with educator and non-educator backgrounds, and an even geographic spread across the four districts. Within this frame, sampling was also opportunistic, depending on who it was possible to contact and agree a time with for the telephone interviews.

We made efforts to interview caregivers and children engaged in learning activities, but this was not practical so instead, we gathered information about a diverse range of children and caregivers indirectly through the Champion interviews.

There were two focus groups which incorporated District Coordinators and two other IGATE-T project staff members (six participants in total) who were personally invited to take part in the study by the research team. All focus-group participants had played a key role in supporting Champions in the four districts.

We also downloaded the conversations in four Champion WhatsApp groups (one for each of the four districts) over a period of three months (July–September 2020). Activity within the WhatsApp groups differed between districts: the same time frame resulted in between 7 and 38 pages of extracted text. In total, approximately 70 pages of downloaded material were analysed (with roughly one-quarter of this text consisting of date and time stamps, phone numbers, and images — which were not analysed).

Table 1: *Sampling summary*

Data source	Sample size
Champion survey	59
Champion interviews	18
Focus group	6
WhatsApp	4 group chats over 3 months

2.3. Methods

The survey was a closed-question instrument (see Appendix A) designed by the research team to gather basic contextual data about the Champions and their modes of working. It used only closed questions requiring quantitative or categorical responses (e.g., *how many children take part, how often does each group meet, for how long*). Zimbabwean field officers carried out the survey by telephone and entered the responses in real-time, directly into a specially designed Tangerine database. The survey was also used to identify Champions who were interested in participating in a longer interview.

We intended that the interviews would be conducted by the research pairs. However, we had overestimated the Champion's confidence to participate using English (in both the survey and the interview the participant was able to choose their language of participation), and it was felt that the regular need for translation and explanation was frustrating for the participant as well as potentially unsettling or exclusionary. In addition, using Skype for the interviews proved unsatisfactory due to frequent drop-outs in connectivity and the cost of using Skype to call Champions' mobile phones directly was too high. Thus, after the first four interviews, we relied on the team in Zimbabwe to carry out the interviews using a mobile phone call rather than the internet. At the end of each day during the interview phase, the pairs of researchers held a 30-minute reflection meeting to discuss key themes emerging from the interviews. This formed the first layer of the iterative analysis process (see below). Interviews were recorded using an app and translated and transcribed by a professional transcription company in Zimbabwe.

The same company transcribed the focus groups, which were carried out (in English, via Skype) at the end of the data generation process, with a small number of prompts developed from the interview findings. These were designed to be informal conversations between the programme and research teams with the intention of understanding the intervention from a

programme perspective and to enrich and ethnographically triangulate the data generated with the Champions.

2.4. Analysis

Survey data was cleaned and analysed using IBM Predictive Analytical Software (PASW), to generate univariate descriptive statistics on the frequency and distribution of responses. Bivariate statistics, especially cross-tabulations, were carried out to understand association between variables.

A collaborative and iterative thematic approach was used to analyse the interview, focus-group and WhatsApp-conversation data. In principle, this was inductive, although we recognise that how we ‘saw’ the data would be influenced by our sociocultural perspectives (Guest et al. 2012) and the focus of the research questions. We aimed to make the analysis process as transparent and rigorous as possible, so any insights from the data would be discussed multiple times within different groupings of the wider team. Each pair (UK and Zimbabwe) worked with a consistent set of transcripts throughout the analysis. Analysis took place through four phases, each involving coding within pairs and reflections on codes across the whole research team. By the final phase, coding table documents were developed for each of the four main themes, collating coded text and references from the interviews and WhatsApp data. These coding tables helped to shape the questions for the focus groups. They also formed the basis on which writing around the identified themes took place. For added transparency, all analysis was carried out on documents located within the shared online drive. We acknowledge that structured coding can be seen to be incompatible with a sociocultural framing, but the potential atomisation of excerpts was mitigated through the iterative cross-team analysis which helped to contextualise parts of the data across the whole.

Table 2: *Iterative analysis process.*

Phase		Activity
1	Reflection	Daily meetings between the research pairs during the interview stage, considering emerging ideas.
2	Coding	In pairs, read through transcripts and familiarise selves with content. Inductive phase of code.
	Reflection	Whole team meeting to collate proposed codes and organise into categories.

3	Coding	In pairs, re-read transcripts and formally code. Keep note of any new codes emerging.
	Reflection	Whole team meeting — share new insights following formal coding and share any additional codes.
4	Coding	In pairs, final read-through of transcripts through lens of new insights.
	Reflection	Whole team sense-making workshop. Interpretation of data.

2.5. Data themes

There were four overarching themes. In **Community** we collated all of the data relating to the Champions' descriptions of the community context, community members' perceptions, and behaviours towards education in general and towards the CLC initiative in particular — including examples of support, resistance, and how Champions managed the latter. This theme also captured examples of community in a broader sense to collate the data around the Champions' examples of the networks they had drawn on to support them in the role (these often extended beyond the geographical community they were living in). The final strand within this theme was the Champions' perspectives about how the programme was influencing their relationships with members of the community. The second theme collated data around **Recruitment**, in relation to how the Champions were approached to volunteer on the programme, and how they, in turn, recruited caregivers and young people to engage with the programme. It also collated data around motivations for volunteering. This theme was more extensive than the description suggests because recruitment was not a one-off event and required multiple strategies on behalf of the Champions to gain and maintain the trust of the community.

In **Ways of working** we included data about the ways in which Champions kept in touch with caregivers or learners, how daily learning activities were shared, the location of 'learning', how Champions worked with children in 'Learning Circles', any other resources they used, how they ensured the safety of children, and the technologies they used to support their work. This theme also included data around insights from their experiences of working with young people which Champions wanted to pass on to teachers and schools and their perspectives on how they were developing as educators through the programme. In **Young people**, we collated excerpts about the demographics of the children the Champions were working with, any specific stories about young people's lives and experiences during the pandemic that were relevant

to the learning programme, how the young people were working together to support each other, and the Champions' perspectives around how young people were progressing with their learning as a result of the programme.

2.6. Representation of data

We have structured our findings in a chronological narrative to give a sense of the 'story' of the initiative as it happened. To support this narrative approach we draw holistically across the survey, interview, focus group, and WhatsApp data at appropriate points rather than presenting each data-type separately. The research questions are then reflected on explicitly within the discussion section. Interspersed throughout the report we also include 'cameos' of Champions, children, and caregivers. The material for most of these cameos has been obtained directly from the narratives of the participants. However, where there were multiple, similar examples, the cameos are written as if they are about one person but constitute a composite from across the data. This is made clear in each of these cases. Photographs used in this report are drawn from the WhatsApp group conversations. These are for illustrative purposes (we did not analyse the photographs) and we have only included photographs where individuals are not identifiable.

2.7. Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee⁴. The research design was guided by university policy, as documented on The Open University's Research Ethics website.⁵ The research also adhered to safeguarding policies held by World Vision and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Interviews and surveys were tested in a 'mock survey' and 'mock interview' activity with colleagues from IGATE-T. This was to ensure clarity of phrasing, to check for missing data points, and to flag up any questions that might touch on local or national sensitivities or cause discomfort among the participants. The instruments underwent a light revision following this activity, although no major issues were raised.

Consent was obtained from all participants. Because of the Covid-19 lockdown, our contact with participants was mediated remotely through mobile technologies. Project Officers shared the project information sheet and consent forms with participants over WhatsApp and discussed these over the phone where necessary, translating where appropriate. Oral consent was obtained from participants in relation to the survey, interview, and access to

⁴ HREC/3602/Buckler

⁵ <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>

the WhatsApp group and recorded by the Project Officer. Telephone protocols were developed to ensure the confidentiality and safety of respondents. This was upheld by respect and full disclosure, including: identification of the calling party, disclosing the identity of the organisation that will receive and process the data, and information about the purpose of the survey. The WhatsApp 'Champions' groups were established before the study began. Permissions for use of this data only applied after the point when consent was given (July 2020). We have only reported contributions from Champions who consented.

Data-tag IDs (e.g., J2, representing the research team name followed by the participant number) have been used throughout the report, to preserve anonymity. Where names are used, these are pseudonyms.

2.8. Limitations of the research

This study was conceptualised as a rapid response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was designed to provide a snapshot of the very specific context of community responses to school closures within an existing education programme. We recognise that the programme's connections to and familiarity with communities may have facilitated the mobilisation of volunteers to an extent that might not be exactly replicable in other contexts.

Most of the data-gathered was 'self-reporting' by the Champions, rather than direct observation or externally verifiable evidence. The Champions' testimonies were triangulated against qualitative data from WhatsApp, including their discussions and photos of their practice. They were also triangulated against the experiences and observations of the Zimbabwe field officers, through data analysis and focus group discussions. Both sources of verification suggest that the Champions' accounts seem honest and reasonable representations of the programme. However, while we were able to include Champions who were no longer working in the role within the survey, we were unable to carry out in-depth interviews with any of them and were therefore unable to learn the reasons why they had not continued. The inclusion of this group may have pointed towards less positive accounts of volunteering than from those still working in the role.

While we made attempts to interview parents and children in these communities, this was not possible due to connectivity issues, travel restrictions, and the timeframe of the study. We were able to gain indirect insights into the experiences of parents and children through our other data sources, but we recognise that their direct inclusion would have led to richer and more diverse perspectives about the activities and more insights into the impact of the Champions' work.

Finally, our intention to undertake the interviews in our research pairs (each pair containing one UK-based and one Zimbabwe-based member of the research team) was only realised in around one-third of the interviews due to technological and connectivity challenges. We were unable to resolve these challenges within the timeframe and budget of the study. Different data might have been generated if we had been able to fulfil this intention.

2.9. Positionality of the research team

The research team consisted of academics and practitioners from The Open University, UK and World Vision, Zimbabwe. All members of the team have extensive experience of working and researching education in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular. We consciously tried to ensure responsibilities were thoughtfully distributed amongst the research team and its varied dynamics (academics and practitioners, those from the UK and those from Zimbabwe, and those who were directly engaged with IGATE-T and those who were not), to maximise inclusion of each individual's particular expertise and to maximise cross-team learning and capacity development. We agreed on a way of working designed to promote reflexive dialogues and engagement across these distinct groups.

Given that some members of the research team are directly involved in the IGATE-T programme we recognise the potential for bias. However, we also feel that the urgency of the educational crisis and the sensitive, unpredictable contexts in which the Champions are working necessitated a research team who were known to them and trusted by them. It would have been impossible for an independent researcher to respectfully gain access to the Champions during the pandemic. The IGATE-T team's position as cultural insiders (Britton 2020) offered valuable insights into the experiences of the Champions. We explicitly reflected on our positionality at multiple points through the study (drawing for example on Bishop and Shepherd 2011).

3. Findings

“Well, when I was told that IGATE is looking for resident teachers to work with community volunteers, I felt the urge within me to assist, I didn’t hesitate to assist with children’s work.”

– Community Learning Champion (M3)

As set out above we present the findings in a narrative form to give a sense of the story of the CLC initiative. We start with the recruitment of the Champions, who they were and their motivations for volunteering. We then explore in-depth the different ways they were working in their role, the issues they were facing, and how they were responding to these. Finally, we consider perspectives around the effectiveness and impact of the CLC initiative.

3.1. Mobilisation of the Community Learning Champions programme

Before the pandemic, IGATE-T had worked extensively in communities, supporting teachers and headteachers directly, and also working with community members to mobilise families to send their children to school. As one of the project officers said, *it has long been a philosophy of the programme that learning should not begin and end in school* (FG2). In Zimbabwe, many teachers are ‘non-resident’ and only stay at the school during term-time. When schools closed, most non-resident teachers returned to their homes — often far from their rural schools. While the sudden closure of schools due to Covid-19 was a shock, project officers agreed that it was not a huge leap to come up with the idea of drawing upon known volunteers to ‘Champion’ alternative learning approaches within their communities. *‘Support for learning was now resting on the communities themselves, they had to take a step up to the front, and it was fairly easy for us to say that, OK, now we need you to give more direct support for learning.’* (All quotes from FG2.)

3.1.1. Recruitment of Champions

I would just give [other potential Champions] a picture of the situation whereby children are just sitting at home and doing nothing and then

encourage them to join the group so that we assist them —
Community Learning Champion (J2).

District teams used different approaches to recruit Champions. Some sent WhatsApp messages to all of the teachers and community engagement volunteers already involved with IGATE-T. Other teams selected individuals they thought had the necessary skills and commitment for the Champion role. Project officers thought, for example, that Champions may be required to *'discuss sensitive issues and speak out about these issues rather than hide away from them'* (FG2), and therefore some process of selection would be necessary. Other teams worked with headteachers and community leaders to identify community members who might be interested. The community then approached these potential Champions, encouraging them to 'volunteer,' e.g., *'I didn't do anything but parents on their own came to me because they had decided that children should be getting lessons since schools are closed'* (M3).

Initially, potential Champions had several reservations, e.g., *'They were fearing for their lives and this took priority over the children's learning in the first instance'* (FG2). Many Champions naturally wanted reassurance that they and the children were going to be safe. Some had technology concerns (see Meki's cameo), relating to their ability to use the technology appropriately as well as being able to afford additional WhatsApp bundles. Others needed reassurance about their ability to do the job well. Reimbursement was also an issue for some who signed up and then left when they realised it was not a paid role. Other Champions started but then needed to drop out and concentrate on income-generating activities as the economic situation worsened. So the recruitment of Champions was not a one-time activity but an ongoing process.

3.1.2. The Community Learning Champions



Figure 1: *Who are the Champions?*

Two-thirds of the Champions surveyed were women. Although ages ranged from 21 to over 65, two-thirds of the total surveyed were middle-aged (between 35 and 50 years). Almost half (48%) of the Champions had a background in education — 43% of those surveyed were currently employed as teachers or headteachers and a further 5% were retired teachers or headteachers.

Just over half of the Champions surveyed said they considered themselves fluent in English. Just over a third (35%) felt comfortable with English although said they sometimes struggled, while some (14%) reported difficulties in communicating in English. The survey showed a correlation between Champions' reported confidence in English and their highest level of education.

All of the Champions had previous volunteering experience. All but one of the 59 Champions surveyed were combining this role with other responsibilities, dividing their time between the Champion role, community leadership roles, other volunteering activities, caring responsibilities, and formal or informal employment. Most Champions interviewed had multiple community or volunteer roles.

I am a village health worker, and I was in the bicycle committee. I am also a community mentor. (J3)

[I am a] community learning Champion, a Behaviour Change Mobiliser for Men under the National Aids Council, a pastor for 12 apostolic churches, a member of the Community Child Protection Committee and I am also the SDC chairperson. (A1)

Through such roles, most Champions were already well known and widely known across their communities. As in Omoto et al. (2010), they drew on this experience and reputation both in their decisions to volunteer for the Champion role and in the different ways they recruited and worked with others. For example, *'the community usually nominate me for various programmes arising here and there — programmes for food aid and any other. I usually help the community'* (A3).

In the interviews, Champions commonly expressed motivations for the role including:

- a desire to improve their community;
- an interest in and a belief in the value of education;
- a moral obligation to do something proactive and positive in the face of the crisis;
- concern about the risks to children's welfare during school closures, and a desire to keep them occupied and focused on their studies.

Such motivations were often expressed in language that drew upon a strong emotion — passion or compassion, their identities as educators, and concern for the children of others in the community, which often seemed to stem from their parental identity. E.g.:

Naturally, I love children, I have a passion for learning, I am a bit learned myself, was it not for money issues, I could have exceeded Form Four, being enlightened myself I want to see children in my community doing better. (A1)

As a teacher, I felt concerned about the education of the children. It has always been my desire to teach even if schools were closed, hence I felt

obliged to teach children despite the Covid-19 situation in order to create a better future for children. (A2)

My child motivates me. When she finished Form Four, she got pregnant and her uncle motivated me to tell my child to look for work as a policewoman and now she works there. Seeing her work gives me the drive to also help other children have a better future. (M7)

3.2. Ways of working

Having been recruited and supported remotely via WhatsApp and mobile phone calls, Champions were asked to see how they could help as many learners as possible to try and use the activities. Daily learning activities⁶ were sent to the Champions via WhatsApp groups. All of the Champions reported being able to receive the daily learning activities via WhatsApp, and all found ways to share these for use with local children in their villages.

The project had anticipated two ways in which Champions might use the activities — by running face-to-face sessions with small groups of learners and by distributing the activities for parents and caregivers to use with children in their homesteads. The survey results show that most Champions (73%) used the activities in both of these ways — with 86% sharing the learning activities with parents or caregivers and 81% running face-to-face sessions with children. All of the Champions interviewed talked about both of these practices in-depth.

Box 1. Champion Cameo — Jane.

Jane is a teacher at a primary school. She also plays the dual role of a nurse and a Dean at school. Her role involves providing counselling for children as well. Jane said she decided to take part in volunteering to create a better future for the children in her community: *'I was so interested in helping children to learn during this lockdown.'* She pointed out that learners are different, and that, in order to meet their individual learning needs, each child should be supported differently. She runs Learning Circles for the older children but didn't want to exclude younger children. Jane explained: *'I usually write little learning cards especially for these little ones who are in Grade One and Two and have given them to just a few parents because most of the activities written on the IGATE cards are a little bit advanced for them.'* The idea is that the smaller children can work on these activities at home in their own time.

A third, unanticipated, hybrid approach also emerged from the interviews — Champions were giving support to individual students or caregivers. Some did this remotely via mobile phone calls (M7). Others did this when learners or caregivers came in-person to collect or copy out the activities (J1, J2, M1, M7) or

⁶ For an example of daily learning activities in literacy and numeracy, see Appendix B. *Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development (CHILD)*

as the Champions cycled around the villages delivering handwritten copies to children or caregivers (see A1, below).

We selected a spot to use for our lessons. Under normal circumstances, we meet on a daily basis. But if we fail to do so we post the learning material on our platform [WhatsApp] or we call the learners and they come to collect [the activities]. (J2)

Some parents cannot read and write and hence they can't assist their own children. In some instances, I would drop children's work [to their homestead] in small papers. Before departure, I would explain activities to learners as their own parents could help ... I share daily learning activities through community WhatsApp platforms, SMS, writing down on small pieces of paper. I then use my bicycle to do door-to-door delivery ... Door-to-door delivery takes long but at least I get time to explain to my learners before leaving. (A1)

In fact, the interviews suggest that Champions didn't approach running *face-to-face sessions* and the *distribution of activities* as discrete roles. Rather, they wove these roles into rich ecosystems of support for children's learning. As circumstances changed in their community contexts, Champions responded, shifting the balance of their actions and networks to maintain support for learning. See Figure 2 below.

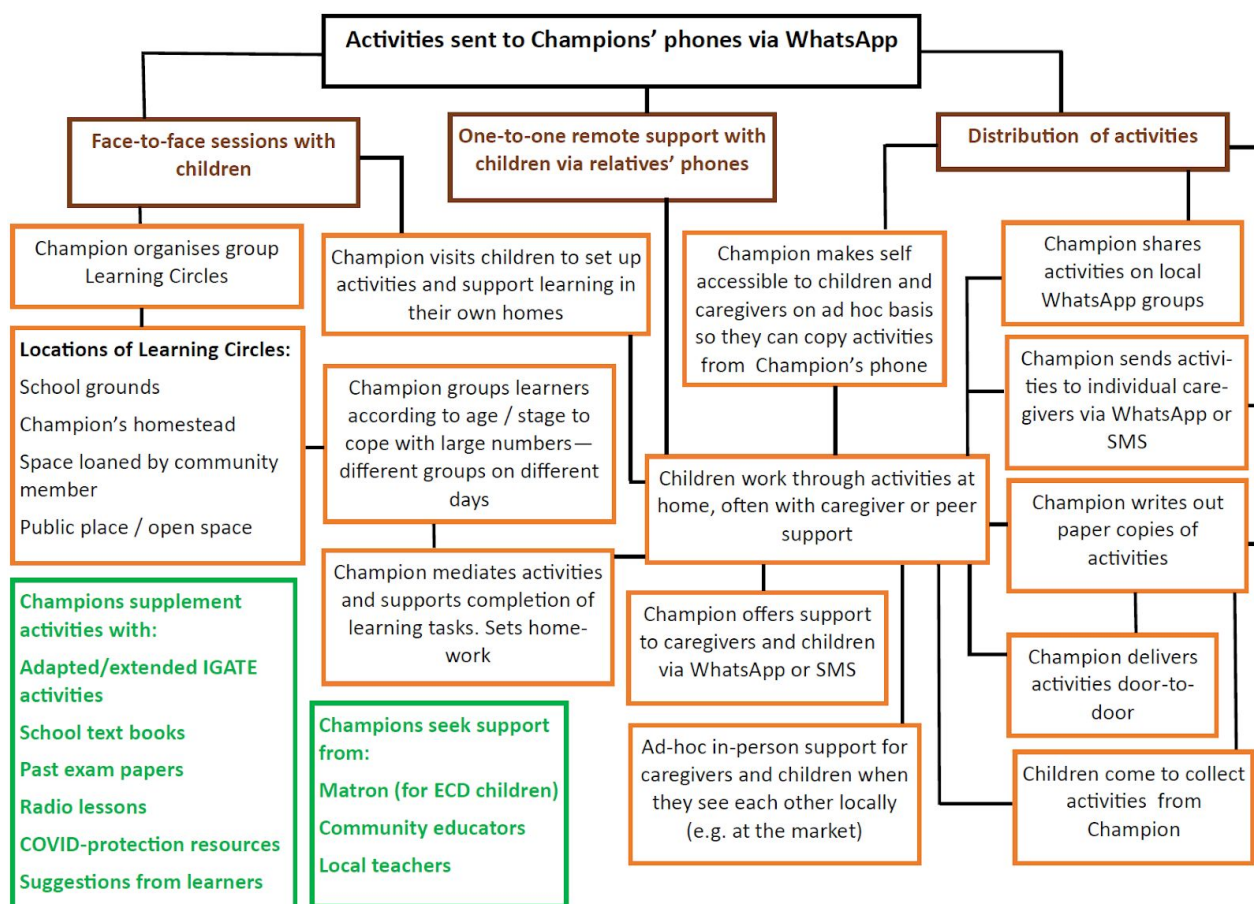


Figure 2: Ecosystem of learning and support approaches adopted by the Champions.

3.2.1. How community-volunteers recruited caregivers to engage with the programme

In the interviews, Champions were asked about the community they were living and volunteering in. We were interested in whether they felt community dynamics influenced receptiveness to the community learning initiative, or if they affected how the programme was progressing. All Champions but one described how many community members were passionately concerned about their children's learning and wellbeing — especially during the pandemic school closures. Many Champions described how the community had proactively asked them to take on the role and regularly asked for more learning activities:

[This] community has a very positive spirit towards learning, this community has produced teachers, nurses and many learned individuals. (A1)

[Here] community members are really supportive, interested, concerned as well dedicated in the education of their children. They

even came to me consulting about ways in which their children can access learning during this Coronavirus pandemic. This shows their great concern in the education of their children. It's their wish for every child in the community to be educated. (A2)

Other studies refer to the challenges of promoting education in rural areas of Zimbabwe, particularly for girls, and particularly in apostolic communities (Machingura 2011). Just three of the Champions mentioned such issues when discussing community views on education in the interviews: '*Education is not really that important [to those parents] ... some need some pushing*' (M7). Champions' positive views were potentially due to the purposive sampling as we were unable to interview Champions who had not been able to sustain the activities, and unsupportive communities may have been a key factor in this. Further, positive attitudes towards learning and the CLC initiative did not mean there was no uncertainty or resistance from parents and caregivers around the initiative, especially as the pandemic progressed and the economic situation worsened (this is discussed later on in the report).

Champions emphasised the importance they attached to engaging senior members in the community in order to start their work as a Champion:

I began by approaching my village head, explained what the programme is all about, he asked me a lot of questions, his biggest concern was the fact that we were all under strict lockdown guidelines and he thought if I am to gather children for learning I would be breaking lockdown rules. I told him that I am not going to gather large groups, my intention was to group my learners into several small groups and besides as the SDC chairperson, I am in charge of [the Primary school] WhatsApp group so I would utilise the WhatsApp group too. When I told him this, he was relieved and he started mobilising parents for me. (A1)

One Champion worked with the local leadership to set up a demonstration lesson so the caregivers could understand and be reassured about the safety measures being taken:

The local leadership helped to explain to the parents and we even invited them to come and observe the learning and parents came to observe and they found everything in accordance with the Covid-19 Regulations. They were satisfied and went on to spread the news and convinced other parents ... If you [use the village leaders] then everything will be easier and also communication and information reaches everyone. (M1)

Some Champions used the pandemic itself as a 'way in':

We started by engaging with parents informing them about Coronavirus and how to stay safe. We then told them about the challenge whereby children are now home and that there is no date set for them to go back to school. We advised them that children are losing out. (A5)

Others used regular sessions on Covid-prevention to serve the multiple purposes of keeping the children and Champion safe, hoping it would keep the community healthy by influencing behaviours at home, reassuring the community that they were being careful, and be a 'hook' to ensure parents kept sending their children to the sessions.

Usually, I do numerous and literacy activities, I also teach about social distancing and about Covid-19. what is needed to sanitise themselves, to wear mask, social distance so that they can teach their parents at home. (J2)

3.2.2. Keeping in touch with caregivers — communication and support

Given the nature of the pandemic and its varied and often unpredictable impact on restrictions of movement, the Champions had a fluid and adaptable approach to how they communicated with caregivers. This also depended on local reactions and responses to Covid, which varied across the participants' communities. Mobile phones were the most common way of keeping in touch either through WhatsApp, SMS, or phone calls: 'Every morning [this parent] sends me a text asking if today her children can come.' For one Champion (A5) whose phone was unreliable, this meant borrowing his neighbour's phone so he could maintain regular contact. Champions combined communication means depending on local need.

Through WhatsApp, I reach out to almost 40 parents [... if parents don't understand the children's work] I would explain on the group chat. Still, on WhatsApp, some parents don't even respond, they just keep quiet, you won't even know if they are assisting children or not. So sometimes I inbox just to follow up. (A1)

One Champion (A3) explained that some of her learners' parents were unable to travel home from South Africa when lockdown happened but even so they regularly phoned the Champion to receive updates and photographs of the children's learning.

Most Champions made it known to the community that they were available by phone or in-person to discuss the learning activities or their children's progress as required: *'I meet with the parents when they are at ward meetings and we talk about the programme. Sometimes I call the parents and others we talk on WhatsApp (J2) and Joy's aunt [Joy's caregiver] always stops by our learning centre to see how we and the children are progressing'* (M8). One Champion, who stopped face-to-face sessions when the number of local cases increased, started sending activities to caregivers via WhatsApp. When the children had completed the work at home, the caregivers brought it to the Champion's home for marking and feedback (A3).

3.2.3. Sharing daily learning activities

As Figure 2 suggests, Champions shared the activities in a range of ways, often switching between these depending on their own time and availability, and their understanding of the needs of the caregivers and learners at a particular time.

Box 2. *Champion Cameo — Aneni.*

Aneni is a Champion from Mangwe district. She started receiving the learning activities through WhatsApp. She knew that not all of the parents and caregivers of the children she was teaching had phones, or had regular access to WhatsApp bundles. A few weeks into the Champion programme, she asked the District Coordinator if she could copy out the activities onto paper. The Coordinator was supportive. When they saw the difference this made to accessibility and inclusivity in that community, they shared the idea across the other WhatsApp groups. The telephone survey shows that by September, sharing activities copied out onto bits of paper had become the most commonly used way to distribute activities — used by nearly two-thirds of the Champions.

Copying activities onto pieces of paper and giving these directly to caregivers was the most common means of sharing activities. This practice stemmed from the idea of a single Champion, disseminated through the Champions' WhatsApp group (see Cameo: Aneni, above). Slightly fewer (54%) Champions reported sending the activities directly to caregivers' phones via WhatsApp and a quarter (25%) reported using SMS. In interviews, Champions said they used SMS to reach caregivers without smartphones, or at times when the Champion knew that the caregiver did not have money for a WhatsApp bundle. Finally, four of the Champions copied the activities onto paper and left these in public places for children and caregivers to collect at a time that was convenient for them. Four-fifths of the Champions said they mainly distributed the activities in English, with the rest distributing in English some of the time but translating into Shona or Ndebele as required.

WhatsApp was also used to share examples of the work children had done in response to the activities (see Image 1 below), with photographs either being shared from caregivers to Champions or between Champions.

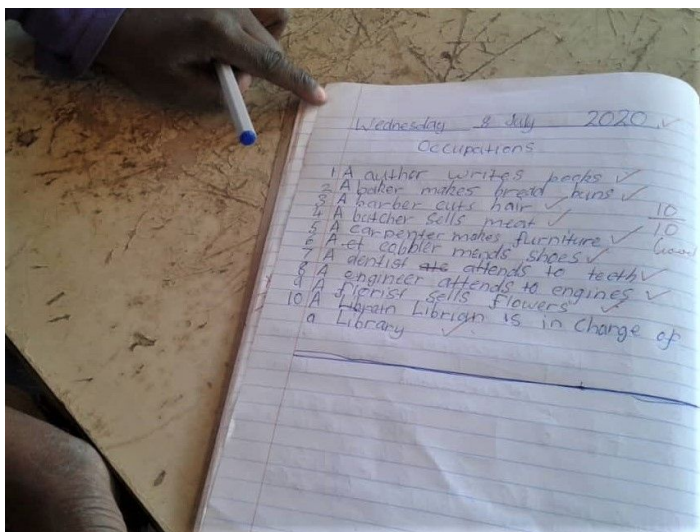


Image 1. Photograph of a child's work shared within a WhatsApp group.

In the interviews, some Champions refer to 'sharing daily learning activities' with caregivers not as an alternative to using them in face-to-face Learning Circles, but as a supplement — like sending homework from school.

We are getting support from the parents as they are welcoming the initiative and sending their children to the centres. Parents also help the students with assignments, and we also post assignments on their phones. (J2)

3.2.4. Attending 'Learning Circles'

Working face-to-face with children through Learning Circles, as shown in Image 2 below, was reported by over 80% of Champions through the survey and was discussed in-depth in all of the interviews. As a 'Girls Education Challenge' (GEC) project, IGATE was working in disadvantaged rural communities in Zimbabwe. Many Champions were concerned about the risks of children becoming permanently displaced from education during the school closures. Teenage pregnancy was the most commonly raised concern for girls and 'gold-panning' was seen as the primary risk for boys, although as Philip and Dani's cameo shows (below), girls were also at risk of this.

Box 3. *Learner Cameo (composite) — Philip and Dani.*

Philip and Dani are siblings from Insiza district who started out as enthusiastic attendees of the Learning Circle. When they couldn't attend, their uncle would send an SMS to the Champion asking for the activities so they could catch up. But then they suddenly stopped coming. The Champion asked around the community and learnt that they were being sent to the river at 5 am every day to do gold panning and most days did not get back until after 5 pm. The Champion still sends activities to the uncle but he no longer replies to her SMS. She knows that the family is struggling for money. One day the children in her Learning Circle were walking home and they met Philip and Dani who started shouting and being aggressive. The Champion thinks this is because they wish they were still at the Learning Circle but doesn't want to interfere with the family's decision.

The telephone survey showed that most of the learners involved in face-to-face Learning Circles were of primary-school-age and were enrolled in school before the Covid-19 closures (64% of Champions said they had children attending from primary grades 4–7 and 53% of Champions reported children attending from primary grades 1–3). Some Champions also reached young people of secondary-school-age who were also enrolled in school before the school closures (15% of Champions said they had young people from secondary forms 3–4 and 9% of Champions reported children attending from secondary forms 1–2). Only two of the Champions surveyed (3.4%) said that they had children attending who were out of school before the pandemic.

Data from the interviews painted a similar picture. Champions explained that most of the children attending the face-to-face Learning Circles were primary-age school children. Some secondary-age school children also participated in some of the groups. There were very few out-of-school children who attended.

No, my classes do not include children who are school dropouts or school leavers. I only teach those students that are already learning from different schools (primary and secondary) in our community. (M8)



Image 2. Photograph of children learning outside in a socially-distanced Learning Circle.

The face-to-face Learning Circles may be seen as having maintained children's connection to learning and their identities as learners. Without such support, children may have been at risk of losing their connection to education and dropping out of school in the future (see Cameo — Philip and Dani). Children who were out of school before the pandemic had possibly already lost their connection to learning or their identity as learners (Plan 2016) and did not think that the Learning Circles were 'for them'. At the time of the study, very few such children had participated in the Learning Circles.

3.2.5. Keeping safe in Learning Circles during Covid-19

Champions reported two main strategies for keeping children, themselves and the community safe. Firstly, following guidance from the project, as numbers grew, they organised children into small groups so that no more than five learners would come together at one time.

At first, the attendance rate was very low. However, with time the turn-up increased that I had to divide my students into groups with different time slots because I have many students due to the Covid-19 crisis. Now I have about 70 students ... They [caregivers] encouraged their children to attend to the extent that I was concerned as they were attending in large numbers. (J2)

Yes, I now use the phased approach. At first, there were only a few learners at my facility and now I have many learners. So to reduce the spread of coronavirus I had to group the classes and allocate different time slots for them. (A2)

Champions had independently developed schedules for meeting learners of different ages, learning stages, or locations, on a rotational basis. For example:

Group one and two are my neighbours' children so they used my homestead as a meeting centre. Group three and four would meet in their village usually under a tree, and sometimes at [a local parent's] homestead. (A1)

Mondays and Wednesdays I would take on primary learners. Thursdays and Fridays I would meet with secondary learners ... No, I was not guided, it is just that I saw that children were on different levels so to put them in one group was not workable. Therefore I decided that if I could group them into primary and secondary groups it would help me. (J3)

One Champion (A6) informally recruited members of the community to help her to stagger the sessions, keeping children apart and safe. This Champion sent the parents a text when one Learning Circle was finished, so the next group could be sent to the setting without too many children coming into close contact.

Furthermore, Champions promoted the use of face masks, handwashing, and social distancing:

On arrival, my learners wash their hands by the gate, with their masks on. Then they sit a metre apart. (A1)

We have also appealed to parents to make a point that when all children are coming for lessons, they should have their masks on. And all masks have to be washed and ironed! On our part we supply handwash and maintain social distancing, trying to keep the children safe. (A6)

In addition to practising foundation literacy and numeracy skills, Champions have also been encouraged to educate children, caregivers, and communities with public health messages relating to the pandemic. This broader 'wellbeing' focus is reflected in several interviews, e.g.:

... the children managed to maintain social distancing. We had a photo shoot with the children while teaching them how to put on masks ... all of them had their face masks on. (M3)

Some Champions were concerned about the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the community and reported that this limited participation.

Also, it's problematic to assemble the learners without sanitisers. Personal Protective Equipment is required ... there were many learners who were eager to learn ... But many parents, even though they want their children to attend, they cannot afford PPE. If I had PPE more learners would actually come. (J3)

Other Champions reported having received material support with PPE from the project.

IGATE gave me PPE comprising of handwashing materials, these were buckets, soap. (A1)

From IGATE we received sanitisers which included soap, bucket for washing hands and pads. Then we also received cards, which also came with sanitisers so that every child was coming to receive the card should be sanitised before they receive them. (A2)

Monitoring from the IGATE project indicated that around half of all the project schools and communities were likely to struggle with water supplies for sanitation when schools reopen. This was foreshadowed by some of the community Champions:

The unfortunate part is that our water tables are now below the ground, so we are having a water supply challenge which leads children to bring water from home. Unfortunately, we cannot repair the water pump because we do not have the money. (J4)

3.2.6. Learning in Learning Circles

The survey indicated that three-quarters of the Champions (75%) allowed between 30 minutes and an hour for each face-to-face session. Most Champions (84%) ran between two and five sessions per week, for each group of learners. Champions, therefore, committed a significant amount of time and energy to their role in running Learning Circles.

The responses to the survey showed that most Champions used the daily learning activities provided by IGATE. In addition to the daily learning activities

offered through IGATE, a quarter of Champions (those who had previous experience as a teacher) also used activities from their schools (27%), a quarter used activities from other non-school sources (24%), and some (17%) made up their own activities. It is important to note that these categories are not exclusive; most Champions accessed multiple sources of activities.

Within the interview data, several Champions made explicit reference to activities provided by IGATE, e.g., *'I use [activities] from IGATE only, because we are provided by IGATE to assist certain learners'* (M2). Still, throughout the interviews, all Champions frequently refer to 'activities'. These references often don't explicitly say 'IGATE' or 'daily learning activities' but this meaning seems implicit, e.g., *'I spoke to the parents and asked for their children to come collect their activities at my homestead'* (M7).

Some Champions described the way they use the daily learning activities in face-to-face sessions in ways that reflect ideas of classroom teaching, for example, *'When the IGATE team sends the daily activities I write the material that the children have to learn on the board and I teach'* (J2). Yet there are some Champions, both teachers and non-teachers, who describe using the daily learning activities in ways that seem more open or creative — as seen in Image 3 below.

Some Champions reported encouraging children to ask questions about the activities, for example, *'We open with a word of prayer, recap on yesterday's activity then start activities for the day. I give them time to ask questions where they did not understand'* (A1). Other Champions report making use of peer support for learning, so that children help each other understand the activity.

What I do is, when they come with their books and pens, they write the activity down first and as for those who did not understand clearly — they get help from those who have understood. That is when you realise that some of them when they are reading from their books, they quickly understand it ... in that way, I will be able to see their performance and quickly identify those who need help so that they can get help from others in the group. (J1)

And several reported being surprised at how well learners engaged and learnt when the activity took the form of a game.

Okay, it was a day when we were doing an activity of filling in words, for example, 'd_g'. They would fill in letters to make a word like 'dig', 'dog'. I realised that they enjoyed this activity because we did it as a game such that the first one to think of the answer goes to fill in, and then we score them and compare the marks at the end of the activity. I realised

that they enjoyed this activity and a lot and all of them were participating, and they enjoy activities with games ... I have also learnt that children enjoy and understand better if they learn through play.
(M1)

Some of the children who attended were not yet proficient in basic reading or number skills, such as recognising letters or being able to count. Even though the activities provided by IGATE targeted foundational skills, the level was too high for such learners. Several Champions reported having to adapt or use their own activities for the very lowest-attaining learners.

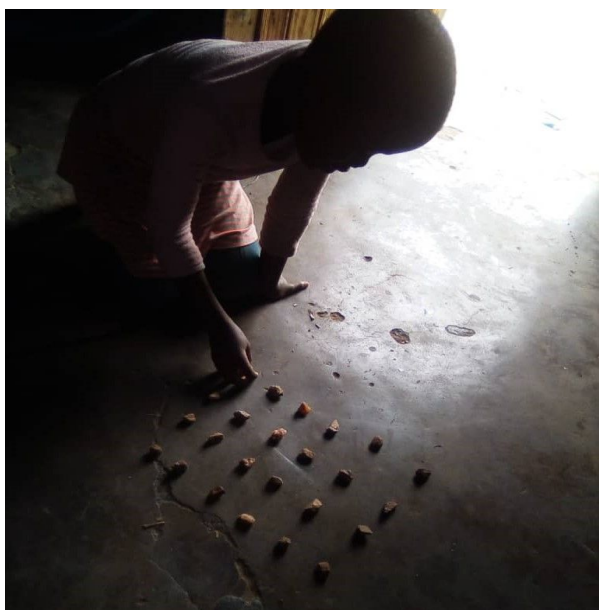


Image 3. A child doing a numeracy activity.

The children I assist some of them do not even know how to count, you find a grade 6 pupil not even knowing how to add and I assist them using counters, of which at school they are probably just told to write and the child is not able and now some have improved because of the use of counters. (A3)

I usually write the cards especially for these little ones who are in Grade one and two and have given them to just a few parents because most of the activities written on the IGATE cards are a little bit advanced for them. (A2)

All of the Champions were able to receive the daily learning activities via WhatsApp and these were often the main learning resource available. But as mentioned previously, some Champions were also able to draw on other, limited, physical learning resources available locally or distributed by the IGATE project as and when possible. Where Champions had access to physical

learning resources, such as reading books or learning cards, these were highly valued.

So I thought that it was very important that the IGATE Team gave us reading cards to help the children not forget the material. (A5)

Textbooks are the main problem. At first, we were solely depending on the daily activities sent on WhatsApp group by IGATE. However, I was later given textbooks by school teachers, but they can't give me many, you see? [and] Yes stationery is a problem. (J3)

3.2.7. Supporting Champions

The majority of the Champions reported feeling supported by their community and gave both practical examples and implicit indications of how that support was manifest, for example:

Parents contributed a lot today. They constructed benches for the children. (WhatsApp-C1)

The support I am getting from the community is that they are giving me the learners. Also, homework is being done on time — so it means parents are supporting me. (J2)

Those (parents) I have managed meet and they are really pleased by the work that I do in the community. They always say I am doing a really great job. (A2)

In terms of pedagogical support, many Champions relied entirely on the activities sent by WhatsApp, although as discussed above, some also received physical learning materials from the project, or were able to access textbooks in limited numbers from their school. Many Champions took part in discussions on WhatsApp where they shared practical and motivational advice about how to handle challenges, such as responding to bad weather or low numbers. For example:

27/07/2020, 11:49 — It's an issue beyond our control, learners are citing hunger issue that parents are left with no option but only to let them go for gold panning in Runde river which makes them vulnerable [to Covid] there are now several cases that emanated from that scenario.

27/07/2020, 12:26 — The issue of learners being left alone for a very long time without proper supervision by both parents who are affected by the lockdown in diaspora, this affects our learners.

27/07/2020, 12:46 — [Group Facilitator] — *That's a dimension I had not thought of. So as a Champion what efforts are you doing?*

27/07/2020, 13:22 — *As a Champion I liaise with my learners and make a simple time programme[...].*

27/07/2020, 13:31 — *Yaa it's true ... but as Champions let's take time with those particular learners and be eye openers so that they really see the importance of learning during hardships they are facing.*

27/07/2020, 13:35 — *We as mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers to them should show that life is never a smooth going road in most of cases. Let's aim at showing them the future light.*

(WhatsApp C1)

The groups were also frequently used for positive endorsement between Champions, for example, when one of the Champions posted a photograph of their learners or an update on a well-attended session the following response was typical:

[Champion shared a photograph]

24/06/2020, 19:39 — Wow 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌

24/06/2020, 19:56 — *Commendable indeed.*

24/06/2020, 20:00 — 🙌🙌

24/06/2020, 20:06 — *Social distance* 🙌🙌🙌🙌

24/06/2020, 20:09 — *kuyangcomeka lokhu. Siyabonga [this is wonderful, thank you]*

(WhatsApp M1)

However, within the Champions WhatsApp groups, there were very few occasions where more in-depth discussions about learning took place — for example, talking about specific literacy or numeracy activities in detail, what children might learn from these activities, or how to support that learning most effectively. Only three such examples were found, including a discussion in one group (M2) about literacy lessons on the radio and how they were good quality, but did not help children whose parents could not understand English. The group agreed about the benefits of the in-person, tailored nature of support the Champions were able to offer families.

Box 4. *Learner Cameo — Ruwadzano.*

Ruwadzano is a student from Mangwe district who has got all the way to Grade 7 without being able to read and write. She was also so quiet in the Learning Circles, she sat at the back and barely spoke. The Champion saw a group of children bullying Ruwadzano one day and calling her 'slow' and another child told the Champion that Ruwadzano's parents beat her when she took homework back to her house and couldn't do it. After a few weeks, the Champion put a message in the village's school WhatsApp group hoping that a teacher might be able to offer some advice on how she could help Ruwadzano. The teachers wrote back *'That's just how she is'* and *'We have never got anything out of her.'* The Champion noticed that Ruwadzano was especially quiet in the lessons that involved writing, so one day she told the class from the start that there would be no writing in that session and that they would be discussing ideas instead. There was an immediate boost to Ruwadzano's participation. Over the past few months the Champion has not asked Ruwadzano to write anything, just contribute her ideas orally. She sets homework activities in pairs so Ruwadzano can contribute, but her best friend does the writing up. Meanwhile, she has arranged for the village matron to work one-to-one with Ruwadzano to work through ECD reading and writing materials. The Champion said: *'Now Ruwadzano is so much more engaged. Her peers no longer tease her because we have spent so long working closely together and they can see she is not slow after all.'*

Three Champions described how they tapped into teacher networks (either online or face-to-face through community contacts) to seek guidance and support around specific pedagogical challenges or concerns. Two Champions sought support for ECD children (or learners at the ECD level) from the village matron (see Ruwadzano's cameo, above). Others explained:

I managed to communicate with some teachers and informed them that I have their learners. I would also ask some teachers about how to approach some topics. (M3)

We discovered that several champions struggled with the cost or provision of data bundles. This was a source of dissatisfaction amongst some champions. Others interviewed mentioned that increased data bundles from IGATE will make their tasks a lot easier.

Even data bundles should be increased, currently what IGATE is giving us lasts only a week yet activities come on a daily basis. With the current bundle disbursement assisting parents on WhatsApp groups becomes very difficult. I can't even do follow up via WhatsApp. (A1)

However, many champions did not seem overly troubled by challenges IGATE faced in providing data bundles: ... *I hear from WhatsApp groups that some receive promised airtime and even though I haven't received any airtime I do not tire because I tell myself that I am helping the kids. (A3)*

By contrast, community validation, practical support, and the endorsement of community leaders appeared to make a huge difference to the Champion's feelings about continuing in their role.

Usually, the Chief shows [caregivers and children] the way to my house. The Chief encourages children in the community to be educated about Covid ... also, from the health sector they come and see what I will be doing with the children and they keep on motivating me. (J1)

A small number of the Champions mentioned that it might have been helpful to have more intensive training. One wanted certification to validate their role, 'we wish that we could be issued with certificates or regalia to show that we have excelled, such that people may take us seriously because people think that the training we do are useless, hence we request more powerful training or workshops' (M8).

The only Champion who described feeling unsupported by the Community also explained that she was unlikely to continue any longer than necessary: 'No one has helped me so far in the community, no one. I just work on my own [...] I am not sure how long I will continue — maybe until the end of the programme' (M4).

This was in contrast to the predictions of better supported Champions who saw their role as a permanent, valuable, and valued feature of their community's future.

Yes I intend to continue helping the children, mine and even any child that I think needs assistance. (M1)

I will continue helping children learn even when the schools open. As long as I am living. As long as I am alive I will be assisting the learners. I won't stop because this is who I am now. (J3)

3.2.8. Managing resistance and concern

The local leadership helped to explain to the parents and we even invited them to come and observe the learning and I think two parents came to observe and they found everything in accordance with the Covid-19 Regulations. They were satisfied and went on to spread the news and convinced other parents. — Community Learning Champion

Despite generally positive feelings towards the Champions and the programme, most Champions interviewed described facing challenges or resistance at some time, ranging from teething problems to widespread

concern about the risks of spreading Covid-19. Despite the promotion of 'Learning Circles' being part of the national education response promoted through the Zimbabwe Education Cluster, there was ongoing uncertainty about whether learners meeting together in small groups was 'allowed'. In some cases, Champions (e.g., J2) had been reported to the police. For most, this was quickly resolved through communication between IGATE-T and the community leaders.

While most Champions had been able to convince the communities that their working with children was legal and safe —as long as they took precautions — several Champions had dealt with persistent uncertainty and resistance.

The community is interested in education programmes but our community leaders continue to insist that what we are doing is against what has been laid down by the Government, hence this has seen us conduct lessons in fear. (A6)

One Champion said that some parents in their community did not send their children because they felt that *"there was no such thing as learning during a pandemic" ... The parents thought that I was exposing and putting the lives of their children at risk. I was really disappointed'* (M8). Champions talked about seeking formal consent from parents and caregivers to protect themselves in case children came to any harm during the initiative. For most this was verbal consent, but one Champion (J4) did not accept children for the Learning Circles without written consent from their caregivers.

Aside from the persistent concerns highlighted above, some Champions also described flare-ups of resistance as the pandemic had progressed and the economic situation in Zimbabwe worsened.

Now fewer learners are coming than before because most parents are scared. (J3)

Chivi area has been struck by hunger now so the problem that we have is that many parents are going for gold panning so they go with their children. They also do what is called 'pfumvudza' [intensive farming] they wake up early with the children to dig fields, so when they come back some children would do [their other chores]. This results in some children not coming for lessons. It has become a major problem. (J1)

The need to earn money leads to resistance from learners even if you try to convince them to learn. Thus sometimes they do not come. They view the sessions as a complete waste of time. (M6)

During the focus groups the District Coordinators reflected that while their attention had been on supporting the Champions directly, they could have done more to engage community leaders from the start. For example, one described a situation where a headteacher made a formal complaint to the IGATE-T team about the work of the Champion because he had assumed the Champion was charging fees and the Champion was not able to convince him otherwise.

We actually realised that probably there was a gap in terms of how we disseminated information. Probably we were supposed to have gone through the Head then get the blessings from the headteacher so that the Champion could effectively do his roles. (FG2)

After dealing with a few incidents like this, the Coordinators set up their own cross-district WhatsApp group where they would take turns to share challenges they were experiencing in their district and discuss ideas for resolutions.

The District Coordinators also suggested that the Champions start with the learners in their own homesteads, as this could include children from multiple families (if they lived in the same homestead). Then when the Champion or the community felt more confident, and they had established a system for working, they could extend the invitation to other households. The District Coordinators empathised strongly with the Champions' concerns and did not want to put pressure on them to do more than they were comfortable with: *we too were locked in our homes and reluctant to leave (FG2).*

3.2.9. Constantly changing circumstances, adaptation and innovation

The situation of Champions and their Learning Circles was neither static nor uniform — it was constantly changing from day to day, and from one district or community to the next. Many Champions saw a continual increase in the numbers of children interested in attending their sessions or keen to receive the activities. In contrast, others described enthusiastic communities and learners in the early days of lockdown, followed by dwindling numbers of increasingly nervous attendees as the pandemic progressed.

Several Champions referred to a news report about a town in Mberengwa where unconnected to the IGATE project, a teacher had illegally gathered full classes of children for learning activities and they had all contracted Covid-19. A similar incident was discussed in the WhatsApp group for the Champions in Chivi. Such stories increased the Champions' concerns around keeping children safe and also made caregivers and community leaders increasingly

anxious about the Champions' work. One Champion referred to the early days of the pandemic as *'before the fears'* (J3).

Rather than formally scheduling Learning Circles, some Champions had shifted to making themselves increasingly available for children to collect learning activities to do at home: *'At first, they were not attending the lessons on a daily basis but now they are free to come and collect the Cards any day except on Sundays because I will be at Church'* (A2). Others became increasingly reliant on sharing the activities through WhatsApp or SMS, rather than sharing activities in person.

It's not the same as before because before we usually met the children and visited them in their homes then I had to stop meeting and visiting the children since it was seen that this disease is very dangerous. (A2)

When I was meeting them whenever I wanted to meet them, they would come to the school premises. But [even now they don't come to the school] I can still send them activities through WhatsApp. (M2)

The WhatsApp groups helped the Champions to share their concerns and ideas for how to address these. In some cases, innovative ideas were rolled out across or between districts. For example, in Aneni's cameo, one Champion's idea of copying activities onto paper became common practice (see also Image 4). District Coordinators also explained (FG2) how one Champion had designed her own register and posted a photograph in the WhatsApp group. The Coordinator for that group suggested other Champions use the same format, and also posted the idea in the Coordinators' WhatsApp group. The template was then rolled out in another district.

These examples show how the initiative was far from top-down. Successes and innovations were generated by the Champions in response to local community contexts, and good practices were disseminated through Champions' WhatsApp groups and the district teams.

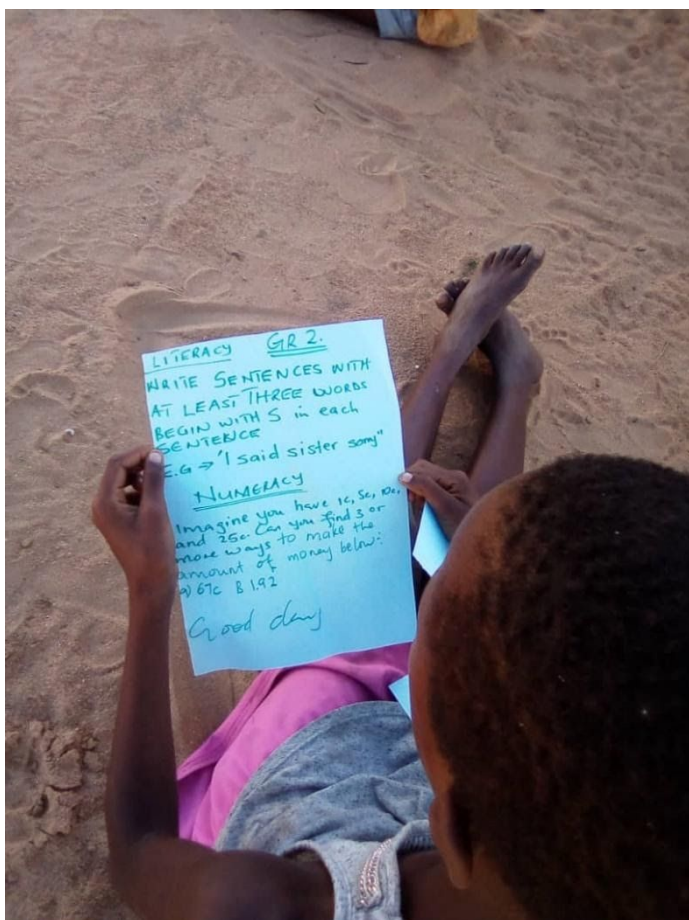


Image 4. A child reading activities that a Champion has copied from WhatsApp on to paper.

3.3. Perceptions of impact

3.3.1. Impacts on children

Four out-of-five of the Champions (81%) surveyed said they found the IGATE daily learning activities either 'very useful' (64%) or 'quite useful' (17%) and over three quarters (78%) thought that children really enjoy (59%) or enjoyed some (18%) of the daily learning activities. (Although, as discussed above, some Champions interviewed discussed how they had to adapt or make up their own activities for learners with the lowest levels of proficiency in literacy or numeracy). It seems that children particularly enjoyed taking part in numeracy activities, as these often involved the use of number games.

One of the most common ways in which Champions said they knew that children enjoyed and valued taking part in the Learning Circles or using the activities at home, was through the 'demand' from learners. Many Champions spoke about how the numbers of learners had grown rapidly, often by children inviting their friends to the Learning Circles.

I think I have helped them a lot because I started with a smaller number of children, now the number has increased [because] the children invite each other. (A3)

Children really appreciate working with me. Their attendance can actually tell you that they really love learning because the number of attendance keeps increasing. (A2)

Box 5. *Learner Cameo (composite) — Mudiwa.*

Mudiwa is a grade 5 child who has been attending the Learning Circles in Chivi district. The Champion in her village is a teacher at the school where Mudiwa is enrolled. The Champion knew that before Covid-19 Mudiwa's attendance at school was low and that she struggled to keep up with her peers. This affected her confidence and made her even less likely to attend regularly as she progressed through the school. At the Learning Circles too, initially, Mudiwa's attendance was sporadic. But over the past few months, the Champion has been working closely with Mudiwa, providing one-to-one support both to her and to her mother so she can help Mudiwa at home. Both the Champion and Mudiwa's mother have noticed a dramatic difference in her confidence and eagerness to learn. She is now one of the Champion's most regular learners.

Several Champions referred to being actively sought out for learning by children, even when they were not running Learning Circles.

Also when I am not busy and not able to attend lessons I see them coming to me to ask when we will resume lessons which means they are enjoying attending classes they actually prefer coming for lessons than doing the work at home. (A3)

Champions also describe how, often for the first time, they had realised just how low some children's levels of proficiency in basic literacy or numeracy skills were. Several Champions indicated that among their learners, some could not read or write or count.

There is a challenge for the majority, especially on literacy, language appeared to be more problematic to learners and this presented them with problems even of interpreting a numeracy question. (M6)

Some of the children are too illiterate. They take time to understand the concept. (M4)

Their skills in English are good but numerically haaa they are totally challenged. (M2)

This had shocked Champions, even those who worked as teachers. Several described how they had pledged to assist children on an individual basis to

ensure they improved. See for example Ruwadzano's and Mudiwa's cameos above. Many of the Champions talked about how they had differentiated activities to meet learners' needs. For some learners, the small-group nature of the Learning Circles may have allowed their needs to be understood and responded to appropriately in ways that may have been unlikely in school.

It has been very successful because many students showed interest and also there has been a vast improvement in numeracy, most of them can now add, multiply and subtract. Also some of the games and activities they have been playing and doing helped in reducing the phobia they had towards mathematics. (J2)

Box 6. *Champion Cameo — Lindah.*

Lindah is a Champion from Mbrenywa. She said that being a mother herself drives her passion to uplift children in her community. This is evidenced in her commitment to support children towards attaining a brighter future. Her commitment to support children in her community was demonstrated during the Covid-19 school closures. In her words: *'I realised that children have nothing to do; some of them are always roaming around the village so I thought the programme was a good idea to keep the children from finding themselves in trouble or harming themselves.'* When Lindah noticed that some of the children she was assisting were struggling with counting, *'you find a grade 6 pupil not even knowing how to add'*, she adopted the use of counters to support their learning needs. She pointed out that: *'...of which at school they are probably just told to write, and the child is not able...'* According to Lindah, using this approach, she has seen some of her learners improve because of the use of counters.

Many of the Champions felt their work provided wider benefits to children's wellbeing, beyond education. Promoting health messaging through the Learning Circles was thought to be particularly positive for children and their families.

Yes [meeting regularly] is helpful especially in this Covid period as they now know that they should wash their hands under running water, sanitise them and also to practice social distancing. (J1)

Some Champions maximised such opportunities by working closely with community health teams. In the Chivi WhatsApp group, one Champion described how she had invited the village health worker to come and do a talk on Covid-protection at the Learning Circle.

Champions often expressed the view that by providing a safe, positive, space for young people to enjoy learning together, they hoped they were also protecting children from unhealthy behaviours or situations that could prevent them from returning to school. Many of the Champions talked about such ideas in relation to their own motivation.

They [children and young people] need to be engaged so that they can continue doing school, as girls will end up entering early marriages and boys will end up doing certain things that will be dangerous — for example, gold panning. Most of the learners are now drunkards because of the gold panning. They need to be engaged into the learning system. Learning should continue as usual and should not stop. (M2)

[one girl] was not coming for lessons in the beginning until I went over to her parents to ask why. I found out that she had a misunderstanding with one of the learners who were attending the lessons. I advised the parents that Mellissa should come for lessons as she would be under my care and nothing will happen to her. The parents understood and agreed to let her come for lessons. Mellisa ended up being friends with those learners who were not friendly to her. [She] is a victim of abuse at home and the children were caught between the grandparents' fight. As a result, she also became violent and learnt vulgar language at home. I spoke with her and counselled her and now I notice some positive behaviour in her. (M1)

This sense of safety seems to be signified by the names some children attached to their Champions — *Godfather, Mr Tasks, GoGo (meaning Granny)*. These names tell the story of a strong bond between learners and their Champions.

3.3.2. Impacts on Community Learning Champions

Champions were generally very enthusiastic about their role and proud of what they had been able to do for the children and their community. As with Meki's cameo (below), for those not engaged in income-generating activities, the Champion role was perhaps an opportunity to keep busy and productive: *'it becomes a way of keeping me occupied as a retired someone, who spends my time at home'* (A6). However, the most significant impact seems to have been developing a sense of agency and empowerment in a time of global crisis, uncertainty, and incapacity. The significance of feeling and being able to do something of value, to act positively for and with others, should not be undervalued.

I have learnt that I can work even in times of crisis. Instead of fearing for my life, I got the energy and the commitment to assist children. (A1)

All along [the commitment to the role] did not bother me because [the children] keep me occupied and being busy with their books helps me

to de-stress. [The work] revives everything and you find yourself in a better state. (M3)

This sense of agency is especially evident in Meki's cameo, but more generally even the Champions who had prior experience as community volunteers spoke positively about the opportunity and space and resources to be proactive in the face of so much uncertainty: *'I have learnt to be brave, to stand up for children's rights'* (M3). Repeated throughout the interview and WhatsApp data was Champions' sense of being valued in the midst of a crisis and feeling that they were a part of something 'bigger'. In the interviews, the Champions were asked to talk about an especially memorable day for them in the role. Responses were split roughly 50:50 between those who shared an example of a day when the learners had had a breakthrough with a particular activity, and those who described a time when their work was externally validated through the project or the community.

[that day] the learners were very active. Midway through the session, the IGATE team arrived for support, they participated in the session, my learners liked their involvement, and it was just a great day. The presence of stakeholders dignified my work. (A1)

This resonates with the framing of this study around shared identity and the development of this identity through learning, which we will explore more extensively in forthcoming publications.

Box 7. *Champion Cameo — Meki.*

Meki is a 74-year-old great grandmother in Chivi district. Before Covid-19 she lived a quiet life with her extended family. When schools closed, the community leader asked her if she would consider volunteering as a learning Champion. She liked the idea but was concerned about the fact that she would be sent the activities through WhatsApp: she had a phone but only used this infrequently to keep in touch with her church group, and members of her family when they travelled away from the village. Five months later she is one of the district's most active and well-known Champions and talks passionately about her new understanding of the potential of technology to support learning. She says she feels energised in a way that she hasn't for years and plans to continue using her phone to support her grandchildren's learning when the schools reopen.

Several Champions identified things they felt they had learnt about themselves, the children, or teaching and learning, from using the activities in face-to-face sessions with children. The most common theme was that they had realised the need to know and understand learners and their abilities properly.

I have learnt a lot. Since I will be surrounded by children ... they spend most time with me ... This has helped [me] understand children better from the time they are struggling up until they catch up with others. I have also learnt that children's ability differs ... At first, I experienced challenges in getting children used to me and me getting used to them. Children differ. So as time moves, you get to know them individually so that when explaining you reach each child according to their level and ability. So it's now simple for me. (M3)

Many Champions, particularly those who were teachers, seemed to have been surprised to have learnt this through engaging children in Learning Circles. The dangers of 'assumed knowledge' were mentioned by several Champions with an education background. Implicitly, it seems that taking part in the Learning Circles had given these Champions time and space to develop a greater understanding of children and their need than was possible during their previous, much more extensive, teaching career.

Yes, I learnt that we as teachers we just assume that learners are more knowledgeable than they are in reality. We assume that they have a good background yet the reality demands that we dig deeper to get to know the real level of the learners. After that then we can start from there moving upwards until the learner catches up with the rest of the class. That is what I learnt and mostly teachers assume that all learners are at the same level not realising that others may be behind. (M6)

We make use of the daily learning activities with the children in order to see their level of understanding. There are some things we overlook — assumed knowledge — thinking that our children already know them. Now at the beginning of a lesson, we give them those things and if we notice any difficulty we attend to that first, before anything else. (J4)

One Champion, also a teacher, thought the approach to learning within the Learning Circle was more beneficial than their regular teaching in school because the small number of children meant the Champion had more opportunity to know and understand each learner and then help them appropriately.

I think the difference is that when they are being assisted as a full class some will remain behind but now because of these activities they are now better than they were before. Even [the learners] themselves they can say that 'now we have benefited a lot because we can now understand better and see things better than before'... I changed the approaches which I was using before because the questions and

answer I am using in assisting them have developed their skills of understanding things and even of how they can do certain activities ... I see myself working in this role even after lockdown because I will be assisting learners and they will be benefiting better than what I will be doing during normal learning days. (M2)

Similarly, a Champion with a long career in teaching thought that experiencing the pedagogical approach within the *daily learning activities*, together with the opportunity to work in a focused way with small groups of learners, had caused them to reflect on their prior lifetime of professional experience and practice.

I feel that personally, I have also improved because I have been exposed to a lot of activities by the IGATE Team. I have acquired skills. The reading cards helped in improving my vocabulary. My teaching techniques have also improved. I am nearing retirement now, but if I had got all these materials before I would have been a better teacher for my whole career. (J2)

4. Discussion

“I want this community to progress whereby the next generation will be better. When you encourage them to learn they might be motivated to do better ... even the slow learners also join in. I believe some might be slow learners but this programme helps me to assist them”

– Community Learning Champion (M7)

4.1. Promoting and leveraging concepts of community

Our first research question focused on the strategies used to recruit and support Champions and young people to participate in the initiative. We have written extensively about the practical strategies above, and the technologies and resources necessary to facilitate this recruitment. However, central to both recruitment of Champions and young people (usually via their caregivers, but also often directly) was the notion that the initiative was one of collective solidarity: a locally implemented but coordinated and supported group response to the crisis. Programme staff talked extensively of building on existing community networks and contacts. Champions framed narratives of 'everyone pulling together' involving the children, their caregivers, community leaders, the other Champions and the IGATE-T programme. Champions agreed that a combination of drawing on or forming networks within the community and making compassionate appeals on behalf of the young people was key to their ability to get people on board and support the children effectively.

The idea of compassion and community coming together in similar contexts has been framed by others as linked to the Southern African humanist notion of Ubuntu (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013; Muller et al. 2018). The focused nature of our data and the time frame of this study meant we could not explore this idea in-depth, and we also recognise how external organisations can use this framing to place unreasonable expectations of sustainability on volunteer-driven models (McDonald 2010). Instead, we drew on Gray and Stevenson's (2018) work on volunteers, and the importance of a cohesive shared identity facilitated by the volunteer organisation. Champions appreciated the positive reinforcement afforded through their WhatsApp

groups, and they expressed feelings of pride when IGATE-T staff visited the community and watched them work.

The one Champion who did not feel supported by the community spoke of a wish for a 'Champion Certificate' so she could strengthen her credibility and 'prove' her association with the project and her shared 'champion' identity. But most champions found the validity and local relevance of their shared identity was not externally conferred but arose from their engagement with multiple dimensions of community. They were not 'Champions' just because IGATE called them so — they were 'Champions' because the community recognised that they actively championed children's learning. The Champions' identity was most strongly related to how they felt the community valued their role and contribution. However, while IGATE may have added to the Champions' confidence and credibility, the strength of their existing connections and their ability to build new ones appears to have been key to their achievement.

The contexts in which Champions carried out their task were very varied. For example, border towns experienced higher rates of Covid-19 infection than other areas; people in these towns were very wary of risk. And in all areas, the risks and rules for managing risk changed frequently. Such variations created a need for Champions to work relatively independently, with only remote support and guidance from IGATE. Understanding how volunteers and communities negotiate such crises together is essential.

At some point, most of the Champions encountered some level of community resistance to their activities. They managed these through a variety of strategies including public demonstrations of the health and safety precautions they were taking and by shifting from small-groups, meeting in Learning Circles, to one-to-one support for home study. Champions also maintained compassionate appeals to families and community leaders about the importance of young people maintaining their skills and identities as learners during school closures.

Finally, the notion of a Community Learning Champion was a rapidly conceived, direct response to school closures. Being a Champion was not an established professional role with accepted parameters and practices. Nor were Champions able to learn from more experienced role models (both are central to conventional sociocultural frameworks of professional learning and identity). Instead, Champions had to develop their understanding and practice of their role through continuous dialogue, negotiation, innovation, and practice. This interaction of agency, community, learning, and identity formation is an element of the study that we intend to explore further in a future publication.

4.2. Flexible ecosystems of support for learning

Our second research question focused on the ways in which the learning activities were used and the stakeholders' perspectives about the effectiveness of different approaches. One of the most striking aspects of being immersed in the Champions' accounts is how richly contextualised, local, and adaptive their approaches to supporting learning have been. One aspect of this may have been having a clear, goal-orientated task — closely aligned to this study's research question — to work together, locally, and from a distance, to find ways of supporting children, so that learning doesn't stop.

IGATE-T provided three broad structures for this task: the provision of the daily learning activities, the encouragement to bring children together in small numbers to do the activities together, and the encouragement to share the activities with caregivers for use at home. Champions were consistent in working with these structures. Over 80% of the Champions surveyed said they had run Learning Circles and over 80% said they had shared the activities with parents and caregivers. All of the Champions interviewed talked about how they had received and used the activities. However, while common themes emerged from the Champions' accounts of their experience volunteering in this role, no two Champions had done things in the same way. They had acted independently, exercising agency and judgement within the particular context of their community, though with support and guidance from other Champions and the project team.

The combination of clear goals and guiding structures without rigid protocols or instructions seems to have empowered Champions and their communities to act together, often using a variety of strategies simultaneously to create a rich ecosystem of support for children's learning (see Figure 2). Such networks are inherently more resilient, flexible, and adaptive than a top-down, pre-defined, step-by-step, procedural approach or programme.

The IGATE-T project developed this approach in the very particular context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the education of children in rural villages in Zimbabwe, but the approach also reflects more general ways of working promoted through The Open University's International Teacher Education for Development programme (ITED) — enabling anytime, anywhere learning through self-study activities, appropriate technology, and the development of local networks of learning support. Before the school closures, learning may have been seen as something bounded within a particular time and place — the school classroom and timetable. We know that parents in similar contexts often feel excluded from these spaces, and the school day may be incompatible with other needs and commitments (Oyinloye 2018; Buckler 2015). The CLC initiative did not eliminate such challenges: many learners

stopped attending Learning Circles when their families needed them for income-generating activities or when their caregivers felt the risk of attending face-to-face sessions was too high. But Champions were able to shift their approach, sharing activities for use at home and sometimes providing additional support to the learners through their caregivers' phones.

Overall, there appeared to be a shift in terms of caregiver engagement and support. Champions who had previously been teachers noted the greater interest of parents in the Learning Circles and activities than in school-based activities. We suggest that this was because, for the Learning Circles to function, the Champions needed to engage caregivers in discussions about the kinds of learning experiences they wanted for their children and the kinds of structures and protocols that would facilitate these safely. Champions described an ongoing dialogue with caregivers — facilitated by WhatsApp groups, mobile phone conversations and regular interactions in day-to-day life — in response to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic's progression. Through this, the Champions appear to have broken down some boundaries by relocating and re-shaping spaces for learning.

4.3. Available technologies and sneaker-ware for last-mile education

Our final research question focused on the significance of the role of technology in the delivery and use of the learning activities. Indeed, there is an educational technology paradox within the findings of the study. On the one hand, the availability and use of mobile technology were both central and essential for recruiting, equipping, and supporting all of the Champions from a distance. If none of the Champions had smartphones, or if they couldn't use WhatsApp, or if they didn't have access to data networks, then none of this would have been possible. Similarly, a third of the Champions used mobile phones very effectively to support learning within the community, for example sharing activities with parents or notifying caregivers that it was safe to send children to meet for the next Learning Circle. Yet the most popular and effective means of sharing activities within communities was to copy them onto bits of paper and distribute them directly by hand — sometimes by children coming to collect the activities, sometimes by the Champion walking or cycling from door to door. Mobile technology was not used or required at the moment of learning, when children were doing their literacy or numeracy activities, alone or together. Activities could be relayed on paper or even by word of mouth, without the need for 'last mile' technologies.

5. Conclusions

“I have learnt that I can work even in times of crisis. Instead of fearing for my life, I got the energy and the commitment to assist children”

– Community Learning Champion (A1)

All of the Champions were able to receive daily learning activities via WhatsApp, and all found ways to share these for use with local children in their villages. Champions facilitated small-group Learning Circles, offered one-to-one support to learners or caregivers, and shared activities with caregivers to use with their children at home.

All Champions but one found community members were passionately concerned about their children’s learning and wellbeing — especially during the pandemic school closures

Dissemination of the activities to Champions through low-tech platforms — low-cost mobile phones and WhatsApp — was essential for enabling this approach. Many Champions also shared learning activities with caregivers via WhatsApp — reverting to SMS for caregivers without low-cost smartphones or money for data bundles. But it was equally essential that children didn’t need to use technology at the ‘point of learning’. The daily learning activities could be shared and carried out with nothing more than pencil and paper. Champions most commonly shared the activities — for use by children at home — by copying them out onto bits of paper which they distributed by hand.

The combination of clear goals and guiding structures without rigid protocols or instructions seems to have empowered Champions and their communities to act together, creating local ecosystems of support for children’s learning that are inherently resilient, flexible, and adaptive. The strength of the Champions’ existing community networks and connections, and their ability to build and maintain new ones, was key to their achievement.

There have been ongoing safety-concerns about learners meeting together. Champions attempted to mitigate this, for example, by meeting with village caregivers and leaders, and by ensuring social distancing, handwashing and face covering during Learning Circles. During the lockdown, it was essential

that Learning Circles were limited to small groups with no more than five learners together at a time. Some Champions also ran ‘demonstrations’ so that parents and elders could observe all the efforts they were making to minimise risk. Though mitigation was often successful, in some cases Champions had been reported to the police or had difficulty with local authorities. The project could have done more to engage community leaders and local officials from the outset.

When proposing this study, the research team initially focussed on the immediate short-term context. Six months later, schools are just beginning a phased re-opening. Re-opening will not mean a full return to pre-Covid patterns of education in the short-to-medium term. Learning is unlikely to return to its original boundaries of lesson time and the classroom. We anticipate an ongoing need for more fluid and mosaic approaches that incorporate learning in school, at home, and in the community for many children, for some time to come. This report highlights a novel approach to building formal frameworks that facilitate informal, flexible ecosystems for children’s learning that could work in tandem with formal schooling and could be scaled up to provide more substantial learning activities for a more substantial number of children.

6. Recommendations

The research suggests the following considerations are critical in mobilising community volunteers to support children's learning during emergency school closures:

1. Remotely recruiting local volunteers who have access to smartphones and who are willing to share and promote the use of offline learning activities within their communities. Projects should seek to identify people who are already active, known, and trusted Champions of education within the community.
2. Developing learning activities that can be distributed via available mobile technologies — through platforms like WhatsApp or even SMS — and which can also be shared and completed offline, via paper and pen, or even word-of-mouth.
3. Providing support and structure through the provision of simple learning activities and simple messages about their desired use. Frame the volunteers' task as an 'open-ended' challenge — with sufficient space for volunteers and community members to exercise agency and autonomy in crafting local responses and responding to changing circumstances.
4. Seeking to work in partnership with community leaders from the outset, to promote children's safe engagement in learning activities. Leverage existing community networks — such as village meetings — to promote participation and raise public understanding of, and support for, risk-mitigation strategies. In particular, promoting small group sizes (i.e., five learners) and encouraging volunteers to reassure caregivers with demonstrations of Covid-safe learning in Learning Circles.
5. Fostering volunteers' sense of 'belonging to something bigger'. For example, WhatsApp groups or field visits can provide opportunities for endorsement and peer support. Local officers should also be available to support volunteers, remotely or in-person, to discuss challenges or to communicate directly with community leaders or officials when required.
6. Finally, those planning such responses should be aware that what begins as a short-term crisis response might lead to longer-term changes. The participants of this study voiced hopes that some of what they have learnt may feed into improved understanding and practice in schools, and closer partnerships for learning between the school, caregivers, and the community.

7. References

Abramowitz, S.A., McLean, K.E., McKune, S.L., Bardosh, K.L., Fallah, M., Monger, J., Tehoungue, K., and Omidian, P.A. (2015) Community-centered responses to Ebola in urban Liberia: The view from below, *PLOS: Neglected Tropical Diseases* 9(4): 1-18.

Akintola, O. (2011) What motivates people to volunteer? The case of volunteer AIDS caregivers in faith-based organisations in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, *Health Policy and Planning*, 26: 53–62.

Albaiz, N. E., and Ernest, J. M. (2020) Exploring Saudi kindergarten teachers' views and uses of school, family, and community partnerships practices, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 1–12.

Ansell, N. (2002) Secondary education reform in Lesotho and Zimbabwe and the needs of rural girls: Pronouncements, policy and practice, *Comparative Education*, 38(1): 91–112.

Bell, A. (2020) Teamwork helps Zimbabwe pupils shut out of class by COVID-19, *Financial Times*, 16 July 2020, [online] Available from <https://www.ft.com/content/d88ad324-b22e-11ea-94fc-9a676a727e5a> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

Bell, S., Cardoso, M., Giraldo, P., Nasir, N., et al. (2020) 'Can broadcast media foster equitable learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic?' Evidence for Action, [online] Available from: <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/can-broadcast-media-foster-equitable-learning-amid-the-COVID-19-pandemic/> (Accessed 13 May 2020).

Bishop, E.C. and Shepherd, M.L. (2011) Ethical reflections: Examining reflexivity through the narrative paradigm, *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(9): 1283–1294

Brink, S. (2016) Employing a multifocal view of ECD curriculum development at a rural settlement community in South Africa: Themes from a “design by implementation” early childhood education programme, *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 6(1): 1–11.

Britton, J. (2020) Being an insider and outsider: whiteness as a key dimension of difference, *Qualitative Research*, 20(3): 340–354.

Buckler, A. (2015) *Quality teaching and the capability approach: evaluating the work and governance of women teachers in rural Sub-Saharan Africa*, UK: Routledge.

Chingono, N. (2020) "I need money for school": the children forced to pan for gold in Zimbabwe, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2020, [online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/13/i-need-money-for-school-the-children-forced-to-pan-for-gold-in-zimbabwe> (Accessed 16 November 2020).

Center for Global Development (2020) *CGD – COVID education policy tracking*, Center for Global Development [online] Available from: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ndHgP53atJ5J-EtxgWcpSfYG8LdzHpUsnb6mWybErYg/edit?ts=5e6f893e#gid=0> (Accessed 9 December 2020).

Cottica A., Hassoun A., Vallet J., Melançon G. (2017) Semantic social networks: A new approach to scaling Digital Ethnography. In: Kompatsiaris I. et al. (eds) *Internet Science. INSCI 2017. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol 10673. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70284-1_32.

Deutsche Welle (2020) Coronavirus: Zimbabwe businesses count cost of economic impact, 27 February 2020 [online] Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-zimbabwe-businesses-count-cost-of-economic-impact/a-52554723> (Accessed 29 June 2020).

Giannini, S. and Albrechtsen, A-B. (2020) *COVID-19 school closures around the world will hit girls hardest*, UNESCO, 31 March 2020, [online] Available from: <https://en.unesco.org/news/COVID-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest> (Accessed 29 June 2020).

Gregson, S., Terceira, N., Mushati, P., Nyamukapa, C. and Campbell, C. (2004) Community group participation: Can it help young women to avoid HIV? An exploratory study of social capital and school education in rural Zimbabwe, *Social Science and Medicine*, 58(11): 2119–2132.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. and Namey, E. (2012) Introduction to applied thematic analysis, *SAGE Research Analysis*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436.n1>

Gray, D. and Stevenson, C. (2018) How can 'we' help? Exploring the role of shared social identity in the experiences and benefits of volunteering, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 39(4): 341–353.

Hunter, K. and Ross, E. (2013) Stipend-paid volunteers in South Africa: A euphemism for low-paid work?, *Development Southern Africa*, 30(6): 743–759.

Haßler, B., Khalayleh, A. and McBurnie, C. (2020) *A sequenced education response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, EdTech Hub Helpdesk Response, DfID EdTech Hub.

Jordan, K. & Mitchell, J. (2020) *Messaging apps, SMS & social media: Rapid Evidence Review*. The EdTech Hub. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4058181.

Kendall, N. (2007) Parental and community participation in improving educational quality in Africa: current practices and future possibilities, *International Review of Education*, 53: 701–708.

Kim, J. and Rose, P. (2020) The threat of COVID-19 on Ethiopia's recent gains in pre-primary education, *The Education and Development Forum* [online] Available from: <https://www.ukfiet.org/2020/the-threat-of-COVID-19-on-ethiopias-recent-gains-in-pre-primary-education/> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

Lagakos, D. and Yam, E. (2020) Reopening schools too early could spread COVID-19 even faster – especially in the developing world, *World Economic Forum Blog*, 10 Aug 2020, [online] Available from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/re-opening-schools-too-soon-in-developing-countries-could-lead-to-much-faster-spread-of-COVID-19/> (Accessed 2 October 2020).

Loth, C.C., Namisango, E., Powell, R.A., Pabst, K.H., Leng, M., Hamada, M. and Radbruch, L. (2020) “From good hearted community members we get volunteers” – an exploratory study of palliative care volunteers across Africa, *BMC Palliative Care*, 19(1): 48–58.

Machingura, F. (2011). A diet of wives as the lifestyle of the Vapostori Sects: The polygamy debate in the face of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe, *Africana*, 5(2): 185–210.

McDonald, D.A. (2010) Ubuntu bashing: the marketisation of ‘African values’ in South Africa, *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(124): 139–152.

McMahon, S.A., Ho, L.S., Scott, K., Brown, H., Miller, L., Ratnayake, R. and Ansumana, R. (2017) “We and the nurses are now working with one voice”: How community leaders and health committee members describe their role in Sierra Leone's Ebola response, *BMC Health Services*, 17: 495.

Mugumbate, J. and Nyanguru, A. (2013) Exploring African philosophy: the value of Ubuntu in social work, *African Journal of Social Work*, 3(1).

Mukwambo, P. (2019) Human development and perceptions of secondary education in rural Africa: a Zimbabwean case study, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, [awaiting issue allocation] DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2019.1681936.

Muller, J., Eliastam, J. and Trahar, S. (2018) *Unfolding narratives of Ubuntu in Southern Africa*, UK: Routledge.

Myende, P.E. (2013) Sustaining school-community partnership through effective communication, *Communitas*, 78: 76–94.

Omoto, A. M., Snyder, M. and Hackett, J. D. (2010) Personality and motivational antecedents of activism and civic engagement, *Journal of Personality*, 78(6): 1703–1734.

Oyinloye, B. (2018). Parents' perceptions of schooling and their educational practices in Southwest Nigeria. [PowerPoint slides], presented at the Education Faculty Research Day, July 2018, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

Phiri, K., Ndlovu, S., Dube, T., Nyathi, D., Ncube, C. and Tshuma, N. (2020) Access to formal education for the San community in Tsholotso, Zimbabwe: challenges and prospects, *Heliyon*, 6(7).

Plan (2016) *Education in Emergencies Endline Evaluation Report — Sierra Leone*.

Stefanski, A., Valli, L., & Jacobson, R. (2016). Beyond involvement and engagement: The role of the family in school-community partnerships. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 135–160.

Theunynck, S. (2009) School construction strategies for universal primary education in Africa: should communities be empowered to build their schools? The World Bank.

Uleanya, C., Uleanya, M.O. and Oluyemi, S. (2019) Revisiting high school teachers' education: Solution to sustainable development in rural Africa, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5: 1–15.

UNESCO (2020) Education: from disruption to recovery, UNESCO. Available from: <https://en.unesco.org/COVID19/educationresponse>

UNICEF (2020) COVID-19: Over 97 percent of students still out of the classroom in Latin America and the Caribbean, *UNICEF Press Release*, 09 November 2020, [online] Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-over-97-cent-students-still-out-classrooms-latin-america-and-caribbean> (Accessed 10 November 2020).

UNOCHA (2020) Zimbabwe cluster status: Education, [online] Available from: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/zimbabwe/card/4qUWJuEhk6/> (Accessed 10 July 2020).

World Bank (2020) *How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*, World Bank, [online] Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic> (Accessed 4 August 2020).

Van Lancker, W. and Parolin, Z. (2020) COVID-19, school closures, and child poverty: a social crisis in the making, *The Lancet Public Health*, 5(5): e243-e244.

Viner, R. M., Russell, S. J., Croker, H., Packer, J., Ward, J., Stansfield, C. and Booy, R. (2020) School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks including COVID-19: a rapid systematic review, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 4: 397–404.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix A – Telephone questionnaire

8.1.1. Introduction

Below is the extract from the research proposal concerning this questionnaire:

Closed questionnaire completed by telephone interview

IGATE-T field officers administer questionnaires by telephone. The purpose is to gather basic information on learners involved and identify Community Champions for participation in the second stage. The questionnaire uses only closed questions requiring quantitative or categorical responses (e.g., how many children take part, how often does each group meet, for how long). Field officers enter responses directly into the project database, Tangerine, using tablets or laptops.

The research questions require information on:

- the strategies used by community champions to recruit and support caregivers and learners.[1]
- how adults and children used the learning activities provided by the project.

The community champions will be the main data source, providing indirect data from the adults and children. Where we can directly contact the caregivers and learners, it will not be through this questionnaire, but by open-ended telephone interview.

The questionnaire, therefore, needs to have three sections, to gather data on:

1. Who are the community champions?
2. How are they sharing activities with parents or caregivers?
3. Who the learners are and how are champions working to support them?

8.1.2. Questions

Pre-question for interviewer: Please confirm that consent has been granted for this interview to go ahead

Response options:

- a. Confirmed

8.1.3. Section 1: nature of community champions and caregivers

Question 1: What is your background?

Response options:

- a. Primary teacher or school head (currently employed)
- b. Secondary teacher or school head (currently employed)
- c. Retired teacher or school head (primary)
- d. Retired teacher or school head (secondary)
- e. Member of School Development Committee
- f. Community Educator
- g. Community member
- h. Parent or Caregiver

Question 2: What gender are you?

- a. Male
- b. Female

Question 3: What age are you?

Response options:

- a. <20
- b. 21–25

- c. 26–30
- d. 31–35
- e. 36–40
- f. 41–45
- g. 46–50
- h. 51–55
- i. 56–60
- j. 61–65
- k. >65

Question 4: What is the highest level of education that you completed?

Response options:

- a. Primary school
- b. Secondary school
- c. Teacher training college
- d. Vocational education or college
- e. University

Question 5: How confident do you feel using English language?

Response options:

- a. I read and speak English fluently.
- b. I read and speak English well, but sometimes struggle to understand.
- c. I read and speak English with difficulty. I often struggle to understand.

Question 6: Are you currently engaged as a Learning Champion?

Response options:

- a. Yes.
- b. No, I had to stop but I hope to start again soon.
- c. No, I had to stop and I can't see myself starting again.

Question 7: When you are (or were) championing as a Learning Champion, what other responsibilities are you balancing your championing with?

Response options (select all that apply):

- a. The volunteering is (or was) my only responsibility.
- b. Combining volunteering with paid formal employment.
- c. Combining volunteering with paid informal employment.
- d. Combining volunteering with looking after my own children.
- e. Combining volunteering with other family caring commitments.
- f. Combining volunteering with other volunteering activities.
- g. Combining volunteering with community initiatives.
- h. Combining volunteering with other responsibilities not listed.

8.1.4. Section 2: sharing daily learning activities with parents or caregivers

If you are **not currently** engaged as a Learning Champion, please answer the questions based on your experiences of **when you were** engaged as a Learning Champion.

Question 8: do you share the IGATE daily learning activities with parents or caregivers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

IF NO, go to Q. 12

Question 9: How many parents or caregivers do you share daily learning activities with?

Response options:

- a. 0–10 households
- b. 10–20 households
- c. More than 20 households

Question 10: How do you share daily learning activities with parents or caregivers?

Response options (select all that apply):

- a. By WhatsApp.
- b. By SMS.
- c. Copying out on paper and giving to adults directly.
- d. Copying out on paper and posting in public places.
- e. Other

Question 11: Do you share the activities in English or translate them into mother tongue for caregivers?

Response options (select all that apply):

- a. English
- b. Shona
- c. Ndebele
- d. Other

8.1.5. Section 3: using daily activities with learners

Question 12: Do you do literacy and numeracy activities with children by teaching them, or do you just give them the materials and let them get on with it?

Response options:

- a. I teach the children using the materials.

- b. I give them the materials and let them get on with it.
- c. A combination of the above.

If b, thank participant. Ask if they have any questions or comments. End interview.

Question 13: How many children do you usually work with each week?

(Enter number)

Question 14: Which school grades or forms are the children from?

Response options (select all that apply):

- a. Primary grades 1–3
- b. Primary grades 5–7
- c. Secondary forms 1–2
- d. Secondary forms 3–4
- e. Children who were out of school before the lockdown

Question 15: how many times a week do you usually meet each group of learners?

Response options:

- a. once
- b. twice
- c. three times
- d. four times
- e. five times
- f. more than five times a week

Question 16: usually, how long is each session with learners?

Response options (pick the closest):

- a. around 15 minutes
- b. around 30 minutes
- c. around 45 minutes
- d. around an hour or more

Question 17: what learning activities do you use with learners?

Response options (select all that apply):

- a. Daily learning activities sent out by the IGATE-T project.
- b. Activities from my teaching (school or community education).
- c. Activities I made up myself.
- d. Activities from somewhere else (i.e. internet, another project or resource).
- e. A combination of the above.

If a) or e) go to Q18.

If b) c) or d), go to Q19

Question 18: what did you think of the IGATE daily learning activities?

Response options:

- a. Not useful
- b. Quite useful
- c. Very useful

Question 19: How do children respond to doing literacy and numeracy activities together?

Response options:

- a. Most children really enjoy the activities.
- b. Most children enjoy some of the activities.
- c. Most children don't enjoy the activities.

Question 20: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- a. Some children invite their friends to the sessions (agree / disagree).
- b. I have to chase children (or their parents) so children attend the sessions (agree / disagree).
- c. It is getting more difficult to continue with the volunteering (agree / disagree).
- d. I enjoy this role (agree / disagree).
- e. I feel like the community value my contribution as a Learning Champion (agree / disagree).

8.1.6. Section 4: Follow-up

Would you be interested in participating in a further interview to talk about your experiences in more detail?

Response options:

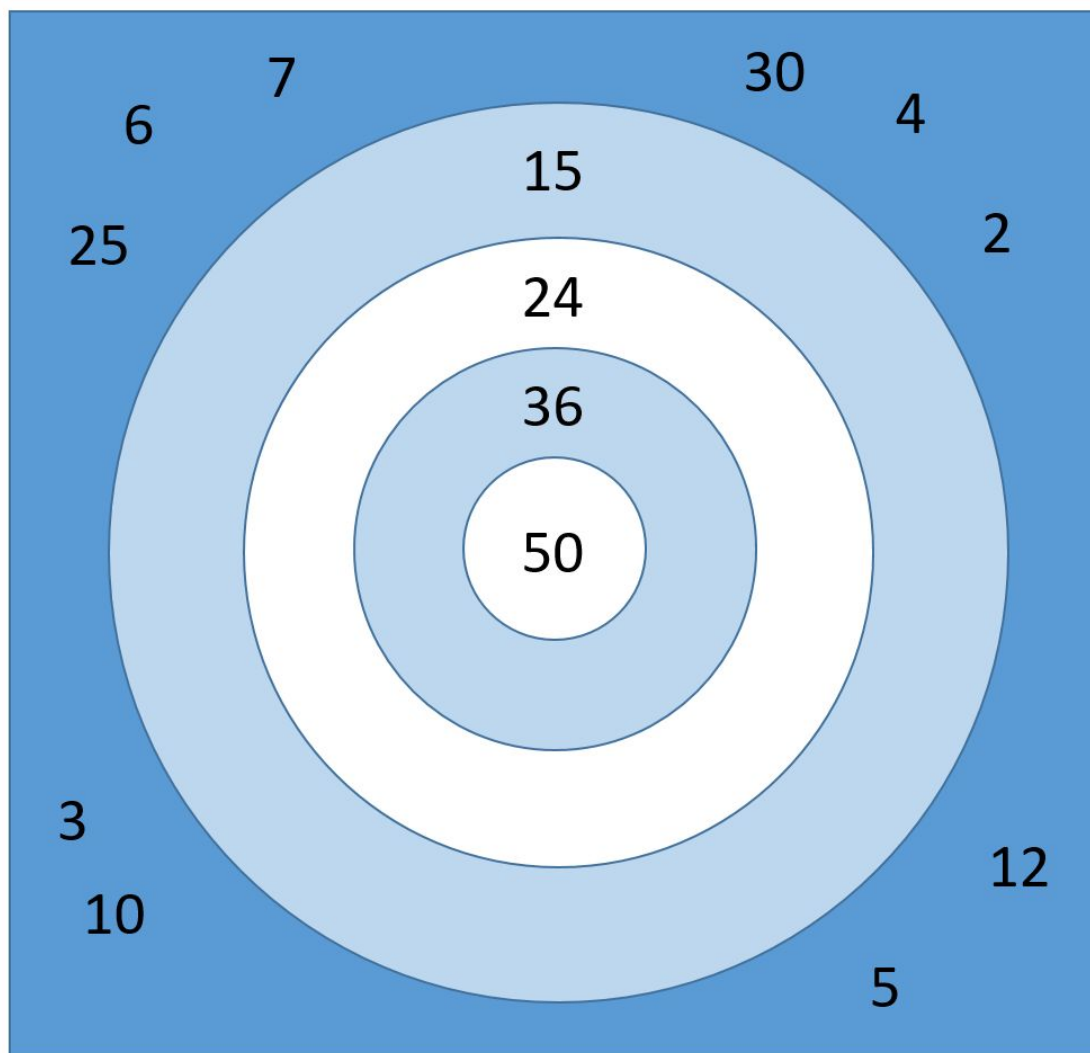
- d. Yes
- e. No

[1] It is assumed that community volunteers will work with some learners directly but also support caregivers who are in turn supporting their family children as learners.

8.2. Appendix B – Examples of daily learning activities

8.2.1. Numeracy Activities

Day 1: Target numbers



Choose one of the numbers in the target (15, 24, 36 or 50). Use the numbers outside the target to make the target number you have chosen. You can use as many numbers as you like and you can use each number more than once. If you have time, choose a second target number.

Day 2: Odd one out

Look at these numbers. 27; 56; 8. Pick one number. How is it different from the other two? (the odd one out).

Now pick a different number. How is that one the odd one out?

Finally, pick the last number and think of how that one is the odd one out.

Day 3: How many legs?

In the animal shed, there are cows, goats, donkeys and chickens. Sometimes there are people in there too. And lots of little creatures like ants and flies.

If there was one of each of these in the shed, how many legs would there be?

What creatures might be in the shed if there were 20 legs? Could there ever be an odd number of legs? Why or why not?

Day 4 — Guess my number

Think of a number. Now make up to 5 clues to help someone else guess your number. Give the hardest clues first! Take turns to think of numbers.

Example, I think of the number 7. I say:

It is less than 10 (could be 1–9)

It is an odd number (could be 1,3,5,7,9)

It is more than 5 (could be 7, 9)

It is written using only straight lines (can only be 1 or 7)

Day 5 — Multiplication pada⁷

Draw a pada game on the ground with ten squares. Write numbers 1 to 10 in the squares.

Throw your stone onto a number. Say at least 3 facts about times tables for the number before you play. You can say more if you like.

(For example, if your stone is on 5, you could say one times five equals five, five times five equals twenty-five, ten times five equals fifty.)

⁷ Pada is the Shona language name for a Zimbabwean variation of the game Hopscotch.
Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development (CHILD)

8.2.2. Literacy Activities

Day 1

How many words can you think of that have the sound of f, but are spelled with ph or gh?

(This can also be a game. The child or team that finds the most words wins.)

Day 2

Choose an interesting job. Imagine that you have that job. Write about your day.

What do you do? What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?

(If necessary, help the children with ideas for interesting jobs: firefighter, musician, pilot, nurse, actor, artist, cook ...)

Day 3

How many words can you make out of the letters in 'I am Zimbabwean'?

(This can also be a game. The child or team that finds the most words wins.)

Day 4

Say a word. Your friend must say another word that ends with the same letter. Who can say the most words?

You: Big.

Friend: Leg.

You: Dig.

Friend: Dug.

You: Bag.

Friend: Bug,

You: Erm ... um ...

Friend: Ha ha! I win!

Day 5

Finish the sentences.

Earlier today I ...

I'm looking forward to ...

I want to ...

I can't ... but I want to learn how to.

In the future, I'm going to ...

(Children complete the sentences in writing with their own ideas. Non-readers can do it just by speaking.)