

Reflections from the 2026 Yidan Prize Conference



1. To start, can you tell us about the Yidan Prize Conference and why it is considered an important platform in global education?

Daniel: The Yidan Prize Conference is organised by the Yidan Prize Foundation. This philanthropic organisation recognises and gives awards annually to individuals and teams delivering transformative change in education, research and development. This year's edition gathered over 200+ delegates from multiple countries around the world, including ministers, researchers, practitioners, and funders from across Africa and beyond. The conference created a platform where evidence, policy, and funding commitments meet in the same room, and where the conference announces major commitments to advance education, rather than simply discussing intentions. This is also the first-ever Yidan Prize conference in Africa, which aims to identify what is going well and celebrate success in the field of education research and development. The conference is a platform built on shared experience and expertise, where education is treated as an ecosystem setting the way for lifelong opportunity, instead of a series of stand-alone interventions.

2. What overarching theme or central question shaped this year's conference?

Daniel: The theme for this year is titled "Unleashing Africa's Potential: The Role of Education in a New Era of Development." The central question running through the sessions was basically, with the wealth of data and evidence now available on promising innovations that work and especially around foundational learning, how

do we move from pilot to scale? Albert Nsengiyumva of ADEA mentioned that 26 years ago we didn't have the kind of data we have now. Our greatest need now is getting stronger government buy-in, involvement, and ownership, because sustainability and scale ultimately depend on countries embedding proven interventions into their own systems, not relying indefinitely on donor-funded projects. One key takeaway from the ARED team that stuck with me is that the evidence space is saturated, but the adoption space is what now needs to be improved. That gap between proof and practice was the recurring statement running through almost every session, and government ownership kept coming up as the answer.

Katrina: A central question of many of the sessions I attended was: "What has to change before evidence turns into policy?" In the Research to Policy Roundtable, we discussed the limitations of data, what indicators built for other contexts fail to measure, and whether there are community-based relationships and outcomes specific to indigenous African societies that are also relevant measures of success. During a panel on cross-sectoral partnerships, Bruce Au, Secretary-General of the Yidan Prize Foundation said, "Collaboration moves at the speed of trust." I think this quote highlights an important theme about the need for trust among education system actors, including funders, governments, and implementers, to use evidence for policy change and to coordinate efforts. Even when an education intervention is proven and adopted, it can still underperform under the stresses and complexities of a real system.



3. What emerging trends in global education were most evident during the conference?

Daniel: A few things stood out for me during the sessions. First, structured pedagogy, breaking teaching down into scripted daily and weekly lesson plans so teachers know exactly what to teach and how, came up repeatedly as the practical bridge between evidence and classroom impact. Second, bilingual mother-tongue instruction: sessions on Wolof-French teaching models showed a 20% improvement in participation and outcomes when children learned in a language they actually understood. Third, technology as a coaching tool rather than a replacement for teachers: WhatsApp groups coaching teachers remotely, hybrid learning materials delivered by mobile phone. And Dr David Sengeh from Sierra Leone framed the tension well: the open question is whether AI and technology in this new era will lift the marginalised up, or leave them further behind. Technology has to be built to our advantage, not the other way round. Other points that stood out include multilingual foundational learning, which uses children's home or environment languages as a bridge into literacy, was featured strongly, anchored by ARED's work in multilingual foundational learning. There was strong emphasis on cross-sectoral partnerships linking education with health, nutrition, climate, and economic opportunity, rather than treating education as a standalone sector. Evidence-to-scale was a dominant topic, showcasing what works to improve education outcomes and pointing to the promise of large-scale system transformation. And finally, AI and education technology surfaced as a cross-cutting lens applied across thematic sessions, alongside gender equality and inclusion.

Katrina: Three trends stood out to me. The first is that social-emotional learning (SEL) is foundational for successful learning. A study of 75 no-fee schools in and around Cape Town found that SEL skills at school entry were highly predictive of later literacy and math scores, measured with ELOM, EGRA, and EGMA assessments two years on. The theory supporting this is that meaningful relationships with teachers and peers build a child's ability to ask for help and self-regulate, both important elements of academic success. The second is the need to interrogate the use of AI in education in Africa, particularly as developed nations begin to roll back the use of screens in schools. As one panellist noted, AI is technology's "fourth go at trying to make tech work for education," following television, One Laptop per Child and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Even as AI offers the opportunity to personalise instruction at scale, we need to investigate whether an ed tech intervention truly responds to education needs or is being touted as another magic bullet for education. The third trend was the economic framing of education as human capital investment for dignified work and economic growth, which I think warrants some critique. Treating people primarily as future labour market inputs risks flattening a deeper purpose of education: helping people to hold governments accountable, strengthen their communities, and raise the next generation.

4. Which conversations at the conference resonated most strongly with TEP Centre's work?

Daniel: I was fortunate to attend the foundational learning sessions. The first panel laid out something related to our work at TEP Centre, which is that teachers are a key determinant of learning. Every child has the capacity to learn; the job is to improve teaching by improving teacher capacity through structured pedagogy and consistent classroom supervision, where supervisors observe, support, and collect real-time classroom data that feeds back into the next class. Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili pointed out that everyone must bring data to show what actually works, and that is exactly how we at TEP Centre engage with government partners.

Katrina: During a panel on the value of education for development, Angeline Murimirwa, CEO of CAMFED, said we need to “build movements, not monuments” and that “government is the ultimate provider,” emphasizing that interventions need to transcend individuals and change systems, as well as involve and strengthen government ownership.

TEP Centre’s 2019 Integrated Teachers Capacity Development Programme (ITCDP), an intervention aimed at strengthening teachers’ ability to interpret classroom-level data and adapt their teaching practices, was built on these principles. We designed the programme around teachers already working in 40 public primary schools across Akwa Ibom and Kaduna States, and treated them as the unit of change. Each of the three cycles moved from a data-literacy needs exercise, to school-level report cards and reflection on pupil learning, to strategy workshops where teachers revised their own lesson plans and built their own tracking tools. By the final cycle, the initiative was embedded in school routines, and schools reported more consistent use of learning data and an observable shift toward learner-centred instruction, providing a scalable framework for sustained improvements in teaching and learning.



5. How do the themes discussed at the conference reinforce or challenge TEP's current approach to education systems strengthening? Did it highlight opportunities to deepen work in research, evidence, policy influence, or implementation?

Daniel: It reinforced the basic rationale of systems strengthening as Angeline Murimirwa of CAMFED put it, governments are the ultimate vehicle for creating scale, love them or hate them, they are the key, and you have to work with them. Mamadou Amadou Ly of ARED added that design has to be done with the ministry,

not around it. Where it challenged me most was on the "demand side" — building up the habit of asking, every day, what did children actually learn today, especially the most vulnerable ones. That's a discipline TEP Centre can sharpen, using assessment data not just to monitor, but actively to advocate, the way Senegal's language-mapping and assessment data were used to bring the Ministry in on increased instructional time and teacher capacity building.

Katrina: The clearest opportunity for TEP to deepen our work is in policy influence. The discussion of country-specific human capital data platforms reinforced for me that data alone doesn't shift policy. What changes policy is what happens after the data is published, and LEARNigeria is a useful example. Findings were released as open-access datasets and state report cards, and then were debated in more than 30 town hall dialogues with State Universal Basic Education Boards, civil society organizations, and community leaders, putting the data in front of the people it concerned and creating an environment of public accountability. This component of translating data beyond data production is something we hope to build more deliberately into every initiative.

6. From the conversations at the conference, what key lessons are most relevant for Nigeria's education sector today, and Africa in general?

Daniel: The language-of-instruction lesson speaks loudest for me. One speaker said it clearly as relational to our experience in Kaduna: children are often taught in a language they don't speak at home, and in some cases, teachers themselves don't fully understand the local language of instruction, which actively misleads learners. That is not an abstract problem for Nigeria; it is what happens daily in our classrooms. The other lesson is about institutionalisation: the fixes that work—structured lesson guides, remediation, teacher coaching—are only sustainable when governments adopt and own them, rather than treating them as donor-funded pilots that quietly end without sticking to the educational system.

Katrina: The key lesson that stood out to me was about learning gains lagging behind years of schooling, a gap described as sharper in West Africa and among female learners than elsewhere on the continent. The learning crisis is not new to us; LEARNigeria was implemented to make this gap visible at the household level. However, hearing it named as a regional pattern rather than a Nigeria-specific problem is a reminder that the tools already built in multilingual assessment and citizen-led data collection, could be doing more work regionally than they currently are.

7. What was your biggest takeaway from the conference?

Daniel: Intentional investment in teacher training is something that is essential and needed in Nigeria. Every scalable success story shared—the ARED bilingual model, the Côte d'Ivoire first-school learning reforms—had the same pattern: structured lesson plans, trained teachers, and supervisors who coach rather than just inspect.

As one panelist said plainly, structuring a teacher's guide well is not as straightforward as it looks; it takes real work to make teaching and learning that simple for a classroom teacher to carry out.

Katrina: My biggest takeaway was a response to the question: "What gives you hope?" Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Founder and President of Human Capital Africa, answered by connecting to this idea of "doing the right thing unashamedly." Despite funding cuts to the development sector, particularly education, there were representatives of so many funders, implementers, and governments at the conference, sharing their work and making efforts to collaborate.

Doing the right thing unashamedly, to me, means African organizations and voices need to be at the helm of these efforts, which is where positionality is also key. Dr. Ezekwesili mentioned that being outside of self is important to design well: design improves when it's led by people whose own experience gives them empathy for those the work is meant to serve. Doing the right thing unashamedly means understanding your positionality and stepping up or stepping back accordingly.

8. If you could summarise your experience at the conference in one sentence, what would it be?

Daniel: Africa, and Nigeria in particular, needs to strengthen its use of evidence to champion the cause for education development and quality, because as one speaker reminded us, education powers human capability, and without it, every other sector underperforms.

Katrina: The conference was a wonderful opportunity for TEP Centre to meet and reunite with people and organizations working to improve education on the continent. It was also a pleasure to attend the West African Partnership for Education Quality hub (WAPEQ) meeting in person. WAPEQ brings together PAL Network's Senegal, Mali and Nigeria members to coordinate citizen-led assessment work and funding strategy across the sub-region.

