GPE KIX SYNTHESIS REPORT

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange

EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND THOSE AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

GPE KIX
KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

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About GPE KIX

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) is a joint endeavour between GPE and IDRC that aims to ensure partner countries have and use the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the 21st century.

About this report

This synthesis report is one of five commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence and lessons learned from applied research projects funded during the program's first phase, from 2019 to 2024. These multi-stakeholder projects focused on key challenges facing education systems across the Global South and generated evidence, strengthened capacities and mobilized knowledge into policy and practice. The reports in this series address five priority themes identified by national education stakeholders: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion; out-of-school children and youth; and teacher professional development.

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For more information: www.gpekix.org

ACRONYMS

AEP	Accelerated education program
ALFA	Accelerated Learning for Africa
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CBE	Complementary basic education
CENF/VS	Centre d'éducation non formelle à visée scolaire
COBET	Complementary Basic Education in Tanzania
EMIS	Education management information system
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
GEI	Gender equality, equity and inclusion
GFM	Girl-focused education model
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
ICT	Information and communication technology
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
OOSCY	Out-of-school children and youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 2021 to 2024, the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX), a joint endeavour with Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), commissioned four research projects to test, assess and develop strategies to scale education innovations that can increase access to quality education for out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) and those at risk of dropping out. The projects involved 11 partners and 15 countries. They were:

- A Comparative Study of Accelerated Education Programs and Girls' Focused Education Models in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone
- The Back2School Project: Scaling an Accelerated Learning Model for Out-of-School Girls in Rural Communities in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania
- A New Model of Bridging Classes to Improve Learning of Out-of-School Children and Youth in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal
- Effectiveness and Scalability of Programs for Children Who Are Out-of-School and at Risk of Dropping Out in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal

Each project assessed a wide range of innovative education programs and school-based practices, deepening knowledge of their characteristics and the quality of their implementation. In total, more than 30 accelerated education programs (AEPs) and practices were reviewed, with students, parents, teachers, education officials and other key stakeholders providing input on what works and what needs to be improved. These findings were used to inform government and other stakeholders about effective policies, strategies and approaches so they can be replicated and scaled up.

This report provides a synthesis of the findings that have emerged from the four research projects addressing the challenge of OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. By consolidating findings across the four projects, the synthesis identifies both generalizable lessons and particularities in findings, situating the specific contributions of grounded research in broader bodies of knowledge. This report informs regional and global education debates by highlighting key features of effective AEPs across the four projects and lessons learned that can help future efforts to scale education options for out-of-school and at-risk learners.

Context

Worldwide, an estimated 251 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 are out of school, with millions of others at risk of dropping out. Governments are addressing these issues through systemic reforms and targeted interventions to improve school access and retention, such as by increasing the supply of schools,

classrooms and teachers, removing fees and other hidden costs, allocating resources equitably across education levels and regions, and making efforts to improve the quality of learning for all students. In addition, governments, donors and civil society actors have supported innovative education models to address the unique barriers and needs of OOSCY. One of the most promising strategies involves AEPs.

Despite the growing knowledge and evidence regarding AEPs, there remain several gaps in data and understanding, including on how to support education for OOSCY at scale, learner outcomes beyond literacy and numeracy, alternative transition pathways to vocational training and livelihoods for youth, and gender equality, equity and inclusion.

Projects' mapping studies revealed deep insights into the factors driving high rates of OOSCY and students at risk of dropping out within the research sites assessed. Acknowledging the need for caution due to significant heterogeneity across contexts, these have been categorized into supply- and demand-side factors.

Supply-side factors include:

- long distances to schools
- poor quality learning environments
- late enrolment and repetition
- lack of inclusive infrastructure and trained staff
- school-based violence

Demand-side factors include:

- insufficient financing
- attitudinal factors of learners and parents
- socio-cultural norms and practices
- children's engagement in paid and unpaid work
- chronic or severe absenteeism
- conflict and insecurity

Key features and gaps of AEPs

Despite different contextual realities within and across countries, and the varied needs of OOSCY based on their age, gender and other factors, several **key features of AEPs** were identified as critical to their success, including:

- condensing one or more years of schooling into an accelerated timeline
- flexible learning schedules adapted around common routines
- meaningful engagement of parents and communities
- elimination of fees or ancillary costs for families
- using learner-centered pedagogies and mother-tongue instruction
- using community-based teachers and facilitators to attract and retain qualified teachers in rural, remote or conflict-affected regions

Key gaps and limitations of AEP models reviewed were also noted. These included:

- lack of policies, standards and guidance for programs
- placement of AEPs within ministries of adult and non-formal education, with drawbacks for their visibility, financing, alignment and accountability
- the arm's length role of some local education officials and inspectors
- limited pathways for vocational training and livelihoods for older youth
- inconsistent financing

The projects noted several **strategies to address gender equality, equity and inclusion**, such as:

- enrolment bias favouring girls
- the creation of safe spaces for girls
- empowering girls with confidence and self-esteem
- sexual and reproductive health programming
- community and parental sensitization campaigns
- teacher and facilitator training in gender-responsive pedagogy
- working with schools and civil society organizations to include children and youth with disabilities in formal education

Effectiveness of AEPs and enhanced school-based practices

To address these barriers, three of the four research projects piloted new or adapted innovations in accelerated education or school-based practices for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. The Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project examined current or former alternative education programs that have scaled or have the potential to scale. All research projects tested the effectiveness of these approaches on learner access, retention, learning and empowerment, as well as gauging their wider impact on schools, teachers, parents, communities and governments.

Overall, the projects found that AEPs and enhanced school-based practices produced significant results at different levels:

- **Individual-level outcomes:** increased access to education for marginalized learners, high rates of transition to formal education, and increased economic and social empowerment, particularly for girls.
- **School-level outcomes:** comparable or better academic performance than learners in formal education, reduced dropout rates and strengthened teacher and facilitator capacities.
- **Community-level outcomes:** improved community engagement and support for education and reduced early marriage and pregnancy.

- **National-level outcomes:** these programs proved to be cost-effective in comparison with formal education, and project teams contributed to enhanced government policies, programs and practices for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out.

The outcomes of these efforts were used to provide evidence-based guidance for scaling up AEPs and dropout-prevention programs as viable strategies for ensuring the right to education for vulnerable learners in rural, remote, deprived and insecure contexts.

Scaling impact

A key focus of the research projects was addressing knowledge and evidence gaps on scaling the impact of education options for OOSCY, for the purposes of expanding accelerated learning options or to attract and retain students in school. The research projects explored four different pathways to scale by adapting or expanding an existing program (program pathway), by using evidence to inform development of a new policy or change an existing policy (policy pathway), by supporting an evidence-informed behaviour, practice or skill that is adopted and applied (behaviour, practice and skills pathway) and by disseminating evidence on the effectiveness of AEPs (methodology pathway). The pathways employed were not mutually exclusive.

Research partners engaged with policymakers and communities in these efforts, strengthened the capacity of stakeholders to understand and use evidence, and supported efforts to unlock government, donor and community resources. Despite these efforts, research projects encountered structural constraints that impeded the ability to scale AEPs and school-based practices. These included:

- lack of sustainable financing
- lack of an enabling policy environment
- the capacity of communities to advocate for scale

Rich lessons were learned in the scaling process. One of the most critical was the centrality of communities in these efforts. Interventions should serve as catalysts for what schools and communities are doing, and collaborative relationships at the level of schools and communities were critical to long-term sustainability and success. Equally important was the need to build partnerships at multiple levels of government and across ministries and departments with responsibility for children and youth. There is a continued need for more and better data and evidence, coordination, awareness and advocacy on OOSCY, and governments and other actors need more analysis of the cost-effectiveness of innovative education approaches to support them in scaling decisions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from across the four research projects:

1. **Mainstream AEPs and practices within government budgets** to enable scale and ensure their long-term sustainability.
2. **Develop harmonized and gender-responsive policies, guidelines, quality standards and curricula for AEPs** that reflect key features and practices that have proven effective.
3. **Support awareness raising and enforcement of laws on child protection,** such as on early marriage and child trafficking and labour.
4. **Strengthen the linkages between AEPs and formal schools and expand learning pathways** for accelerated learners.
5. **Reinforce programs in formal schools** that support access and retention for vulnerable learners and prevent dropout.
6. **Improve school infrastructure and support accessible and inclusive education** for learners with disabilities.
7. **Invest in teacher and facilitator recruitment, training and professional development programs**, with a special focus on women, to meet the specific needs of out-of-school learners.
8. **Ensure communities are at the centre of improvements** in education options for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out.
9. **Collect comprehensive data on OOSCY, and support continued evidence generation, learning and uptake of evidence**, including the intersection of gender with broader socio-economic, cultural and political factor.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) is a joint endeavour between GPE and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to ensure partner countries can access and action the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the twenty-first century.

During its first phase, from 2019 to 2024, GPE KIX funded 41 applied research projects focused on key challenges facing education systems across the Global South. These projects generated demand-driven and contextually relevant evidence on a wide range of innovative education programs, strengthened capacities of education stakeholders and mobilized knowledge into policy and practice. The research projects were engaged and applied, involving research users throughout, from communities and parents, teachers and school leaders, district to national education officials and other stakeholders as relevant. They were undertaken by a range of universities, think tanks, networks and NGOs.

This document is one of five synthesis reports commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence and lessons learned across these projects in relation to priority themes identified by national education stakeholders: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion (GEI); teacher professional development; and out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY).

This report provides a synthesis of the findings that have emerged from four research projects addressing the challenge of OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. It aims to mobilize knowledge and evidence on scaling the impact of education options for these vulnerable children and youth, and addresses knowledge and evidence gaps on this critical theme at national, regional and global levels.

By consolidating findings across multiple sites and projects, the synthesis identifies both generalizable lessons and particularities in findings, situating the specific contributions of grounded research in broader bodies of knowledge.

This report aims to inform and influence regional and global education debates by increasing the visibility of Southern perspectives on evidence for education. It highlights key features of effective AEPs across the four projects and lessons learned that can help future efforts to scale education options for out-of-school and at-risk learners.

1.1 About the projects

The four projects assessed the effectiveness of innovative education programs and practices, mobilized knowledge and awareness, strengthened the capacity of diverse stakeholders to use knowledge and evidence, and explored approaches to scaling the impact of effective solutions. Collectively, the four research projects involved 11 research partners and spanned 15 countries across Africa and South Asia.

They include:

A Comparative Study of Accelerated Education Programs and Girls' Focused Education Models in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs)

This project investigated the effectiveness, efficiency, adaptability and scalability of existing accelerated education and girl-focused education models (GFMs) that were either scaling or had the potential to scale. It conducted mapping exercises in each country to understand the magnitude of the OOSCY challenge in select districts, ran tracer studies to understand the longer-term education outcomes for accelerated education program (AEP) beneficiaries, and conducted interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholder groups. Evidence was used to engage policymakers and strengthen their capacity to adopt and scale up these approaches.

The Back2School Project: Scaling an Accelerated Learning Model for Out-of-School Girls in Rural Communities in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania (Back2School)

This project conducted baseline assessments in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania to identify constraints and promising practices and gaps in existing accelerated learning models. It piloted and tested enhanced approaches and strategies for accelerated learning to improve access, retention, completion and learning for rural girls.

A New Model of Bridging Classes to Improve Learning of Out-of-School Children and Youth in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Senegal (Bridging Classes for OOSCY)

This project aimed to create educational opportunities for OOSCY by developing a new and innovative model of a bridging program in six countries in West Africa. The model was based on an assessment of promising practices and gaps and limitations in existing bridging classes and non-formal education. The project assessed the number of OOSCY returning to formal education, the effects of innovative practices on the self-efficacy of teachers, facilitators and beneficiary communities, and the effects of training in gender-sensitive pedagogy.

Effectiveness and Scalability of Programs for Children Who are Out-of-School and at Risk of Dropping Out in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners)

This project assessed current and former government policies and practices to address the challenge of OOSCY and make programs more inclusive. It tested community interventions and enhanced school-based practices to attract, retain and improve learning for these children. The project used the knowledge generated to inform policies and practices, identify scalability pathways and build the capacity of key stakeholders.

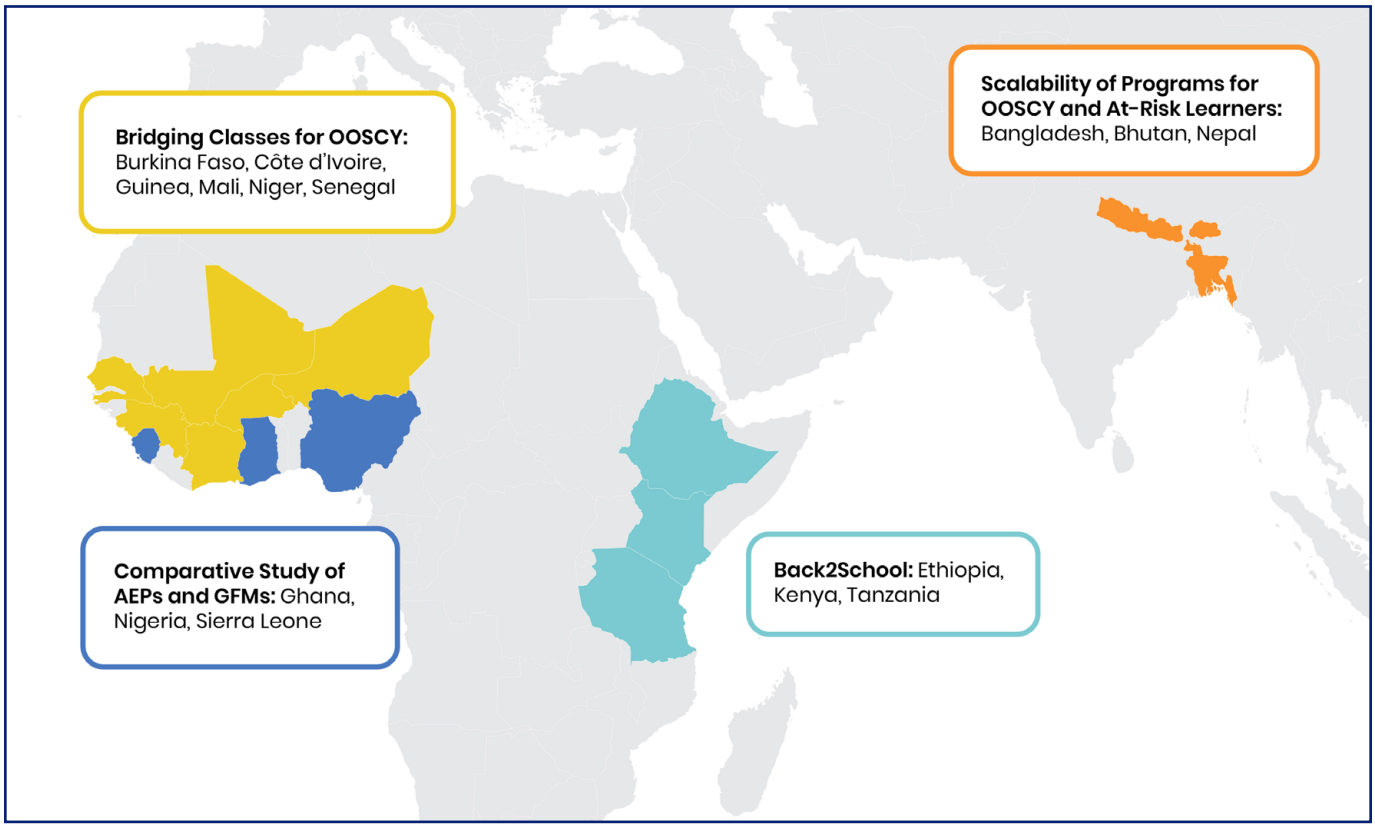
Table 1: Overview of research projects, implementing organizations, focus countries and innovations

Projects and focus countries	Implementing organizations	Innovations tested or existing models assessed
Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone	Associates for Change Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa Dalan Development Consultants	Assessed former or existing AEPs and GFMs with the potential to scale. Models and programs included: **In Ghana:** • School for Life • Afrikids • The Ghana Institute of Linguistics and Bible Translation **In Sierra Leone:** • Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents Programme, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) • AEP programs, Save the Children International • AEP programs, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education **In Nigeria:** • Education Crisis Response project • DFID EiE Non-Formal Learning Centre project • Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria • European Early Recovery project • Opportunity to Learn

Projects and focus countries	Implementing organizations	Innovations tested or existing models assessed
Back2School Tanzania, Ethiopia and Kenya	The Graça Machel Trust African Child Policy Forum The Diocese of Musoma Pan-African Research Services I_Rep Foundation	Tested enhanced approaches and strategies for accelerated learning to improve access, retention, completion and learning for rural girls. Strategies included: **In Tanzania:** • Curricula harmonization • Teacher training • Community sensitization • Improving Ministry of Education oversight and support to schools **In Ethiopia:** • Age-disaggregated learning • Vocational training pathways for older students **In Kenya:** • Teacher training in child-centred pedagogy • Community sensitization
Bridging Classes for OOSCY Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Senegal	Fondation Karanta Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa	Innovation tested in all countries: • Centres d'éducation non formelle à visée scolaire (CENF/VS)

Projects and focus countries	Implementing organizations	Innovations tested or existing models assessed
Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan	Kathmandu University School of Arts South Asian Institute for Social Transformation Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan	Innovations tested: **In Nepal:** • Extra-curricular activities • Parent and community engagement **In Bangladesh:** • School-based workshops and events for students • Parent and community engagement • Teacher capacity-building in experiential and ICT enabled teaching and learning **In Bhutan:** • Individualized interventions for children and youth with disabilities

Figure 1: Countries in which research projects were executed



1.2 About this report

This report begins with an overview of the challenge of OOSCY, a high-level scan of recent knowledge and evidence on this theme, and a summary of the four research projects. This overview is followed by the identification of factors that prevent children and youth from accessing and remaining in school, based on mapping studies conducted as part of the research projects. The report then provides a summary of best practices, gaps and limitations of existing AEPs and other school-based practices reviewed by the research partners. Issues of gender equality, equity and inclusion in the research projects are discussed, followed by the effectiveness of educational innovations tested by partners.

Finally, the pathways, strategies, constraints and lessons learned in scaling education innovations are summarized. The report culminates in recommendations to governments, civil society organizations, researchers and other stakeholders seeking to deepen their work in this space.

2. OOSCY CONTEXT

An estimated 251 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 worldwide are out of school. This includes 71 million children of primary school age, 57 million adolescents of lower secondary school age and 120 million youth of upper secondary school age. While this represents a slight decline from 2018 numbers (258 million), the issue of OOSCY poses a significant and sustained challenge that undermines the right to education for all children and the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.1, which calls for universal primary and secondary education completion (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.).

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are 98 million OOSCY, compared with 87 million in Central and Southern Asia.[1] Sub-Saharan Africa, where three of the four research projects are focused, is the only region where the out-of-school population is growing, particularly among adolescents and youth of lower and upper secondary education age, demonstrating the intractable nature of this challenge. With some variation across countries and localities, there are more females than males out of school in sub-Saharan Africa, especially at the upper secondary level. The West Africa country-mapping studies suggest that in Sierra Leone (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2022a) and Nigeria (Center for the Study of the Economies of Africa, 2022), the majority of OOSCY are female, whereas in Ghana (Associates for Change; Ministry of Education in Ghana, May 2022), a growing number are male. The majority of OOSCY in Central and Southern Asia are male (UNESCO, 2022).

In addition, significant numbers of children and youth are at risk of dropping out of school and failing to complete their education. Only 43% of girls and 46% of boys in sub-Saharan Africa, based on 2021 data, complete lower secondary school. In South Asia, this number rises to 81% for girls and 79% for boys (World Bank, 2021). Completion rates in primary and secondary education have remained stagnant across many countries, despite increases in access. COVID-19 exacerbated this challenge, with an estimated 1.5 billion children and youth affected by school closures during the height of the pandemic; the average estimated learning loss was a year or more (Education.org, 2022). In Nepal, a survey of children in grades 1 to 5 in 17 schools of Durga Bhagwati municipality found 386 (8.5%) had dropped out and 715 (16%) were at risk of dropping out due to absenteeism of one month or more. Dropout rates were higher for girls, reflecting parents' preference for boys' education (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha, Shrestha & Adhikhary, August 2022).

[1] For further details, see https://education-estimates.org/out-of-school/data/

Armed conflict is another factor driving high out-of-school rates, with the destruction of school infrastructure and forced displacement. It is estimated that 468 million children, or one in six, live in areas affected by conflict, marking an increase of 28% since 2015 (Save the Children, 2023). In areas of extreme poverty and rural deprivation across Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, mapping studies suggest that the proportion of OOSCY ranges from 25 to 35% of the 5- to 16-year-old cohort, rising to 35 to 40% in conflict-affected areas (Associates for Change, April 2023). Governments are addressing these issues through the ongoing development and implementation of policies and programs that increase access to education, enhance retention and reduce the factors that contribute to dropout, both within and outside of formal school systems. These policies and programs include both systemic reforms and targeted interventions. They feature a wide range of approaches, including: increasing the supply of schools, classrooms and teachers; removing fees and other hidden costs; cash transfers; school nutrition programs; automatic promotion; and equitable allocation of resources across levels of the education system and between states, provinces, districts and schools. They also feature efforts to improve the quality of learning for all students through teacher training and enhanced inputs such as learning materials (Global Partnership for Education, 2023).

Mapping studies in Ghana note that despite government efforts to increase access to education through interventions such as school feeding programs, free uniforms and abolishment of school fees, more than one million Ghanaian children aged 5 to 16 years were out-of-school (Associates for Change, April 2023).

In addition to these strategies, governments, development organizations and civil society actors have supported innovative education models to address the unique barriers and needs of OOSCY. One of the most promising strategies, and the focus of recent evidence reviews, is the use of AEPs.

There are various terms used to describe education programs that are not considered part of the formal education system. These include alternative education, accelerated education and non-formal education. For the purposes of this synthesis, we use the term “accelerated education” as including alternative education, non-formal education, girl-focused models and other forms of alternative learning programs reviewed or tested by the research projects. The term “in-school practices” is used to refer to strengthening extra-curricular activities or ICT-enabled instruction.

Table 2: Terms and definitions for education programs outside the formal education system

Term	Definition
Alternative education	Over-arching term that refers to education programs that are not considered formal education programs (UNESCO IIEP; CfBT Trust, 2009).
Accelerated education programs	Flexible, age-appropriate programs that are run on an accelerated timeframe and aim to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age and out-of-school children and youth (INEE, 2024).
Non-formal education	Education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative or complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).
Girl-focused education models	Interventions that address supply-side (school) and demand-side (household) factors that inhibit girls' educational participation and performance. These interventions include girls' circles, with foundational literacy and income, using AEP models of education (Casely-Hayford, 2024).

3. EVIDENCE SCAN

There has been an increasing focus on understanding the scope and nature of the OOSCY challenge, including a deepened understanding of the barriers they face, and best practices in responding. In addition to the mapping studies noted above, several global initiatives and reports, including the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children, Education.org's evidence synthesis and guidance for policymakers on AEPs, and GPE's Leaving No One Behind report have all focused on this issue. As a result, there is a growing body of knowledge and evidence around the scope and nature of the challenge, and the education policies, programs and practices designed to address it.

AEPs have been an important response to the out-of-school challenge. They are the core focus of this evidence scan, given three of the four research projects focus on this strategy. AEPs have been proven to improve access to education for marginalized learners not served by traditional education systems, though not at a level commensurate with the scale of the problem. AEPs have produced literacy and numeracy outcomes comparable to or better than those achieved by students enrolled in formal education. There is growing data on enrolment and retention in AEPs, and transition of learners to formal education, often disaggregated by gender. There is also a growing understanding of the core features of effective AEPs that can be replicated or scaled up by governments and other actors, and of strategies to address gender barriers, particularly for female learners. Furthermore, there is growing evidence of government policies and strategies that reference out-of-school children and the education programs that serve them (Education.org, 2022; Shah & Choo, 2020).

At the same time, the literature on OOSCY and AEPs has identified several areas where there are considerable knowledge and evidence gaps (Education.org, 2022; Shah & Choo, 2020). These include:

Policy context and scale: More knowledge and evidence is needed on how best to support education for OOSCY at scale. Countries lack practical, actionable guidance and context-sensitive knowledge as well as evidence on policies, strategies, financing, program adaptations and other critical considerations. There is also insufficient evidence on how to deepen and strengthen government policy, strategy and implementation capacity in such areas as oversight, human resources, integration of data systems and processes for transition. More research and evidence are needed on linking AEPs to formal education systems and strengthening alignment with curricula, assessments and certification to ensure sustainability. There is growing knowledge and evidence on how the wider political economy impacts AEPs. For example, the West African team conducted extensive political economic analysis on the drivers and limiting factors regarding the scaling up of accelerated education in

Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. They have also conducted a cross-country synthesis of the findings and presented them to policy learning working groups in Ghana and Sierra Leone.

Effectiveness and efficiency of AEPs: While some core features of alternative education programs are becoming better known, there are enduring questions regarding what works, for whom, why and in what contexts. There remains wide variance in the implementation of models, including level of flexibility, duration, curricula and number of years of traditional education covered. There are gaps in knowledge and evidence around certain program characteristics and the quality of implementation such as how learners are selected and recruited, how teachers are hired and trained, and how curricula are adapted and implemented in classrooms. Evaluations commenting on the quality of the components of these programs are difficult to find, as are linkages between strategies and outcomes. More evidence is needed on how these models work and why they are succeeding or failing in different contexts.

Accelerated education models also face similar challenges and inefficiencies to those seen in the formal education system, such as learner dropout, and poor rates of attendance, transition to and retention in post-graduate formal schooling or skills training programs. More research is also required to understand the range of costs associated with the different programs and their effects over a longer timeframe.

Learner outcomes: Beyond their impact on literacy and numeracy, there is limited data and evidence on a more holistic set of learning outcomes from AEPs, particularly in the areas of socio-emotional learning and life skills. There is also a need to focus on and capture evidence on psychosocial health and well-being of learners to understand how disruptions (i.e. COVID-19 or conflict) or other drivers of well-being — including safety, nutrition and access to water, sanitation and hygiene — can impact learning outcomes. More evidence is needed to understand the benefits of different education models in crisis- and conflict-affected environments. Attention is also needed to understand the impact of violence, both in and out of school, on both education access and learning outcomes.

Transitions: There is limited data and evidence on alternative transition pathways for OOSCY such as vocational or technical training, or directly into livelihoods. There is a need to focus research on longer-term impacts and the use of tracer/longitudinal studies to understand: a) whether accelerated education graduates perform at or beyond grade level; b) whether graduates retain their newly acquired knowledge and competencies longer than if they had learned through more traditional methods; and c) the impact of this learning on graduates' livelihoods.

Gender equality, equity and inclusion: More evidence is needed to understand how gender-related challenges intersect with broader socio-economic, cultural and political contexts (i.e. household poverty, pastoralism, faith, insecurity, pregnancy,

early marriage and gender-based violence, among others). Another area that needs further documentation is the extent to which AEPs have a deeper commitment to gender-transformative actions. For example, how are teachers' views and learning practices and community perceptions and beliefs around girls' education being reshaped by accelerated education? There is also a need to broaden equity beyond gender parity, to include other forms of exclusion.

Dropout prevention: In addition to OOSCY, there are large numbers of learners at risk of dropping out, due to over-aging, high rates of absenteeism over extended periods, and, for girls, early marriage and pregnancy. Strategies to address retention in school include scholarships, bursaries and conditional cash transfers, school feeding programs, back-to-school and anti-early marriage campaigns, re-entry policies, extra-curricular programs such as empowerment and leadership clubs, and more. However, there is insufficient knowledge and evidence to track the effectiveness and outcomes of these strategies in reducing dropout rates, particularly for female learners.

Capacity strengthening: The effective implementation of AEPs and dropout prevention strategies requires capacity to deliver programming at multiple levels — through communities, school leaders and teachers, local education authorities and local and national governments. Knowledge and evidence gaps remain on how best to strengthen the capacity of actors at different levels, and how to track the outcome of these efforts for individual learners and at the level of the education system.

Data: There are few consistent and comparable metrics and tools for comparing AEPs. While there is a focus on disaggregating data by gender, there is less disaggregated outcome reporting across other indices of marginalization such as socio-economic status, disability or displacement, or other demographic and identity markers. There remain substantive gaps in the inclusion of data on AEPs in government education management information systems (EMIS) and data collection cycles.

It is within this context that the four research projects sought to address knowledge and evidence gaps on education options for OOSCY and at-risk learners.

4. MAPPING STUDY FINDINGS: KEY DRIVERS OF OOSCY AND SCHOOL DROPOUT

Each of the four research projects conducted extensive mapping of the communities in which they were assessing or testing accelerated education models and school-based practices. These mapping studies aimed to shed light on OOSCY and their communities, the barriers they face in accessing education, and how innovative education models and practices can overcome these barriers.

The mapping revealed deep insights into the factors driving high rates of OOSCY and those at risk of dropout within the research communities assessed. While noting that there is significant heterogeneity across contexts and among the OOSCY within them, these insights have been categorized into both supply- and demand-side factors. Supply-side factors concern school characteristics such as the number and availability of schools, school infrastructure, availability of teachers and the quality of education offered. Demand-side factors include social and environmental characteristics that affect school exclusion, such as economic hardship, conflict, cultural factors, and perceptions of the value of education (UNICEF, 2014). The following table summarizes the key drivers of school dropout from both a supply and demand perspective.

Table 3: Key drivers of OOSCY and school dropout

Supply-side factors	Demand-side factors
Long distances to schools	Insufficient financing
Poor quality of learning environments	Attitudinal factors of learners and parents
Late enrolment and repetition	Socio-cultural norms and practices
Lack of inclusive infrastructure	Children's engagement in paid and unpaid work
Lack of trained staff	Chronic or severe absenteeism from school
School-based violence	Conflict and insecurity

4.1 Supply-side factors

Schools often require long distances to commute, particularly in rural and remote areas. Some communities lack access to primary and secondary schools, requiring students to commute long distances or continue schooling in larger towns. This has implications for cost and safety, particularly for girls. For example, in West Pokot, Kenya, the distance to school can be up to eight km each way. This is a deterrent, particularly for younger children, older girls (Pan African Research Services Ltd., n.d.) and children with disabilities. In Sierra Leone, parents keep pre-school children (aged four to six years) at home until they are considered old enough to make the journey to school (Dalan Development Consultants, n.d.). In 2015, Côte d'Ivoire introduced compulsory education but without sufficient space and infrastructure to accommodate all students, particularly in rural areas (Koffi, July 2022).

Poor quality learning environments influence attendance and retention in schools. The deployment of teachers to rural and remote areas, high levels of teacher absenteeism, shortages of trained teachers and high attrition rates were challenges impacting the quality of learning environments in many of the research sites, particularly in conflict-affected and extreme poverty zones. Lack of learning materials and equipment, and lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities were other factors that limit quality. In Ghana, mapping studies revealed that 77% of schools lacked desks and chairs for learning, while 15% of schools had no furniture at all (Associates for Change, April 2023). In Bangladesh, 47% of students in the treatment group and 25% in the control group reported missing school in the last three months due to menstruation (Akhter, Rana, Nahrin & Tasneem, April 2023). In Tanzania, a survey of 18 schools hosting Complementary Basic Education in Tanzania (COBET) Centres, across five districts, revealed a teacher-student ratio from 1:53 to 1:142, with only one urban school within the prescribed teacher student ratio of 1:40, indicating the significant burden on teachers. Further, the toilet-to-student ratio ranged from 1:32 to 1:162, signalling the challenges of poor infrastructure (Telli & Kwayu, 2022).

Late enrolment in school and high levels of repetition contribute to dropout. Older students feel uncomfortable studying with younger students. This is particularly true for girls as they develop and mature. In Guinea, 77% of pupils that start lower secondary education are over age 12, with a significant proportion over age 15 (Diané, June 2022). In Sierra Leone, the higher the class level, the greater the number of children who drop out. The highest dropout occurs among senior secondary students, with girls in senior secondary school having the highest dropout rate at 40% (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2022a). School closures during COVID-19 have exacerbated learning loss, late enrolment and dropout.

Lack of inclusive infrastructure and trained staff contributes to the risks of dropping out. In Bhutan research sites, the inaccessibility of the school environment prevented children with mobility issues from attending, and often required a full-time attendant

to move learners around the school. Teachers sometimes discouraged parents from sending children with disabilities to school, as they felt unprepared to provide individualized attention and support (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, n.d.). Apart from the lack of inclusive infrastructure, mapping studies in northern Ghana and Nigeria revealed that few children with special needs remain in school beyond early primary due to stigmatization of families and individuals with special needs (Associates for Change, April 2023).

School-based violence such as bullying and gender-based violence is a risk factor. Bullying and gender-based violence were identified as factors contributing to OOSCY in Kenyan research sites (Pan African Research Services Ltd., n.d.). In Bangladesh research sites, 20% of primary school students reported experiencing some form of bullying. Ten percent of students from the treatment group and 7% from the control group experienced sexual harassment, mostly on their way to school or home. Most of these students were girls (Akhter, Rana, Nahrin & Tasneem, April 2023).

4.2 Demand-side factors

Insufficient financing is a critical constraint to school attendance. Even in contexts where schooling is considered "free", there are many associated costs that families are unable to meet, including learning materials, uniforms, transportation and more. One of the reasons that AEPs are attractive to families is that many models cover these additional costs. COVID-19 was found to exacerbate the financial constraints of schooling. In Sierra Leone, poorer parents are more likely to withdraw girls from school in response to growing school maintenance demands. In Guinea, for families belonging to the poorest quintile, 64% of children aged 5 to 16 have never been to school, versus 13% for the richest quintile (Diané, June 2022).

Attitudes of learners and parents, such as perceived low value of schooling and limited interest in education, are key drivers of OOSCY. This is a complex issue, with the likelihood of multiple contributing factors rooted in poverty, including years of poor-quality education, low employability of graduates, parental workloads and more. In Ghana research sites, more than 50% of respondents cited limited interest in schooling or the belief that it is unimportant as a key reason why children and youth are out of school (Associates for Change, May 2023). In Bangladesh research sites, parents felt that sending their child to school was expensive due to the lack of employment opportunities after graduation. Families preferred to send their children to workshops to learn technical skills (Akhter et al., November 2022). Low literacy and education rates among parents and caregivers may contribute to devaluing education. In Ghana research communities, 80.7% of household heads have not accessed education (Associates for Change, April 2023). In research communities in Nepal, more than 80% of mothers are illiterate (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha, Shrestha & Adhikary 2023). Parents who are working may not have the time to follow up on

student attendance. In Sierra Leone, the government's 2020 decision to overturn the ban on pregnant girls attending school has had a positive impact on girls' school participation, but this is only recently being captured in enrolment and retention data.

Some socio-cultural norms work as barriers to school attendance, particularly for girls. Factors identified include female genital mutilation, early marriage and teen pregnancy, expectations and aspirations for girls, and gender-based violence. These norms are multifaceted and deeply rooted. In Nigeria, for example, 44.1% of girls are married before the age of 18. In the northeast and northwest of Nigeria, these rates are even higher (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, n.d.-a). Schools in Bangladesh research communities reported that at least 50% of their female students were lost to child marriage in the last two years of the pandemic (Akhter, Rana, Nahrin & Tasneem, April 2023). In many contexts, boys' education is valued more than girls' education. In Nepal, boys are often put in private school where the quality of education is perceived to be better, while girls undertake household responsibilities that are believed to prepare them for marriage (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha, Shrestha & Adhikhary, August 2022).

Traditional practices such as livestock herding in pastoralist communities, agricultural production and entrenched gender divisions of labour are other examples of socio-cultural norms that can serve as a barrier to schooling. Young girls in West Pokot County, Kenya take care of livestock for extended periods of time in the forests. Older male children are often sent away with animals for several months, leading them to fall behind in school (Pan African Research Services Ltd., n.d.).

Children's engagement in paid and unpaid work prevents their participation in schooling. Across research sites, children and youth engaged in a wide variety of economic activities — from farming to petty trade, to household responsibilities — with significant variance by age, gender and context. In Ghana, household chores were cited by 27.1% of households as a key barrier to schooling. Girls are often responsible for caring for younger siblings when both parents are working. They accompany their mothers and support petty trading. For boys, the need to generate income in financially insecure households is a key driver limiting the access of children and youth to any form of education (Associates for Change, April 2023). In Ethiopia, primary data revealed that some children do not attend school because their parents or guardians want them to work to support the family income or perform domestic work (The African Child Policy Forum, n.d.).

Chronic or severe absenteeism (an absence of more than one month) is a key risk factor for student dropout. Absenteeism is driven by several factors, including participation in cultural and religious functions, migration, household responsibilities and lack of monitoring by parents or schools. In Ghana, 23% of students surveyed in formal schools have high rates of absenteeism, which places them at risk of dropping out. Absenteeism is more common in the lower grades (Associates for

Change, April 2023). In Nepal, it was the single most pressing problem across public schools surveyed. Chronic absenteeism contributed to learning loss and poor academic performance, and potentially to dropout. Children and parents did not take absenteeism seriously, due in part to the liberal promotion policy in government schools and a perception that schooling is not mandatory (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha, Shrestha & Adhikhary, August 2022).

Conflict and insecurity are significant drivers for out-of-school numbers and absenteeism. In Mali and Burkina Faso, close to one million children were affected by school closures due to insecurity. In 2021, according to the Mali Education Cluster, 1,684 schools (27%) were non-functional due to insecurity, affecting more than 505,200 children (Diabé, July 2022). In Burkina Faso, conflict and insecurity affected 525,299 children and youth and nearly 3,405 schools (13.6%) were closed in January 2022 (Kabore, April 2022). In northeast Nigeria, girls face gender-based violence on the way to school and many primary and secondary schools near communities are no longer accessible due to risks of kidnapping and death (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, 2022).

In summary, many of the supply- and demand-side factors identified in the research projects are well known and reinforce the drivers of OOSCY and dropout articulated in the broader literature. The research projects contributed to a deeper understanding of these issues.

5. FEATURES, GAPS AND LIMITATIONS OF EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR OOSCY AND THOSE AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Each project assessed a wide range of accelerated education models and school-based practices for OOSCY and children at risk of dropping out. These assessments deepened knowledge of program characteristics and the quality of implementation and were used to inform government and other stakeholders about effective policies, strategies and approaches so they can be replicated and scaled up. These assessments also helped identify innovative solutions that research partners could test to address gaps in existing education options for OOSCY and at-risk learners.

In total, more than 30 AEPs and school-based practices were reviewed. Stakeholders, including students, parents, communities, teachers, education officials and innovators were solicited for their perspectives on what works and what is needed for effective AEPs and school-based practices.

These assessments reinforced the broader literature regarding core features and best practices of AEPs for OOSCY, such as acceleration, flexibility, learner-centred pedagogical approaches and parental and community engagement. They also revealed gaps and limitations of existing models and practices that require new or enhanced approaches.

While many of these key features relate to AEPs, the potential to transfer good practices from AEPs —such as flexible timetabling and learner-centred pedagogies — to the formal education system is an area to explore. Such practices could perhaps help to retain students in school and create a conducive environment for accelerated education graduates transitioning back into formal education.

5.1 Key features of AEPs for OOSCY

Despite different contextual realities within and across countries, and the heterogenous needs of OOSCY based on their age, gender and other factors, the following key features of AEPs for OOSCY were identified in the research projects.

Table 4: Key features of AEPs

A. Key features and practices of AEPs addressing demand-side constraints of OOSCY, such as financing, socio-cultural norms and child labour	
Key features	**Explanation**
Acceleration	Most accelerated education models reviewed condensed one or more years of schooling. For example, the second chance and Accelerated Learning for Africa (ALFA) programs in Ethiopia covered three years of primary school in ten months, and the Centres d'éducation pour le développement in Mali covered the first cycle of basic education (grades one to six) in four six-month cycles. Programs in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone provide robust literacy and numeracy outcomes in a nine-month period commensurate with what would be achieved in three years of formal schooling (Associates for Change, May 2023; Center for the Study of the Economies of Africa, April 2023; Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). Accelerated curriculum coverage is attractive to parents and to older learners who have missed out on foundational skills. It can also be attractive to governments if recognized as a cost-effective alternative to formal education.
Flexibility	Flexibility was a key feature across most AEPs reviewed. Schedules adapted around common routines and economic activity in their communities allowed children and youth to attend school. The timing, duration and hours per day varied significantly across models, often reflecting the unique demands on children and youths' time in a particular community. For example, the Education in Emergency Non-Formal Learning model in northern Nigeria operated three hours per day, three days a week, while the I_Rep Foundation Shepherd School model in West Pokot, Kenya, conducted classes in three shifts — in the morning, midday and evening. Sierra Leone models demonstrated the importance to beneficiaries of a flexible, learner-centred approach that recognizes, values and addresses diverse needs (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023).

Key features	Explanation
Parental and community engagement	Meaningful engagement of parents, guardians and communities was considered a key success factor and vital to transforming the socio-cultural norms that keep many children and youth out-of-school, and to motivating a return to school and good attendance. Practices around community engagement varied across the models reviewed. In Ghana, communities participated in identifying educational needs, providing infrastructure (such as learning spaces) and engaging in the selection and support of local facilitators. They also mobilized financial and material resources for accelerated education and collaborated with local education authorities on culturally relevant curricula and tailored teaching methodologies (Associates for Change, December 2023). In northern Nigeria, sensitization and engagement of community *Ulamas* (scholars) and Islamic leaders in program activities was a key driver of sustainability (Centre for the Study of Economies of Africa, n.d.-d). The Back2School project found parental and community engagement to be ad hoc and poorly established in the models examined, but strategies for enhanced community engagement was instrumental in the enhancements they tested.
Affordability	Most accelerated education models reviewed were provided free of cost and covered teaching and learning materials, food and occasionally additional supplementary expenses such as transport and sanitary supplies for young women. This was a strong incentive for learner participation across most models reviewed. However, the financing of supplemental school costs remains a significant issue when alternative learners are reintegrated into formal school. In Sierra Leone, encouraging parents to participate in village savings-and-loans schemes helped them to support their children's education following their transition into the formal school system (Dalan Development Consultants, 2023).

B. Key features and practices of AEPs and school-based practices addressing supply-side constraints of OOSCY, such as proximity of schools, poor quality of learning environments, late enrolment, repetition and teacher deployment and retention	
Key features	**Explanation**
Learner-centred pedagogical approaches	Interactive, learner-centred approaches that draw lessons from the local context and are non-punitive were identified as a key success factor for accelerated education models reviewed. Learner-centred pedagogies allow optimal interaction for students and enhance student attention and the relevance of learning. The second chance and ALFA models in Ethiopia were particularly noted for this feature. These approaches were also credited with improving the confidence of learners.
Mother tongue-based instruction	Allowing students to learn in their mother tongue facilitates learning in literacy and numeracy, increases learning and retention, strengthens ability to learn new languages, and enhances the knowledge and self-confidence of learners. As noted in Ghana, the AEPs' practice of teaching in local languages helped children understand better, acquire reading and writing skills, and ease their transition to formal schooling (Associates for Change; Ministry of Education in Ghana, May 2022).
Community-based teachers and facilitators	Most programs used facilitators or animators from the communities in which learners were located, with an emphasis on the recruitment of female facilitators. This was considered a key success factor of most models. The use of community-based facilitators and teachers addressed one of the core supply-side constraints of attracting and retaining qualified teachers in rural, remote or conflict-affected regions. Community-based teachers and facilitators understood the local economy and socio-cultural norms of communities and engaged with parents and communities to address barriers that contribute to dropout or absence. The teachers and facilitators often displayed empathy to students from challenging circumstances and followed up on cases of absence. Female facilitators had a positive impact on bringing girls back to school. Training provided for voluntary facilitators in Sierra Leone positively influenced their decision to remain with community-based AEPs (Dalan Development Consultants, n.d.-b).

5.2 Gaps and limitations of AEPs for OOSCY

The review of AEPs for OOSCY also identified several gaps and limitations which varied across countries and contexts. Projects' assessments also identified innovative approaches or adaptations that could be piloted and tested through research to address the gaps and limitations of existing AEP models.

Table 5: Gaps and limitations of AEPs for OOSCY

Gaps and limitations	Explanation
Enabling policy frameworks	Some countries lacked enabling policy frameworks for accelerated education. This has implications for standards, consistency and equitable financing. Countries across the research projects ranged from having no policy framework or guidance for accelerated education to having fully developed policies in place. However, simply having a policy framework in place (i.e. Ghana, Tanzania, Sierra Leone) did not ensure the quality or availability of AEPs due to funding and other constraints. It was noted that greater attention needs to be paid to the policy implementation gap. In Ghana, political economic analysis revealed that governance systems were in place from a policy and legislative perspective, but funding remained far below the projected commitments of one percent of the national education budget to accelerated education.
AEPs fall under the mandate of ministries of adult and non-formal education in some countries	In some countries, AEPs fall under the mandate and responsibility of ministries of adult and non-formal education, with drawbacks for visibility, financing, alignment and accountability. Consequently, in Tanzania, AEPs were excluded from per capita funding formulas used in formal education systems; they were misaligned with national curriculum and lacked oversight and accountability from local level education officials (Telli & Kwayu, 2022).

Role of local government officials and inspectors	Local government officials and inspectors often played a passive role. They had an arm's length relationship with AEPs and did not always see them as their responsibility. Even when accelerated learning programs were operated from formal schools, local education officials often assumed an administrative role, rather than taking instructional leadership. For example, in Ethiopia, local officials' visits to schools that housed AEPs rarely engaged accelerated learning teachers: they tended to focus on school principals with overall responsibility for the functioning of schools (The African Child Policy Forum, n.d.). This is not universally the case, however. In Ghana, NGOs acted as facilitators and partners in the implementation of the complementary basic education (CBE) program. For example, they collaborated with local education authorities to develop contextually relevant curriculum and teaching methodologies.
Pathways into vocational training	With some important exceptions, few AEPs offered a pathway into vocational training, despite the fact that OOSCY tend to be older and many will transition directly to work. The goal of most AEPs was to transition to formal primary education. Curricula tend to be largely focused on literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills, though there were some exceptions across the models reviewed such as the BRAC Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents model in Sierra Leone and the Education Crisis Response model in Nigeria. In Ethiopia, the Back2School project experimented with providing vocational training pathways for older youth. Increasing post-primary transition pathways to include vocational training and market-relevant skills were identified as important to learners and their families, particularly for older OOSCY. In the Bridging Classes for OOSCY project, parents and teachers suggested AEPs should be oriented towards vocational training (Fondation Karanta, January 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation	There is a need for stronger monitoring and evaluation systems to fully assess the impact of education models and practices for OOSCY. The most common data available for AEPs were enrolment and transition data, sometimes disaggregated by gender. Most of this data came from progress reports for donor-funded and international NGO-implemented projects. While the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project provided highly valued longitudinal data that tracked retention and performance of post-graduate children and youth in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, this is not common practice across AEPs. Further, there are no nationally standardized systems of education performance measurement for AEPs against which to assess performance.
Inconsistent financing	Inconsistent financing remains a significant barrier to sustainability of AEPs for OOSCY. Most models reviewed were funded by international organizations. Government-funded models, such as those in Ghana, Tanzania and Ethiopia, have limited resources available to meet demand. International donor financing, on which many models depend, can be short term, subject to project cycles, inequitably distributed and unsustainable. Currently in West Africa, international donors fund programs for three to five years and the costs of maintaining or developing these are not institutionalized by governments, whose financial commitment remains extremely low. Often communities are expected to fill the gap, which is not their responsibility.

6. GENDER EQUALITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Across Africa and Asia, there are large swaths of the population excluded from education, based on their gender, race, age, disabilities, sexual identity, faith and more. For excluded individuals, these identities often intersect negatively with low socio-economic status and societal or community conflict.

GEI was a specific focus for the research projects. Back2School and the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs focused on girl-focused models within AEPs. In Sierra Leone, for example, two of the three programs covered by the research project targeted girls using girl-focused models. All innovations assessed under the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs were implementing AEPs in a gender-responsive and equitable manner. They often took progressive steps to ensure girls were reached and actively participating and included women within the facilitation teams, as well as shifting parents' attitudes towards educating girls.

Bridging Classes for OOSCY analyzed the effectiveness of programs, practices and new models from a gender equity lens, while Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners had a specific focus on understanding in-school practices and community engagement from a GEI perspective. The Bhutan component of this project offered deep analysis, insights and strategies for children and youth with disabilities.

Collectively, these four projects explored education barriers that exclude girls and other marginalized groups. They identified or used various strategies to deepen GEI in their study contexts and pointed to several ways in which these strategies could be enhanced.

6.1 Barriers faced by marginalized groups

Out-of-school rates for girls and boys vary by context. For example, mapping studies undertaken by the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project that assessed enrolment and dropout rates in formal education by gender found no discernable pattern across countries. In Sierra Leone, more boys than girls have never been to school (64% of boys versus 49% of girls), while girls are more likely to drop out than boys (51% of girls versus 44.5% of boys). In Ghana, boys are more likely to drop out of school than girls (64% of boys versus 36% of girls) (Associates for Change, April 2023).

Many supply- and demand-side barriers for OOSCY identified in this report disproportionately affect girls. On the supply side, the lack of proximity of schools affects attendance of both girls and boys; however, girls and their parents may fear the risks of gender-based violence on their long journeys to school. The lack of water and sanitation facilities at schools, and unavailability of sanitary pads, pushes away girls who have reached puberty. Female role models are underrepresented in

teaching, especially at more senior levels and in school management. However, one strength of AEPs, particularly those using girl-focused models as in Ghana and Sierra Leone, is that they attract female facilitators. With capacity-building and confidence boosting, these facilitators serve as strong role models for girls.

On the demand side, gendered divisions of labour are deeply embedded in cultural practices. In Nepal, girls were found to shoulder more domestic responsibilities — such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings — than boys, while boys were more focused on academic and recreational activities. The differential availability of time between genders was a significant factor in access and retention in school, as well as performance (Thapa & Rajbanshi, 2023).

Several research projects highlighted child marriage and the high incidence of teenage pregnancy as key barriers to education for girls. Cultural expectations around marriage cause girls to drop out or not enrol in formal schools. Girls are viewed as a form of investment once married and their in-laws generally do not support them returning to school. In Nepal, boys' education is often favoured over education for girls (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha, Shrestha & Adhikary, 2023).

Children and youth with disabilities face multiple barriers to attending and completing school. Teachers lack training or confidence in their ability to meet the needs of learners with disabilities, and may be unable to manage behavioural issues, particularly in large class sizes. Teachers also lack specialized equipment or resources in the classroom. Mobility challenges and a lack of inclusive infrastructure is common in many schools. Parents fear that their children may face sexual harassment or bullying or may feel that education is not relevant for their child (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, n.d.).

Barriers for learners with disabilities are compounded by poverty and geographic location. On top of the added health-related expenses for children with disabilities, families experiencing economic disadvantage find it difficult to take time off to care for their children or support them in school when services are absent. Families in rural areas also have less access to specialized programs or resources to support their child's disability. Older students age out of the education system with limited income-generating options.

In Bhutan, there have been no studies undertaken on children with disabilities and limited data is available through the Ministry of Education (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, n.d.). In Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, the OOSCY mapping research revealed a problem in identifying children with special needs in rural remote areas, and pointed to outmoded beliefs and socio-cultural practices of infanticide.

BOX 1: MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: THE CASE OF BHUTAN

In Bhutan, an estimated 2.1% of the population (15,567 people) have disabilities. Nearly half are between 6 and 18 years of age. Only 12% of these children are enrolled in 30 public schools that offer special educational needs programming, with the remaining 88% out of school.

Paro College of Education at the Royal University of Bhutan, in collaboration with two middle schools and two civil society organizations in Thimphu District, provided individualized intervention strategies and programs to 20 children and youth with disabilities (9 female, 11 male), to assess the impact of individualized interventions on access, retention and learning.

Sangay was one of those children. He lives in a household with alcoholism and economic struggles and has an intellectual disability. He was frequently absent from school and at risk of dropping out. Sangay was provided instruction in functional literacy and numeracy, activities for daily living and vocational skills. As a result, his attendance improved, he gained confidence to engage and motivation to improve and was inclined towards vocational skills.

The impact of the project was multi-faceted. Children and youth with disabilities demonstrated enhanced daily living skills, pre-vocational aptitudes, functional proficiency and improved behaviour. They gained motivation and were more likely to stay in school. Parents were relieved of everyday stress and demands while their child was at school and had more opportunity to work and earn income. The project also demonstrated the power of collaboration and coordination between schools and civil society organizations serving children with disabilities.

Challenges with this approach included the scarcity of qualified professionals, uncertain parental commitment to the intervention due to economic pressures. Its effectiveness was also challenged by families' single-parent status or need to travel, the diverse range and severity of disabilities, and seasonal migration in rural areas.

Sources: *Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, 2023a and b.*

6.2 Strategies employed to enhance GEI

Research partners identified or used several strategies to address GEI in AEPs and in-school practices. These included:

Enrolment bias — actively encouraging girls' participation in education or specifically targeting girls using GFMs. Given the challenges girls experience in accessing and remaining in education, AEPs assessed in Ghana enrolled more girls than boys in their programs (55% of girls versus 45% of boys). This in part accounts for the greater numbers of female AEP graduates in formal education identified through tracer studies conducted by the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project (Associates for Change, May 2023).

Creating safe spaces, where girls can learn and thrive without fear of discrimination or violence. In Sierra Leone, safe spaces were provided for girls along with peer learning, vocational training and income generation. In addition, the GFMs included training instructors and AEP committee members on child protection and reporting abuse (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023).

Empowering girls with confidence and self-esteem to pursue further education, and gain agency in their home and community life. AEPs generally incorporated socio-emotional or life skills. Literacy and numeracy skills empowered girls to advocate for themselves and support their families in both income generation (e.g. petty trading) and personal issues (e.g. reading doctors' reports). Across these models, girls developed a passion for education, persistence in their studies and an expanded view of their employment possibilities.

Sexual and reproductive health programming to prevent dropout and support girls in preventing unwanted pregnancies and mitigating early marriage. In Sierra Leone, building girls' self-reliance and autonomy reduced early pregnancy and unprotected sex (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). In some Kenyan accelerated education models, sanitary pads were provided to menstruating girls (Pan African Research Services Ltd., n.d.). In Bangladesh, the research project provided sessions on menstrual hygiene, basic health and hygiene, sexual harassment and anti-bullying to advance GEI, create a safer school environment and reduce dropout (Akhter et al., 2023).

Community and parent sensitization and engagement to build support for girls' education. In Nepal, education campaigns were undertaken with communities to promote education for girls and boys, to connect parents and communities with teachers and schools, and to increase the self-efficacy of parents in engaging with the school system. In West Pokot, Kenya, the I_Rep Foundation worked with local leaders and heads of public schools to sensitize the community and parents on the value of educating girls. In Tanzania, pupils who were following the AEP and their teachers undertook community sensitization on the value of educating

children, particularly girls, and encouraged parents to allow their children to enrol in the program (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). All programs assessed in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone through the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs demonstrated that community and parental engagement was key to their effectiveness in shifting norms and increasing support for girls' education.

Teacher or facilitator training in gender-responsive pedagogy. This training aimed to ensure that teachers are able to include gender considerations in teaching and learning processes. In Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Senegal, gender and protection were included as part of teacher training modules and a monitoring and evaluation process was established for reporting abuse. The Back2School project developed gender equality and social inclusion guidelines to support mainstreaming GEI in AEPs and basic education (see Box 2).

Dropout prevention programs to retain students, particularly girls. Nepal's enhancement of extra-curricular activities strongly enhanced students' sense of belonging and attachment to schools and decreased dropout rates. GFMs in Sierra Leone implemented remedial peer learning and mentoring education for out-of-school girls as a strategy for dropout prevention. Government policies and strategies to foster inclusive education and address the specific needs of learners with disabilities and pregnant schoolgirls in Sierra Leone are likely to have a positive impact, although it is too early to assess this in depth. In Bangladesh, the Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners research project successfully implemented a multifaceted approach to dropout prevention. It included parental awareness, engagement and teacher capacity-building, which enhanced student knowledge of health and hygiene and created a positive school environment (Akhter et al., 2023).

Income generation to prepare and support girls, particularly adolescents, to successfully transition to work. In Ghana, one of the AEP models offered vocational and apprenticeship training as part of participants' transition to post-graduation work. In Sierra Leone, the BRAC model emphasized vocational skills training and training in skills needed for micro-enterprise development. Models in Nigeria and Ghana included employability skills. In francophone West Africa, the project Bridging Classes for OOSCY called for the addition of a vocational skills component for older learners that will not return to the general education system, as part of a new model of accelerated education.

BOX 2: GEI GUIDELINES

The Back2School project developed GEI guidelines to support evidence-based interventions in mainstreaming GEI into AEPs and basic education. The guidelines were developed for head teachers and school managers, teachers, parents, communities and policymakers. They include practical activities to guide the development of locally relevant interventions in the following core areas:

- Creating a culture of inclusion and respect for diversity
- Teacher training on GEI awareness and recruitment activities
- GEI-aware record-keeping and performance management
- Designing safe and inclusive school infrastructure
- Curriculum analysis to identify GEI opportunities in the curriculum
- Gender equitable and inclusive classroom practices
- Creating a school culture that welcomes parents, including through good parent-school communication (reports, meetings, regular discussions)
- Advocacy for GEI, in particular the valuing of girls' education
- Mentoring girls and providing role models
- Drawing on community resources

The following principles of good practice were developed to guide GEI interventions after the GEI mainstreaming guidelines were piloted:

Draw on and extend existing school and community GEI practices to create a sense of ownership. Positive examples being undertaken by communities included creating systems of record keeping that help them track the progress of vulnerable groups, promoting children's psychosocial well-being, and creating gender desks where gender inequality can be reported, and support obtained.

Promote peer learning and sharing of good practice. This is far more effective than external training.

Guide a process for communities to establish their own priorities for intervention. By focusing on the process rather than the outcome, schools and regions can set their own priorities.

Recognize schools can be effective sites of broader social change. A good example is the ambassador programs where respected community leaders influence community members to promote GEI using existing community mechanisms, such as chiefs' meetings.

Ensure AEP and GEI needs and priorities are part of ongoing policy processes and changes. This enhances the sustainability of GEI interventions.

Match the type of scaling to community needs. Some GEI interventions might be expanded nationally, while others may be refined and changed to suit the needs of a school or community.

Source: *Graça Machel Trust, November 2023.*

6.3 Towards more gender-transformative and inclusive approaches

Research projects identified several ways in which strategies and approaches could be deepened to further enhance gender equality and inclusion in AEPs and school-based practices:

More evidence is needed to demonstrate how gender-related challenges intersect with broader socio-economic, cultural, political and educational factors. These include, for example, household poverty, pastoralism, insecurity, faith, pregnancy, early marriage and gender-based violence. More disaggregated data is needed on other forms of exclusion such as disabilities, socio-economic status, ethnicity, geography and more.

Transition pathways should be expanded to meet the diverse needs of girls, boys and other excluded groups. Across models, there was uneven inclusion of transition pathways after accelerated education interventions. Most programs, with the exception of some of the GFMs in West Africa, focus on transitions to formal education, usually at the primary level. This focus on the transition to formal schooling does not always meet the needs of over-aged children or youth, or the expectations or aspirations of learners and their families. In Bhutan, there were no defined pathways into vocational training or university for disabled youth.

Policies and regulatory frameworks must be gender-responsive and inclusive. Across contexts studied, there are uneven regulatory frameworks around AEPs. Most countries have a stated commitment to accelerated learning programs for OOSCY, though more can be done to ensure they are gender-responsive and inclusive. In some countries, including Sierra Leone, these commitments were accompanied by policies, implementation and resources, although with a wide range across countries.

More female teachers and facilitators are needed. Female teachers and facilitators can attract girls to school, provide positive role models and mentorship, and reduce school-based violence. In Bangladesh, there are equal numbers of male and female teachers, in part due to established government quotas. In West Africa, female teachers are often well represented at lower levels of the formal education hierarchy, but their presence declines at more senior levels.

7. EFFECTIVENESS OF EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR OOSCY AND THOSE AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Three of the four research projects piloted new or adapted innovations in accelerated education or school-based practices for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. The Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project examined current or former alternative education programs that have scaled or have the potential to scale. All research projects tested the effectiveness of these approaches on learner access, retention, learning and empowerment, as well as their wider impact on schools, teachers, parents, communities and governments. The results of these efforts were used to provide evidence-based guidance for scaling up AEPs and dropout prevention programs as viable strategies for ensuring the right to education for vulnerable learners in rural, remote, deprived and insecure contexts.

Overall, across the four projects, AEPs and enhanced school-based practices demonstrated positive and multifaceted outcomes for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out, at individual, school, community and national levels. The positive outcomes of these programs and practices are described below.

7.1 Individual-level outcomes

Increased access to education for marginalized learners: AEPs and enhanced school-based practices increased access for marginalized groups not well served by the formal education system. In Nigeria, approximately 310,000 OOSCY were educated through five AEPs, providing them access to education that might otherwise have been unavailable (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, April 2023a). In Tanzania, the national COBET program reached close to half a million leaners between 2008 and 2013 (Telli & Kwayu, 2022). In Nepal, parental education campaigns resulted in a 20% decrease in out-of-school children and a 2% improvement in enrolment in the two school districts where the project was implemented (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha & Adhikary, 2023).

High rates of learner transition to formal education: AEPs improved transition rates to formal education. In Ghana, overall transition rates for AEP learners in the last few cycles of their programs were high, at 80% or more. More girls were able to transition to formal education as AEPs proactively selected more girls than boys (55% versus 45%) (Associates for Change, May 2023). In Ethiopia, most AEP learners transitioned to the next grade (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). Across centres in Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Guinea, 158 out of 284 students (55.6%) were transferred to the formal system. In centres that did not benefit from project interventions, 79 out of the 154 (51%) were transferred to the formal system (Fondation Karanta, January 2023).

Developed skills that increased economic empowerment: AEP learners demonstrated increased economic empowerment, due to foundational skills development as well as vocational and business skills training. In Sierra Leone, AEP graduates from the BRAC program reported positive impacts from skills received in starting and owning a business (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). In Ghana, AEPs have enabled girls to develop literacy, numeracy and life skills that generate income; learners report they are better able to account for their finances, interact with customers, read tool manuals and more (Associates for Change, March 2023). In Nigeria, AEP learners gained skills in literacy, numeracy, communications and daily living that were considered invaluable in their working lives; they also helped their families meet household needs, such as reading medical reports (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, April 2023b). AEPs have also expanded the worldview of learners, raised their awareness of career options and pathways, and increased their aspirations for a professional future.

Empowered learners, particularly girls: AEP learners, especially women and girls, gained confidence and self-esteem through their participation. In Sierra Leone, respondents reported strengthened empowerment, self-esteem and confidence, attributable in part to unique teaching methods (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). In Nigeria, AEPs provided an opportunity for girls to prove their academic and intellectual abilities. This helped girls build confidence and self-esteem (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, April 2023b). In Ghana, women gained knowledge, skills and self-confidence enabling them to make informed decisions, advocate for their rights and actively participate in social and economic spheres. (Associates for Change, March 2023)

"Education made me realize my worth and potential. I now have the courage to speak up for myself and others when we are in a group. I feel empowered to make choices that shape my own future."

(Associates for Change, March 2023)

Female AEP Beneficiary

7.2 School-level outcomes

Delivered academic performance comparable to or better than formal education: AEP learners demonstrated comparable and/or better academic performance than learners in formal schools at equivalent grade levels. In Sierra Leone, AEP learners were comparable to non-AEP learners in word reading, while scoring slightly lower in reading and comprehension (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). In Ghana, the AEP group outperformed the non-AEP group in letter, word and paragraph reading, while the non-AEP group outperformed AEP learners in reading (Associates for Change, March 2023). In Nigeria, AEP learners demonstrated greater proficiency in number recognition and less proficiency than non-AEP learners in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, though the differences were not significant (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, March 2023). In Nepal, treatment schools increased academic performance by approximately 7% versus control schools. In Bangladesh, student performance in STEM increased by 6.8 points in math and 7.4 points in science scores (Akhter et al., 2023). In Bhutan, children with disabilities demonstrated enhanced daily living skills, pre-vocational aptitude, functional proficiency and behaviour (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, 2023a). Under the CENF/VS model applied under the Bridging Classes for OOSCY project, learners' performance in language and communications was strong, at 70% across centres in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Mali, though performance in mathematics was less strong (Fondation Karanta, January 2023).

Reduced dropout rates: Enhanced school-based practices improved retention and completion rates in formal school for vulnerable girls and boys. In Nepal, there was an 18% reduction in the number of chronically absent students, suggesting campaign activities were successful in encouraging regular attendance. Dropout rates declined, with only four students dropping out of treatment schools versus 22 dropouts in control schools. Enhanced extra-curricular activities improved student retention rates, resulting in a 35% increase in student participation in those activities and an 84% increase in students' emotional connection with schools (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha & Adhikary, 2023). In Bhutan, the project increased interest and motivation for learning among children with disabilities (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, 2023b). In Bangladesh, there was an 11% reduction in dropout rates due to holistic interventions at community, teacher, and student levels (Akhter et al., 2023).

Strengthened teacher and facilitator capacities: Teachers have attained new skills in managing accelerated education learners, integrating learners within classrooms, providing support to meet learners' specific needs and circumstances, and ensuring a welcoming school environment. In Kenya, after receiving training in pedagogical approaches for accelerated education learners, teachers began pairing up AEP and

non-AEP learners in the classroom, which improved learning for AEP pupils, eased teachers' workload and contributed to greater acceptance of AEP learners at the school level. These changes have led to improved academic performance of AEP learners (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023).

7.3 Community-level outcomes

Improved community engagement and support for education: AEPs and enhanced school-based practices had a positive impact on community engagement and support for education. In Nepal, parental campaigns positively influenced parents' perceptions and involvement in their children's education. They built a strong connection between parents and schools and enhanced parental knowledge, beliefs and self-efficacy in bringing positive change to the school environment (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha & Adhikary, 2023). In Bhutan, the project reinforced the importance of collaboration and resource-sharing between schools and organizations that serve children with disabilities (Jigyel, Lhendup & Tshomo, 2023a). In Tanzania, schools have reinvigorated teacher-parent partnerships. Parents in Maburi primary school constructed a toilet block after students raised this as an issue. Parents are supporting school feeding programs in several schools and are contributing to the salaries of paraprofessional teachers (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). In Kenya, there is increased stakeholder ownership of project initiatives. For example, chiefs are locating and ensuring girls are re-enrolled in school, and teachers have committed to retaining these girls. Other schools are beginning to enrol over-age, out-of-school learners (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). In Sierra Leone, stakeholders reported believing all children have the right to education regardless of their circumstances (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023). In Ghana, rural communities are becoming more supportive of girls' education.

Reduced early marriage and pregnancy: AEPs have reduced early marriage, teen pregnancy and socio-cultural practices that hinder participation in education. In Ghana, AEPs have changed parents' perception about investing in girls' education and have helped avoid the push to marriage by families and communities. Across all 32 communities reached, there was evidence of a reduction in child marriage for girls aged 10 to 15 years. In addition, girls in AEPs were aware of ways to prevent abuse, potential assault and pregnancy (Associates for Change, March 2023; Associates for Change, May 2023). In Sierra Leone, AEPs helped learners understand pregnancy through guidance and prevention (Dalan Development Consultants, August 2023).

7.4 National-level outcomes

Demonstrated cost-effectiveness: A cost-effectiveness analysis of complementary basic education found that the unit costs of CBE programs in Ghana were 21.4% lower than those of formal schooling, excluding the cost of teacher training in formal education (Associates for Change, November 2023). In addition, one year of accelerated education is equivalent to 2.4 years of conventional delivery, meaning that complementary basic education is twice as efficient as the formal system.

Enhanced government policies and guidelines for AEPs: Research programs informed and helped shape government guidelines for accelerated education across implementing countries. In Ethiopia, research partners engaged with the Ministry of Education and the Department of Adult and Non-formal Education on draft policy guidelines and directives for AEPs to be enforced across Ethiopia (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). In Kenya, insights from the baseline assessments and piloting and testing of interventions were incorporated into the Ministry of Education's guidelines on accelerated education. In Tanzania, the Diocese of Musoma research partner is recognized by the Ministry of Education for its technical expertise (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023).

8. SCALING EDUCATION INNOVATIONS

A key focus of the research projects was addressing knowledge and evidence gaps on how to scale the impact of education options for OOSCY. Existing AEPs remain small in scale compared with the high, and in some contexts, growing number of OOSCY.

Furthermore, for several countries with national AEPs, enrolment is in decline, even as out-of-school populations are rising. In Guinea, enrolment in second chance Nafa centres is declining. In 2017, there were 5,612 learners versus 6,000 in 2011 (Diané, June 2022). In Tanzania, between 2008 and 2013, there were 480,556 children enrolled in COBET, while between 2014 and 2018, only 65,989 children enrolled, despite there being 1,812,727 primary school-aged children out of school (Telli & Kwayu, 2022).

The goal of scaling in these contexts was to *expand* accelerated learning options for greater numbers of OOSCY that have been excluded from the formal school system or dropped out. For the Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners project, which sought to improve school-based practices, the goal was to *attract* and *retain* students in school.

8.1 Pathways to scale

Research partners focused on four of five pathways to scale, as articulated in IDRC's Scaling Science (McLean, 2019). These pathways are not mutually exclusive, and research partners employed several to advance scaling impact.

The **program pathway** was a key pathway to scale for research projects. This pathway is defined as the development of a new program, or the replication, adaptation or expansion of an existing program, or quality improvements to an existing program as informed by evidence. The Back2School and Bridging Classes for OOSCY projects used analysis of best practices, gaps and limitations of current education options for OOSCY to test improvements that could be implemented across multiple contexts to scale the quality of programs offered. The Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners project tested quality enhancements to school-based practices to attract and retain students by addressing the significant gaps between existing policies and their implementation.

The **policy pathway** was the principal pathway to scale for the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs. This pathway uses evidence to inform the development of a new policy or change an existing policy, influence the replication or adaptation of a policy to a new jurisdiction, or expand the application of an existing policy. The project collected evidence on the impact and effectiveness of AEPs that are scaling or have the potential to scale across Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, and used that evidence to advocate for policy development, expansion and enhanced implementation to

reach broader numbers of OOSCY. For example, the project cited AEPs' transition rates to formal education of above 80 percent, their comparable or better learning outcomes in comparison with formal schools, and their cost-effectiveness as evidence of the relevance of these programs for scaling.

The Back2School and Bridging Classes for OOSCY projects also included elements of a policy pathway to scale by mapping the policy landscape and seeking to improve it. They pursued this in part by engaging local, regional and national government officials in dialogue and establishing a robust working group structure to support continued awareness and advocacy.

The **behaviour, practice and skills pathway** to scale is defined as an evidence-informed behaviour, practice or skill that is adopted and applied, through behaviour change instruction, practice standards and learning and training interventions, to teach new skills and improve pre-existing ones for the public good. This pathway was pursued by the Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners project. It sought to change social and cultural norms that result in non-attendance and dropout, particularly for girls and children with disabilities, and to empower communities to find their voice in advocating for improvements in education. Similarly, the Back2School project worked with communities, parents and guardians to change community and parental behaviours affecting school participation. This project, along with Bridging Classes for OOSCY, developed teachers' and facilitators' skills to enhance gender-transformative approaches in AEPs.

Finally, all projects engaged to some extent in the **methodology pathway** to scale by sharing evidence on the effectiveness of AEPs and school-based practices. They also fostered exchange among implementers, researchers, civil society networks and development partners across countries, and strengthened the ability of national and local policymakers and other stakeholders to use research findings and best practices. Broadly constituted, inter-sectoral policy learning working groups across West Africa are playing a pivotal role in conversations about how best to re-position AEPs as a credible pathway to achieve the overall goal of universal education access (Dalan Development Consultants, 2023).

8.2 Scaling strategies

Research partners used the following scaling strategies as part of their scaling plans. Not all were pursued in each project and the following list is not sequential, as strategies were pursued simultaneously.

Strengthening and adapting AEPs and school-based practices to demonstrate the effectiveness of quality programming on learners and their communities in making the case for scale.

Disseminating knowledge and evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of education options for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. Projects leveraged growing government interest in addressing the challenge of OOSCY to share knowledge and evidence. Several dissemination pathways were developed, including establishing multi-stakeholder working groups at local and national levels, delivering policy briefs, participating in conferences and establishing peer learning and exchange mechanisms with implementers, researchers, donors and governments.

Alliance and coalition building at local, regional, national and international levels to build support for addressing the OOSCY challenge and highlight the need for scale. Bridging Classes for OOSCY organized stakeholders within each country into groups at three levels, each with different roles and responsibilities for implementation, monitoring, knowledge mobilization, strategic decision-making and financing. Groups included local authorities, civil society organizations, ministries of education and technical and financial partners. The Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project worked closely with international stakeholders invested in issues of out-of-school children and scale, such as the Brookings Institution, Cambridge University's REAL Centre, Carleton University and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies Accelerated Education Working Group.

Policy engagement with government ministries and champions within ministries to build ownership and find opportunities to develop, expand or implement policies and guidance for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out. The Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project created an enabling environment for policy uptake and dialogue across all three countries. It established policy learning working groups in each country, comprised of government champions and civil society advocates. It developed strategic partnerships with like-minded coalitions such as Sierra Leone's Radical Inclusion Coalition and Ghana's National Education Campaign Coalition. CENF/VS centres in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Niger enjoyed frequent visits from national and local government officials to learn about and support their innovations (Fondation Karanta, January 2023).

Community engagement to identify OOSCY, empower and strengthen communities' collective voice in seeking quality education, mobilize resources for AEPs, identify and recruit facilitators and challenge norms that discourage school participation. The Scalability of Programs for OOSCY project, for example, engaged education innovators, mayors' offices, education officers, principals and students enrolled in schools. They also established community action groups to advocate for quality education and broadened their outreach to other influential community members, such as religious leaders.

Capacity strengthening of various stakeholders to deliver quality education innovations, monitor programs for OOSCY and understand and use evidence. The Back2School project focused on strengthening the capacity of teachers, facilitators, local government officials and communities to improve the quality of AEPs and address education challenges. It further supported education officers so they could play an enhanced supervisory and instructional leadership role.

Resource mobilization to unlock government resources, external funding and community contributions to implement education innovations and support scale. In Sierra Leone, evidence from the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs project was used to mobilize and allocate funding from the Qatar Foundation and the World Bank to expand AEPs. In Ghana and Tanzania, projects sought to mobilize existing government allocations and policy commitments for AEPs.

Regardless of the strategies pursued, research partners encountered several structural constraints that impeded the ability to scale the impact of AEPs and school-based practices.

Lack of financing was the most significant constraint to quality improvements, scaling and sustainability of the options tested. Most AEPs in research projects were funded by international donors. Even when they are included in national education budgets, funding is often limited. In Tanzania, where the COBET program comprises one of the longest running government-funded AEPs, financing has substantially declined (see Box 3) (Telli & Kwayu, 2022). In Ghana, the government committed one percent of its national education budget to the CBE program, which is far lower than the financing needed to ensure AEPs for the out-of-school population. The inclusion of AEPs under the Ministries of Adult and Non-formal Education excludes these programs from some of the measures established to ensure the right to education for all learners, such as per capita funding.

Communities, for the most part, are unable to meet the full costs of sustaining AEPs due to poverty and insecurity. In Nigeria, for example, with the withdrawal of UK government financing for AEPs, the community was able to sustain only five of 300 centres (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, April 2023b).

BOX 3: FINANCING COBET IN TANZANIA

The COBET program in Tanzania has operated across the country for the last 23 years and has experienced many successes. When COBET started, it had a budget for teachers and paraprofessionals of TZS50,000 (USD22) per month. That budget was eventually reduced to TZS20,000 (USD7) per month. Many stakeholders interviewed conclude there is no budget available for COBET.

The government provides capitation grants to mainstream schools based on their pupil enrolment; however, COBET learners are not included in these per capita calculations. Head teachers in schools running COBET programs have to use the existing capitation grants to cover COBET pupils, putting further financial strain on both formal schooling and the COBET program and providing a disincentive for host schools and teachers alike. Meanwhile, capitation grants are in decline, with the average grant per student in the Mara region only 55% of the planned amount.

These challenges have contributed to a decline in COBET enrolments, even as out-of-school numbers continue to climb.

Source: *Graça Machel Trust, April 26, 2023.*

Lack of an enabling policy environment is a second constraint. Policies, guidelines and standards are considered necessary to set norms and practices and ensure consistency and quality across programs. Policies are also needed to ensure the availability and equitable distribution of resources. Countries engaged in the four research projects are at different levels in terms of an enabling policy environment. In Kenya, the Ministry of Education is in the process of developing a policy and guidelines for AEPs and there is no specific curriculum in place. In Ethiopia, the policy framework for accelerated learning falls under the Adult and Non-Formal Education Framework, which is broad in scope and covers learners aged 15 to 60. However, Ethiopia has well-developed models in practice and recently finalized the Accelerated Learning Programme Implementation Guideline, which defines the scope, objectives, principles, target groups and responsibilities of stakeholders for accelerated learning programs. Tanzania is the only country within the Back2School project with a national policy on accelerated education, a national curriculum, and national standards and guidelines (Graça Machel Trust, April 2023). However, as illustrated in Box 3, having a policy framework and guidelines does not guarantee effective implementation.

Governments have supported AEPs in non-financial ways. These include using government schools for accelerated learning centres, assisting in integrating out-of-school graduates into the formal education system, running sensitization campaigns with local government and community leaders, and facilitating the implementation of donor/NGO projects. State-level governments have also contributed furniture and other supports, conducted sensitization campaigns and monitored AEPs.

The role of communities in the decision to scale is a third constraint. This role is hindered by the challenge of illiteracy, and communities are insufficiently empowered to advocate for quality education for their children. In Nepal, for example, local parents are unaware of their community's role and responsibility towards schools, and of schools' accountability towards communities. Parents have little understanding of how schools work and are less aware of school management committees and parent-teacher association functions (9.4% of parents have some awareness and information on school management committees and 3.3% have awareness and information on parent-teacher associations). Despite relatively strong interest (41.5%) in being part of these groups, only 35% of parents believed their concerns would be listened to and valued, and only 3.3% of parents made suggestions or complaints to schools (Thapa, Poudyal, Shrestha & Adhikary, 2023). In Ghana, rural communities lack awareness and voice to advocate for their children's right to education and a more equitable allocation of education resources.

Insufficient data is a fourth constraint to scaling. There is growing knowledge available on the scope of the OOSCY challenge, particularly due to UNICEF, UNESCO and government census data. However, OOSCY are not always included in EMIS. There is limited data provided on performance of accelerated education graduates. This lack of data makes it hard to make the case for expanding accelerated learning programs or to determine how solutions are performing. The OOSCY mapping studies, cost-effectiveness and AEP tracker studies now available in West Africa demonstrate to government and development partners that AEPs are the most effective approach to tackling the out-of-school challenge and addressing foundational learning. They are being considered by some governments (e.g. Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana) as a second education pathway to address the crisis.

8.3 Lessons learned on scaling impact

Research partners provided the following reflections on the piloting, testing and assessment of education innovations to help future efforts to scale education options for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out.

Interventions should serve as catalysts for what schools and communities are doing, not replacements. Projects should build on existing knowledge and resources rather than develop parallel programs and processes. For example, the Back2School project was minimally prescriptive with local and community partners in terms

of what to do and how to do it. While this approach created initial discomfort, country implementation teams embraced the approach. This resulted in different interventions, tested across each of the three countries engaged in the project that reflected their context, challenges and needs. Some communities have used their own resources to carry forward the work, such as establishing a WhatsApp group among community members and teachers in Kenya to track and bring out-of-school girls back to school (Graça Machel Trust, 2023a).

In Nepal, the Scalability of Programs for OOSCY and At-Risk Learners project leveraged existing government policies on extra-curricular activities and mechanisms for school/community/parental engagement that had been insufficiently implemented, to demonstrate the impact of quality improvements. This also contributed to the cost-effectiveness of the approach — a critical factor in scaling. At the same time, the project recognized the need for ongoing resources and stakeholder capacity-building to sustain the gains achieved (Thapa & Shrestha, 2023).

Collaborative relationships at school and community levels were critical to long-term sustainability and success. Developing a shared understanding of learners' challenges, co-creating solutions and sharing evidence-based learning supported this process. In Ghana, the most sustainable CBE programs were those where local communities took ownership and contributed resources, infrastructure and ongoing support. In Nepal, in addition to engaging community members and schools, it became essential to engage influential leaders and religious figures. These leaders played a significant role in influencing community mindsets regarding education (Thapa & Shrestha, 2023).

Partnerships with government must be built across multiple levels. To scale in Nigeria, the Comparative Study of AEPs and GFMs research partner suggests that state governments can use a proportion of the federal matching grant to fund AEPs and can ensure budgetary allocations across all states as a strategy to address OOSCY. During mapping studies, the Back2School project initially engaged with Tanzanian national officials regarding COBET curriculum review, but found this was not possible. However, discussions with regional and district officials revealed it was possible to harmonize the COBET curriculum at sub-national levels. This experience is now, in turn, informing review of the curriculum at national levels (Graça Machel Trust, 2023a).

In Nepal, despite the policy requirement for parent-teacher associations and school management committees, these bodies have not been effectively enacted. There were no related activities or funding available in pilot communities. Municipal wards are key to sustaining these initiatives, and in turn are influenced by community demand (Thapa & Shrestha, 2023).

Support for OOSCY requires coordination between ministries of education and others with responsibility for children. In Sierra Leone, many of the barriers faced by OOSCY fall outside the mandate of the Ministry of Education. This requires engagement and coordination with other ministries, departments and agencies responsible for child well-being, social protection, and health (Dalan Development Consultants, November 2023).

Data and evidence can play a key role in scaling impact. Data enables planning and weighing options based on credible evidence. In the Back2School project, transparency and credible data helped win the goodwill and support of local stakeholders. Research partners were called on by governments in Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania to provide input into policies, guidance and standards for AEPs, due to their expertise (Graça Machel Trust, November 2023). In Sierra Leone, ongoing data is needed to understand the scale of OOSCY across the country, to map implementers and to support coordination across stakeholders (Dalan Development Consultants, November 2023).

There is a need for ongoing coordination, awareness raising and advocacy on OOSCY. In Nigeria, a working group was established with state, federal and non-state actors to build and sustain commitment to this issue and provide greater oversight and evaluation. Some successes have been registered, such as the ongoing development of a curriculum for AEPs (Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, December 2022). In Sierra Leone, similar efforts to coordinate actors engaged in AEPs, and provide evidence on the effectiveness of AEPs, resulted in the development of a national education strategy for OOSCY and has attracted USD25 million in investment by Qatar (Dalan Development Consultants, November 2023).

Greater analysis of cost-effectiveness is required. One of the least researched areas is the cost of alternative education programs and practices. As noted earlier, a cost-effectiveness analysis of CBE programs in Nigeria and Ghana found that program costs were more than one-fifth lower than those of formal schooling, excluding the cost of teacher training in formal education (Associates for Change, November 2023). In Nepal, Kathmandu University determined that it cost NPR14,929 (USD112) to decrease the OOSCY rate by one percent and NPR2,331 (USD17) to bring one out-of-school child back into the education system through parental engagement campaigns. Further, it cost NPR4,951 (USD37) to increase attendance rates by one percent in targeted communities and NPR6,739 (USD50) to retain one student in school, using extra-curricular activities. In Bangladesh, the incremental cost of reducing school dropout risk and improving mathematics scores was BDT6,388 (USD57) (Akhter et al., 2023). In Nepal, Kathmandu University determined that it cost NPR14,929 (USD112) to decrease the OOSCY rate by one percent and NPR2,331 (USD17) to bring one OOSC back into the education system through parental engagement campaigns. Further, it cost NPR4,951 (USD37) to increase attendance rates by one percent in targeted communities and NPR6,739 (USD50) to retain one student in school, using extra-curricular activities.

In Bangladesh, the incremental cost of reducing school dropout risk and improving mathematics scores was BDT6,388 (USD57) (Akhter et al., 2023). These analyses only begin to scratch the surface of the cost-effectiveness analysis required to support governments in their scaling decisions: they need to better understand the overall scope of financing needed and the most cost-effective strategies and approaches to invest in.

A longer timeframe is needed to test new approaches. Most innovations were tested for periods from three to 12 months, partly due to challenges related to COVID-19 school closures and measures. Stakeholders felt more time was needed to understand the full outcome of these approaches. In the Back2School project, implementation schedules were significantly shortened due to COVID-19 and working with government officials took longer than expected. The ability to capture results, share and validate evidence with stakeholders, and disseminate evidence widely required more time (Graça Machel Trust, 2023a). In the Bridging Classes for OOSCY project, implementation was insufficient to determine the long-term effects of the improved model; however, several communities have re-enrolled students, signifying their commitment to continue (Fondation Karanta, January 2023).

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCALING EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR OOSCY AND THOSE AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

The following recommendations emerged from across the four research projects. They are intended for government officials, donors, educators and others seeking to improve enrolment, retention and completion rates for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out, enhance their learning and lifelong outcomes, and scale successful innovations that contribute to these outcomes.

1. **Mainstream alternative education programs and practices within government budgets to enable scale and ensure their long-term sustainability.** In many cases, alternative education programs and practices are solely reliant on community, NGO and donor funding. This puts their stability and sustainability at risk. Government financing of AEPs must be sufficient to meet the needs of large, and sometimes growing, OOSCY populations. Even in countries that have made budgetary commitments, such as Ghana, Sierra Leone and Tanzania, resources should be increased. Policy formulation by federal ministries of education can form the basis for inclusion in the national budget and confer a mandate to lower-level jurisdictions, which can help unlock additional resources.
2. **Develop harmonized and gender-responsive policies, guidelines, quality standards and curricula for AEPs, reflecting key features and practices that have proven effective.** Evidence from the research projects can support the development of AEP policies, guidelines, standards and curricula, and inform plans for scaling. Policies are needed to institutionalize commitment, allocate financing and align stakeholders under common objectives. Evidence-based guidelines and standards will enhance harmonization of delivery approaches and the replication of successful approaches. Curricular alignment will facilitate transitions to formal education and enable learning accreditation.
3. **Support awareness raising and enforcement of laws on child marriage, child trafficking, child labour and child protection policies.** Schools and educators have an important role to play as agents of social change in communicating and enhancing understanding of these measures and adherence to them.
4. **Strengthen the linkages between AEPs and formal schools and expand learning pathways for accelerated learners beyond primary education.** This would require more formalized policies and guidelines for transitions between AEPs, formal schooling or further learning pathways, including vocational training. Attention should be given to adopting, within the formal education system, key features of AEPs that contribute to their success and are desired by learners and communities. These include learner-centred pedagogies, flexibility, psychosocial support and

support for non-fee education expenses such as teaching and learning materials, hygiene supplies and transportation. Head teachers can play a key role in creating a supportive environment for accelerated education graduates and implementing innovative school-based practices.

Education innovators should continue to collaborate with formal schools, government and community stakeholders. AEP learners are not homogenous: they vary by age, gender, socio-economic background and context. More AEPs should broaden learning pathways beyond primary education to include transitions to secondary education, vocational training or directly to the job market for older AEP youth.

5. **Within formal schools, reinforce programs that support access and retention for vulnerable learners and prevent dropout.** Interventions that have proven their potential to reduce dropout rates in schools include: extra-curricular programs to enhance engagement and belonging of at-risk students; community and parental engagement with teachers and schools; teacher capacity-building in gender-responsive pedagogies and ICT-enabled instruction; supplementary programs for learners; and inclusive education for children and youth with disabilities. Additional strategies include stipend programs for girls, school feeding programs, inclusive infrastructure and construction of new schools and classrooms that are closer to students.
6. **Improve school infrastructure and support accessible and inclusive education for learners with disabilities.** Children and youth with disabilities are over-represented within out-of-school populations, with greater effort needed to overcome the many challenges these learners face at home, in their schools and their communities. This includes supportive policies, accessible infrastructure and sanitation facilities, training for teachers and school leaders, flexible curriculum, assistive technologies, cash transfers or other forms of financial support to meet the increased costs of education, and partnerships with civil society organizations that play a key role in supporting learners with disabilities.

   Schools in rural areas in particular have inadequate infrastructure, including insufficient classrooms, inadequate sanitation facilities and limited teaching and learning materials and equipment. These conditions are a significant disincentive to school enrolment and retention. In addition, many of the supply-side factors that lead to dropout and drive learners to AEPs remain present after reintegration in formal schooling. Governments can work with international development partners and communities to identify innovative ways to fill these gaps, including affirmative action investments in underserved areas and incentives for communities to improve school infrastructure.

7. **Invest in teacher and facilitator recruitment, training and professional development programs, with a special focus on women.** Passionate, committed and skilled teachers and facilitators who speak local languages, are embedded in remote, rural and insecure communities, and are skilled in learner-centred pedagogical approaches are crucial to the success of AEPs and school-based practices for vulnerable learners. Governments should recruit, remunerate and deploy teachers and facilitators to AEPs and schools with over-age learners. Opportunities for continuous professional development and teacher well-being are key factors in incentivizing and retaining teachers and facilitators within AEPs. They need training and professional development that is relevant to their needs, allows for collaboration with colleagues, and provides opportunities for them to lead and have agency.

   Continuous professional development should focus on refining teachers' and facilitators' skills in meeting the unique needs of out-of-school learners. This may include working with older learners, providing guidance and counselling for victims of trauma and gender-based violence, and engaging parent and community leaders. Teachers and facilitators should be trained in gender-responsive pedagogy and inclusive education approaches.

8. **Collect comprehensive data on OOSCY and AEPs to support continued evidence generation, learning and uptake of evidence, including on how gender intersects with other social and demographic factors.** Data management systems for out-of-school learners are sparse and incomplete. Data on OOSCY and AEPs should become a core component of national EMIS to better allocate resources and to track out-of-school numbers, transition rates from AEPs to formal school systems and progress in learning performance and transitions. More evidence is needed to demonstrate how gender-related challenges intersect with broader contextual factors (such as household poverty, pastoralism, insecurity, faith, pregnancy, early marriage and gender-based violence). More disaggregated data is needed on other forms of exclusion such as gender, disabilities, socio-economic status, ethnicity and language, geography, age and more. Education innovators should improve and strengthen their data management systems to enhance the evidence base for scaling AEPs and school-based prevention practices.

9. **Put communities at the centre of improvements of education options for OOSCY and those at risk of dropping out.** Governments, development partners and NGOs need to partner with parents and communities to build the commitment and ownership needed to bring children back to school and scale the impact of these programs. This engagement should ideally happen at the program design phase. This helps to ensure the relevance of education programming, identify barriers and gaps for OOSCY, and contextualize expectations, curriculum, timing, language and practical skills. This engagement is particularly important for shifting entrenched socio-cultural barriers, such as child marriage, that keep girls and boys out of school.

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