While in many ways the COVID-19 pandemic has made our global interdependence and shared experiences more apparent, this crisis has also highlighted and exacerbated stark inequalities. From uneven access to healthcare and housing, to disparities in education, technology, basic safety, and equal protection under the law, we know that race, gender, and all other facets of identity greatly affect a person’s life and prevent some from accessing resources and opportunities freely available to others. We also know that education is one of our most powerful tools to combat inequality. That’s why we’re doubling down on our commitment to equity and designing solutions that provide all young people, no matter where they live or the barriers they face, with the skills to build a bright future for themselves. (Continued on page 4)
Rapid Evaluation for a Reshaped World

One of the most important lessons for social impact organizations and entrepreneurs in Educate! is that good intentions alone do not create impact. That’s why we’ve worked hard to build an impact-obsessed culture that aims to create meaningful, measurable impact on life outcomes for youth. Our rigorous evaluations help us better understand Educate!’s impact as well as how to strengthen it.

When the coronavirus began to spread, we had to adapt our monitoring and evaluation approach to a new set of program strategies. School closures presented a pressing need to develop new tools and systems for real-time data collection and rapid model development and improvement. Our proven school model to distance learning has required us to experiment, iterate, and evaluate our solutions much faster than ever before. We believe our models will be strengthened by these new evaluation strategies, and we will emerge from the pandemic with even better tools to create and measure impact for youth.

Recognizing a Need to Learn Faster

Rigorous, externally-run Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), like those we have completed in Uganda and Rwanda, are the gold standard for impact evaluation, but the process of collecting and analyzing data takes a very long time. As a result, it is difficult to make evidence-based design updates to our model as quickly and frequently as we would like. We identified the need for more rapid evaluation strategies before the pandemic, and the need became even more pressing when the pandemic forced schools to close. We began designing our new distance learning model knowing that our ability to learn and make changes as quickly as possible would be crucial, and that our changes would only be as good as the evidence we had to support them.

Our team set out to construct a Rapid Impact Assessment system to facilitate faster, more iterative learning. This tool allows us not only to run traditional experiments comparing a treatment and a control group, but also A/B testing — a comparison of the impact of one design option against another. This lets us see what works and how it is working, and target the most successful elements to generate the greatest impact on youth. Where a typical RCT could take years to return results, this system can provide valuable model insights in just a few months. In the era of COVID-19, this tool has generated critical information about how to quickly transition core components of our proven model to a distance-friendly format.

Part of changing how quickly we can collect and evaluate data was identifying variables we could measure quickly — indicators of future skill development, improved gender equity, increased education attainment, and improved livelihoods. For example, when youth set goals and make decisions or community development plans, express ideas clearly, and work together with peers and community members to achieve their goals — this suggests they are forming the skills that will facilitate improved life outcomes. In measuring these variables, we can learn more about our possible long-term impact on youth in a shorter amount of time.

Targeting Pandemic-Era Impact with Rapid Assessment

Since launching the new Rapid Impact Assessment system, we have been able to test the design and delivery of our new distance learning model, and make improvements as we develop it, rather than waiting for the pilot model to end, awaiting impact evaluation results, and then making updates. Instead, we set up pilot experiments to generate data that helps us iterate and make improvements almost immediately. For example, we learned through an A/B test in a product development sprint that calling participants’ caregivers to tell them about Educate!’s remote learning activities could *increase youth participation by 23%*, so we quickly integrated this targeted outreach into the model.

The main purpose of the Rapid Impact Assessment system going forward is to understand the impact of our programs on youth — what does participation in Educate! do for skill development and other life outcomes? With this tool, we are developing and tracking indicators of success that directly map to the life outcomes we are targeting and have observed in our RCTs: improved transferable skills, increased educational attainment, greater gender equity, and improved incomes and business ownership.

While Educate! has always been a learning organization, the unprecedented challenges of this year have strengthened our team’s ability to design new systems to help us better manage and monitor our impact on youth. So far, we have discovered that young people have been able and excited to learn remotely if they receive adequate support. As we continue to navigate this challenging time, we are looking forward to iterating and refining this new system so that we can strengthen our impact on youth, both during the pandemic and after.

As schools begin to reopen, Samuel is looking forward to sharing the hands-on experience he’s acquired during the pandemic with his peers:

> From the experience I have now, I can only envision so much more for myself and other young people, especially for those in the Business Club at school. Starting small with limited resources has taught me patience and discipline of trusting the process. Now I appreciate the meaning of this phrase.

While many things remain uncertain these days, some things remain the same, and that is the tenacity and determination of young people, who continuously inspire us.
Youth are disproportionately experiencing the social and economic shocks brought on by the coronavirus, as young people are more likely to be enrolled in education or training or employed in insecure, temporary, or informal employment. Now more than ever, youth need to be gaining 21st century skills that will support their resilience and recovery to this pandemic. Yet, many youth in East Africa do not have the infrastructure or resources to transition their studies to online learning: just 12% of households have internet access at home. That’s why we set out to develop an innovative new distance learning model specifically designed for youth in East Africa. This model leverages low-tech and low-cost delivery mechanisms, such as radio and mobile phone platforms, to bridge the learning and skills gap in education systems which has been widened by the coronavirus.

Targeting Gender Equity During a Pandemic

Past crises show that girls face heightened challenges during pandemics and severe economic downturns, as well as a host of new barriers to quality education and employment, including increased sexual exploitation, early marriage, and adolescent pregnancy. This prompted us to ask ourselves: How can we target Educate!’s significant impact on gender equity outcomes during a pandemic?

As a first step, we are separating the data we collect on our distance learning solutions by gender and tracking differences in participation and achievement between boys and girls. This allows us to identify areas where girls might be disadvantaged and design solutions to address them. For example, we learned that boys are more likely to own their own phones than girls — making it more challenging for female learners to participate. We also learned that many girls have been expected to take on new responsibilities at home, giving them less time in their day to prioritize learning while schools are closed.

In response to these learnings, we’ve put the following strategies in place:
- Facilitating all-girl conference calls in an effort to create safe spaces for girls to discuss gender-related issues that have come up during the pandemic
- Adding a second set of remote lessons to radio and SMS later in the day for learners with limited time, conflicting responsibilities, or those who may have to share devices
- Connecting youth directly to Educate! Mentors over the phone for 1:1 support and to make up missed lessons

Expanding Impact to Out-of-School Youth

When schools closed, suddenly all youth were disconnected from their teachers and classmates and the world was reminded of the consequences of school closures on young people’s lives. However, many youth were already out of school before COVID-19: in the region, about 50% of youth are not enrolled in secondary school.

Access to education is an equity issue, and Educate! has been working since 2019 to extend our reach outside national education systems by developing new solutions for out-of-school youth. Focused on sector-specific skills coupled with leadership and entrepreneurship training, this new bootcamp-style model aims to create a market of alternative pathways to employment for youth who cannot afford to attend secondary school. With the outbreak of coronavirus, we’ve pivoted to deliver this model to youth virtually, and the curriculum has been updated with content on coronavirus safety.

Our commitment to designing solutions with equity front of mind is as critical now as it has ever been, and we can always strive to do more and do better. Even youth with ample support and access to resources are experiencing a loss of learning due to this crisis, and those without it will face even greater challenges in their recovery. As we continue to iterate, experiment, and build on Educate!’s equity-focused approaches, it is our hope that our solutions will provide youth, both in and out of school, with the skills they need to overcome the inequities they face during and after the pandemic.