



STRATEGIC FREIRE AT THE EDUCATIONAL EDGE: TOWARDS A NEW ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR YOUTH EDUCATION IN THE (POST-) COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract

A unique non-formal education program (NFE), certified to 10th grade level, is the result of creative collaboration between a governmental organization – the Jordanian Ministry of Education – and a non-governmental organization, Questscope. Institutional partnership responsibilities were allocated to meet criteria for formal certification and to introduce holistic participatory learning. Certification allows access to secondary academic and technical/vocational opportunities for tens of thousands of previously excluded out-of-school youth 13 and older. NFE learners are essentially volunteer clients who will not attend if they are not satisfied with their experience. The participatory learning approach of Paulo Freire is uniquely appropriate for these youth – especially during and post-COVID-19 – and has been adapted by Questscope in a theory of change including significant emphasis on adult-youth partnership, dialectical (not didactic) learning, and flexibility that increases agency of learners. This is a “prosocial” model in which positive individual changes and appropriate institutional responses are reinforced by supportive policy, increasing the sustainability of impact.

Keywords: *Freire; Non-Formal Education; Jordan; Critical Pedagogy; Mentorship; Youth.*

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I. Introduction

Young people around the world have seen their education immensely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2021, UNICEF reported that learners had lost a total of 1.8 *trillion* hours of learning as a result of school closures, and 77 million children missed nearly all in-person learning between March 2020 and September 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). Students – more so than anyone else – sense the pandemic’s brutal impact on their education. They recognize that they have lost months or years of learning, that it will be difficult to catch-up to where they should be, and that if and when they *do* return to school – especially in low and middle income countries – they are unlikely to receive a quality education. In too many communities around the world, schools are unable to impart to learners adequate foundational knowledge and skills due to lack of material resources, unprepared teachers, unsuitable curricula, highly didactic pedagogies, and the absence of holistic, supportive educational ecosystems that assist learners with the emotional and social challenges in their backgrounds, while also building on their strengths and interests.

While the pandemic may be unprecedented in terms of the *number* of young people around the world who have had their schooling disrupted, this phenomenon of learners losing months or years of education – including in many cases while enrolled in and attending school – is not a new experience for peripheralized youth on the margins of society. For decades, millions of students have learned that formal education does not represent time well-spent in pursuit of their goals. Young people in low-resource contexts constantly face competing priorities, opportunity costs, and difficult decisions vis-à-vis how to prepare themselves for the future they want. Formal schooling may sometimes be the best option to bring about that future, but not always. When it isn’t, young people have found, and will continue to find, other alternatives that best serve their ever-shifting needs and priorities – not all of which will be positive for themselves or for society (Kaffenberger, Sobol & Spindelham, 2021). They are at risk of being left behind completely by “legacy” education systems (Pritchett, 2013) that were never designed for them, but in which they are forced to survive instead of thrive.

It is possible to make a significant paradigm shift in how these young people learn in order to bring them back from the edge onto which current education systems are pushing them. We must move beyond the static, one-way, formal “banking system” (Freire, 1970) embodied in formal education systems around the world – and also shattered by COVID-19. We can turn instead to a dynamic model of education designed to be shaped by learners’ own interests, experiences, and agency – one that surrounds young people with others who deeply care about them. Substantial research has shown that self-directed learning (Brookfield, 2009), agency (Cook-Sather, 2020), and belonging (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020) in educational environments contributes to learning outcomes, especially for marginalized learners.

In particular, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire offers an alternative paradigm for re-engaging youth on the margins. Freire’s approach – first outlined in his seminal 1968 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – emphasized learner agency, partnerships with adult mentors, and dialogue-based learning and discovery that is driven by learners’ own curiosity and experiences (Freire, 1970). While widely recognized as potentially transformative, Freire’s ideas are less frequently operationalized within the education space – and even less often for learners on the margins, or in crisis contexts such as the pandemic. One rare exception is a

partnership between the Ministry of Education in Jordan and the international NGO Questscope, which has operated in the country for over 30 years. Together, they have used Freirean pedagogies to design a Non-Formal Education (NFE) program to give formal school drop-outs and non-enrollers in Jordan a second chance to complete their education, establish a sense of social belonging, and to experience what it means to be valued by those around them (Magee & Pherali, 2019). The rest of this essay explores the design and purpose of the NFE program in Jordan, in order to illuminate the strategic power of Freirean pedagogies for learners on the educational margins.

II. Bridging the Dichotomy of Opportunity for Out-Of-School Youth

Children and youth who have dropped out of the formal school system in Jordan – or never enrolled in the first place – face a difficult future. Young people who are out-of-school (OOS) for three years (*i.e.* who are three years older than their expected grade level) are not permitted to (re)enroll in formal education. Students who consequently do not complete 10th grade are unable to continue their secondary education, which is required in order for students to sit for the national university entrance exam, or to enter certified vocational training. In turn, young people's future academic and employment prospects are dramatically limited. While various informal education and recreational programs exist in Jordan, these options do not provide certification for participants, and in turn do not support access to further education or meaningful employment. There is a clear *dichotomy of opportunity* between OOS learners and their in-school peers. What's more, this dichotomy quickly carves a chasm between the set of futures possible for youth who persist in formal education, and those who choose not to.

Importantly, the formal education system is no longer a viable opportunity for OOS children and youth. They have different needs, experiences, and desires, compared to their peers who remained in formal education. In Jordan and many other countries around the world, however, the education system does not offer certified, alternative pathways that respond to the unique circumstances of OOS learners. To give these young people a second chance – to resolve this *dichotomy of opportunity* by providing *equitable* opportunities – in 2002 Questscope developed a certified, alternative, and accelerated education pathway that opens doors for youth, called the Non-Formal Education (NFE) program, as it is outside the formal, public education system. NFE is implemented in a joint partnership between Questscope and the Jordan Ministry of Education (MoE), for adolescent girls (ages 13-20) and boys (ages 13-18) who are unable, for any reason, to study in formal schools. NFE comprises three cycles, which typically take a learner 24 months to complete. There are no minimal entry requirements: learners need not have prior educational experience, formal or informal. Unlike other educational options for OOS youth in Jordan, NFE is certified – and is in fact the *only* certificated educational program outside the formal education system in Jordan. NFE provides graduates with the equivalent of a 10th grade certificate, which allows them to enroll in vocational training or continue secondary education through home-study. Since 2004, Questscope and the Jordan MoE have served over 25,000 youth through NFE.

NFE represents an innovative partnership between a government entity (the MoE) and a non-profit organization (Questscope) that collaborate in building on the strengths and capacities of each partner to deliver value and benefits for learners: the MoE is responsible for content – *what* students learn – and

Questscope is responsible for the learning methodology – *how* they learn. The MoE provides testing oversight and the curriculum for NFE, which is based on the national curriculum and adjusted to allow students to complete the program in a short time frame. The MoE also provides teachers (“Facilitators”) for NFE, all of whom already and continue to work in Jordanian public schools and have demonstrated subject matter competency. Meanwhile, Questscope provides technical support for implementing pedagogies in NFE that are informed by the insights of Paulo Freire and strengthened to respond to Middle Eastern youth. This approach allows educational Facilitators in NFE to respond to the learning interests and the social and emotional needs of each individual young person, providing new pathways for previously excluded youth for whom the formal education system is not a good fit. The adult-youth partnership and mentoring relationship between Facilitators and learners presents a unique and hopeful opportunity for peripheralized youth to move back from the edge.

However, in order to bring youth out from the margins – and to address the resulting *dichotomy of opportunity* – it is necessary to understand how they got there in the first place.

III. Drivers of the Dichotomy of Opportunity

Young people in Jordan are brimming with energy: full of thoughts, questions, hopes and worries. This energy and creativity emerge in an environment of “learning freedom”, if they are given the chance. But many youth in Jordan never have this chance in formal education: didactic, authoritative teaching requires repetitive, rote memorization of information, predicated by a rigid emphasis on curriculum content. Social and emotional learning is thus stymied, curtailing the development of critical thinking processes that are vital to further success in a rapidly changing world.

According to a 2015 observational study, only 24% of teachers in Jordanian public, formal schools were “excellent” at applying student-centered pedagogies in class, while 15% had very limited competencies in this area (Queen Rania Foundation, 2017). This suggests that pedagogies emphasizing critical thinking, participation, and student agency are likely in short supply in the average Jordanian classroom. In turn, what students learn is disconnected with what they want to learn. And the *how* of learning doesn’t excite them enough to tolerate the *what*. The consequence is boredom and alienation from the very system that should prepare them for their futures.

These pedagogies are abetted by overcrowded formal schools (many with four shifts per day) and inadequate infrastructure, which are often unable to properly accommodate large cohorts of refugee children. The learning environment in the Jordanian formal school system is also marred by misbehavior and violence – verbal and physical violence from peers, as well as implied violence that derives from authoritative teaching styles. In addition, refugee children face bullying in and around schools. In a context characterized by fear of real and implied violence, and lack of healthy relationships with adults and among peers, learning is blocked (UNICEF, 2020; Salem, 2018). Family members often have not completed school themselves and are frequently unaware of how to support their children as they grow up.

Young people have insight. They are aware when something isn’t worth delaying gratification, and they are willing to take initiative outside formal education. In the absence of strong connections to those around

them in school settings, young people feel untethered. They find “better” things to do – often working to support their families for boys; and complying, but not learning in the system, for girls. When they leave formal education, they are labeled “drop-outs.” But in reality, they’ve been dropped by schools and systems that couldn’t respond to their academic, social, and emotional needs.

The result is that over 112,000 youth (6% of school-aged children) do not attend basic schooling to the 10th grade level in Jordan, and an additional 40,000 children are at risk of dropping out³. However, not all young people experience these risks equally. In particular, the risk of drop-out increases with age. Among children ages 6 - 11, 5% are OOS, increasing to 9% among those ages 12 - 15. Variations in drop-out rates are also reflected in gender and nationality breakdowns: boys 12 - 15 are more likely to be OOS (10%) than girls (8%), and Syrian children (ages 6 - 15) are more likely to drop out (31%) than Jordanians (3%) or other nationalities (22%). Syrian boys ages 12 - 15 have the highest OOS rate, at 45%. Youth ages 12 - 15 in the poorest wealth quintile are also more likely to drop-out (14%) than youth in the wealthiest quintile (around 2%) (UNICEF, 2020).

High drop-out rates in Jordan have led to large cohorts of young people without adequate education – and who fundamentally have different educational and social needs. Among youth ages 18 - 20, 13% have not completed secondary school (grades 11 and 12). Among youth ages 20 - 22, 44% have not completed secondary school – 50% of Jordanian males and 79% of Syrians⁴ (UNICEF, 2020). We assume that COVID-19 has made these statistics even more worrying. A third of households in Jordan do not have internet (World Bank, n.d.), which contributed to the 46% of students nationwide who did not have access to the online options for the formal school system (UNHCR, UNICEF & WFP, 2020).

Together, these statistics point to a simple but troubling reality: as learners in Jordan get older, they are less willing to tolerate staying in school if they are not excited to be there and don’t feel it is useful for their futures. The most common reason youth (ages 12 - 20) mention for dropping out is that they don’t *want* to continue in school or didn’t do well. This is mentioned by 75% of Jordanian girls, 87% of Jordanian boys, 26% of Syrian girls and 28% of Syrian boys (among Syrians, insecurity and fear of violence are the most common factors leading to drop-out) (UNICEF, 2020). These two reasons for drop-out – unwillingness to continue in the system and not doing well academically in that system – are two sides of the same coin and give insight into how young people in Jordan experience education.

However, youth are *not* intrinsically misguided when they drop out because they don’t see the “point” of education: The World Bank Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) metric reveals that while the average Jordanian will spend 11.1 years in school, this represents only 6.9 years of quality education, relative to countries that have top scores on international assessments (Filmer *et. al.*, 2018). This means that 38% of the time a young person spends in school is not used productively. Teenagers will be the first to tell you that this is untenable.

³ This figure of children at risk of dropping out comprises students who are over-age for their grade in primary or secondary school; it is likely that there are also children at risk of dropping out for other reasons, who are not captured by this statistic.

⁴ Among Syrians, both males and females have roughly equal rates of upper secondary completion.

Compounding this issue is the fact that economic returns to education in Jordan are far below international averages. For each additional year a young Jordanian stays in school, their hourly earnings will increase by about 4% (for Syrians – and likely other refugee populations – further schooling does not yield higher wages in the Jordanian economy, due to labor market restrictions⁵). By comparison, the average global return to education is around 9% (UNICEF, 2020). In general, further education does not make young people in Jordan more competitive in the labor market: in 2015, 28% of university graduates were unemployed, compared to 20% of youth with only a secondary education (ILO, 2016).

As a result, students, and their families, recognize that young people often do not stand to gain enough knowledge or skills from formal education to make it worthwhile, especially in terms of earning capacity and competition for employment. Other pursuits, such as child labor or under-age marriage, are perceived as providing more benefits. This is especially true for low-income and refugee families, who often face substantial financial or social barriers to enrolling in and continuing to attend school – effectively raising the cost of an investment that will only provide limited returns (UNICEF, 2020).

IV. The Experience of Non-Formal Education

The NFE program in Jordan was designed specifically to address the *dichotomy of opportunity* faced by OOS youth, and to respond to the specific needs of young people whose negative educational experiences have pushed them over, or closer to the edge. Freirean methodologies are uniquely suited for these youth, who, in many cases, come to NFE having never experienced positive adult relationships, and having been made to believe that learning simply isn't for them. Freire's focus on learner-centered methodologies, surrounding young people with a learning culture and people who care about them, and building critical thinking capacities that will eventually grow into critical consciousness, provide a pathway back for young people, so they can once again envision a future they want for themselves, and pursue it.

Young people will not be able to learn if curriculum-driven academics are the only thing that matters. Their desires need to be cultivated, their fears need to be assuaged, and their curiosities need to be fed – they need to be treated like the complex human beings they are. NFE provides an environment in which Facilitators are supported to deal with learners in holistic ways to meet their educational, emotional, social, and aspirational needs.

NFE gives young people a chance to experience what it feels like to have systems of power and authority respond to their agency. At the most basic level, this means that learners get to write – and enforce – their own class constitution: a set of rules by which they all agree to abide. For many young people, drafting the class “constitution” is their first experience creating the rules they themselves live by, instead of the rules dictated to them. Another opportunity is when learners in NFE are asked to choose which extracurricular activities they want, such as a field trip to a local historical site. In this way, young people get to experience living in a reality that they themselves helped to shape – which encourages learners to continually seek other ways they can affect the circumstances and systems around them.

⁵ Syrians in Jordan are only allowed to secure work permits for a limited number of specific sectors, though many end up working illegally.

NFE is grounded in unique and transformational Freirean pedagogies that set a new bar for quality education in the Middle East. These approaches are embodied in the Reciprocal Learning for Change (RLC®) educational methodology, which Questscope developed uniquely for the NFE program, and which comprises a three-part theory of change:

1. Adult-youth partnership and mentorship:

Learning in NFE centers takes place in the context of an authentic and nurturing partnership between the learner and the Facilitator. The learner knows they are respected by someone who is their champion, and who will advocate on their behalf. The learner trusts the Facilitator to accompany them through an immersive inquiry of their own experiences, and the Facilitator allows learners to determine the course and content of their own explorations.

This adult-youth partnership and mentorship creates an atmosphere of trust, care, and belonging in the NFE classroom. Many OOS youth come from unsupportive family backgrounds, surrounded by adults who are not aware of how to meet their developmental needs. Facilitators are trained to understand the socio-emotional and relational needs of youth during crucial phases of growth. NFE ensures that learners have the adult support (*i.e.* mentorship) they need not only to learn, but to thrive. This relationship with youth also motivates Facilitators to regularly go above and beyond for the learners in their classroom, for example by negotiating on behalf of those who must work with employers⁶ and parents to ensure students' continued access to NFE, and following up individually when students do not attend class.

Questscope and the MoE recognize the key role of the Facilitator in NFE, and provide specialized training in the unique pedagogies of NFE. Facilitators receive initial training, followed by refresher trainings on a regular basis, and have regular contact with Questscope quality assurance staff who provide support and guidance. Facilitators, who are all teachers in Jordanian public schools, often report anecdotally to Questscope staff that the training they receive dramatically changes the way they teach in their formal school classes. They see the benefit of student-centered pedagogies in real-time. In this way, NFE also contributes to building human resource capacity within Jordan's formal education system.

2. Dialogue-based learning:

NFE students learn by reflecting on their lived experiences through classroom dialogue with their Facilitator and peers. Dialogue is based on daily events that occur. Discussion is cultivated by Facilitators, who are trained to recognize what is occupying the minds of learners on any given day – from a situation in the local community, to an incident that took place on the way to school that morning. The topic is then utilized as a “seed text”, from which an entire day's lesson is developed. Facilitators are trained to cover content from different subjects around the seed text that advance curriculum goals, instead of relying on curriculum-based lesson plans. These discussions and the resulting lessons, based on students' own experience and relating directly to their daily lives, ensure that learners are highly engaged and deeply curious throughout the NFE

⁶ Many students in NFE – in particular boys – also work while attending classes. NFE supports students to work only if the employers and conditions are in line with the International Labor Organization's guidelines for safe work.

class. This continuous – and continuously evolving – give-and-take between learners and Facilitators cultivates what Freire called *critical thinking*: an acute awareness and understanding of the context, systems, positives and inequities in students' daily lives, and a personal awareness of action to take to achieve positive change.

3. Development of learners' agency:

Youth are given the opportunity to exercise agency to catalyze self-directed changes in their educational space within NFE, which in turn changes youth as they are shaped by the changes taking place around them. Students are given daily opportunities to express their agency through dialogue-based learning, and in turn the ability to decide for themselves which and how topics are discussed during their NFE session. These experiences of exercising control in their own lives – with positive results – establishes an expectation among students that they *can* and *should* aim to create change around them, including beyond the classroom. This personal agency developed through the NFE program is a key component of the *critical consciousness* described by Freire, and ensures that learners are empowered to act on their expanding understanding of the world and challenges surrounding them.

These three building blocks of the NFE program create an environment in which learners develop not only *critical thought* – the ability to think critically about themselves and the inequities shaping their reality – but also *critical consciousness* – the capacity to consider and the agency to drive change within the systems that engender and abet the limits around their lives.

The reciprocal learning embedded in RLC® advances impact through the Questscope theory of change: When young people experience positive adult-youth partnerships, are invited to contribute through dialogue-based learning, and can see how their own agency can create change in the world, then they develop the critical consciousness needed to enact positive change in every layer of the systems around them: their own lives, in their communities, and in the policies holding the status quo in place. This last point is key: Questscope sees the process of social development and social change not only as “bottom up” but also as a process of affecting the “top down” so that decision making through policies can become more responsive to changes taking place among individuals and communities. This is a self-sustaining, upwardly spiraling cycle. If young people see that institutions are becoming responsive to their agency, they will be encouraged to pursue initiatives for change, which in turn can incite institutions to become still more responsive.

Within any system of education, located in larger national systems, each level, top and bottom, can be mutually responsive to changes happening at the other level. Changes within individuals should lead to changes in community power dynamics, which ought to give way to new policies and resource allocations (and vice versa). In order for change within one part of the system to be sustained (for example, after the end of a donor-funded project), both levels will need to shift in parallel, and will need to shift *enough*, so that the tide of the status quo cannot quickly wash over and erase the gains achieved (Kania *et. al.*, 2018).

Visitors to public schools in Jordan will immediately be able to point out the NFE classroom in the building⁷. There is student work and art filling every empty space on the walls. The chairs and tables can be – and indeed often are – picked up and moved around, depending on what activities are happening that day. Every NFE classroom has a fan, a computer, a printer, and at least two whiteboards, which are often used simultaneously to give tailored lessons to different sections of the class. Five days a week, learners arrive at NFE centers with ideas and opinions and questions spilling out from their mouths and minds. The ideas and opinions and questions have always been there – but when too much “stuff” is forced *in*, nothing from within the learner can get *out*. Our young people don’t sit still and they’re not quiet. In formal schools, this would be a problem that needs solving. In NFE, this is what learning feels like. In formal schools, students are taught what the textbook tells them they need to know so they can pass a test. In NFE, young people are invited to ask questions about the world they experience and to use the knowledge gained to better understand the context in which they live. In formal schools, teachers deposit information into a person’s mind (the “banking model” of education) which can be forgotten again by the next school bell. In NFE, Facilitators accompany learners to explore and critically examine what happens around them, what happens to them, and what can happen *because* of them. Facilitators provide opportunities for learners to use academic knowledge to *make things happen*, both in the classroom, and outside it.

Learners bubble and fizz with all sorts of queries and complexities – “Do you know what I *saw* this morning on the street?”, “Why did my brother decide to do *that*?”, “What can we do to make this *better*?” – Facilitators listen and absorb and devise how to toss their own bubbles and fizz back into the mix. They ask the learners: “Why did you notice *that*?”, “Why do you think he said *this*?”, “What do you want to do *next*?”. Such questions are a learning opportunity in NFE – a chance to use students’ lived experiences as the basis for that day’s lessons. What’s most important to the Facilitator on any given day is what’s most important to the learner, every day.

The problem has never been that young people have nothing inside them – they aren’t empty and don’t need to be filled with “stuff”. The problem is that they’re too often not allowed to express everything that’s already brewing in their heads and hearts – and they are too often put in classrooms that lack dialogue that they need to *learn*.

Having understood how it feels to be brought out of the shadows, youth are empowered to show those around them what it means to be put – and to put others – first. In an era where children are increasingly left to learn from screens and software, rather than peers and partners, our non-negotiable focus on these building blocks has proved invaluable to thousands of young people who must negotiate an uneasy world.

⁷ All NFE classes take place in classrooms in public schools, which have been customized to support a student-centered learning environment.

V. Impacts of Non-Formal Education

Organizations and international agencies typically judge the success of an education program by counting how many children enroll, how often they attend, and how many graduate (*i.e.*, “what works” [Unterhalter, 2009]). These metrics tell us something about *access*, but little about the *quality*, *impact*, or *justice* of education (*i.e.*, “what matters” [Unterhalter, 2009]). Using enrollment as a measure of education program quality is misguided; the metric has become the target.

In NFE, the quality of education is conceptualized from the position of how the learner *experiences* education. Is it fun? Does academic knowledge make sense in their context? Do learners enjoy what they’re doing? Do they feel respected and valued by the people around them? Do those people let them control some parts of their environment? Can learner advocate for what they want, in partnership with an adult who is their champion? Do they get to talk about what is important to them?

NFE does track enrollment and attendance as process indicators within a larger theory of change. These metrics inform us that we are on the right track, and that young people are learning through participating in their learning. All learners in NFE are essentially volunteers, *i.e.* they attend because they *want* to be in that learning environment, not because they *have* to be. Youth who are enrolled in NFE have typically already decided to leave or not to join formal education. They show up to NFE because they enjoy what they learn, how they are learning, they know that adults around them care deeply about them, and they know that the learning experience will enable them to pursue the future they want for themselves.

The voluntary participation of learners is a vital indicator of success in the NFE program. If learners stop showing up, we know that something has gone wrong. But as long as they continue to show up, we know – and they know – that we’re doing something right. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unintended and unplanned test of this approach. In March 2020, the Jordanian government unexpectedly closed all schools to in-person learning. However, within a month, roughly 75% of NFE students had reconnected with their peers and Facilitators online (as per Questscope records) – compared to only 54% of students nationwide who had *access* to (though did not necessarily *attend*) the online options for the formal school system (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2020).

From 2009-2010, Questscope and the MoE partnered with researchers from the University of Oxford’s Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention to evaluate the NFE program through a randomized controlled trial of 127 Jordanian youth. A treatment group of 67 youth participated in NFE, and a control group of 60 youth participated in recreational clubs not utilizing participatory educational methodology. The study was conducted in six NFE centers (four male, and two female) in Amman, in low-income communities with high rates of child-labor. Data on youth were collected prior to the study as well as four months later, to measure the impact of the NFE program on conduct problems and violent behavior (University of Oxford, Questscope, Jordan Ministry of Education, 2011). The study found that the NFE program reduced conduct problems and violent behavior among youth after four months in the classroom environment. Youth in the treatment group had statistically significant improved outcomes related to prosocial behavior, overall difficulties, and hyperactivity/attention compared to the control group. The study also revealed encouraging changes in social

and emotional outcomes in youth with higher levels of attendance, and in centers that offered more initiatives that empowered youth in their learning progress (University of Oxford *et. al.*, 2011).

In 2018, USAID also conducted a final evaluation of their funding of the Questscope NFE program to determine the effectiveness, impact, and potential for sustainability. The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, including key informant interviews and focus group discussions with Questscope staff, NFE Facilitators, and NFE graduates. The evaluation confirmed, among other findings, that NFE effectively addresses the factors that lead to drop-out from the formal system; that participation in NFE has contributed to social and emotional, behavioral, and academic changes in learners; and that participation in NFE contributes to learners' self-efficacy (USAID, 2018).

VI. Conclusion

Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970) that emphasizes adult-youth partnerships, youth agency, and learning through dialogue provides a remarkable alternative that addresses the *dichotomy of opportunity* and gives youth a second chance. This is a second chance not only to create a worthwhile future for themselves, but to develop the qualities needed to pursue adjustments in a system that nearly allowed them to be left behind – to go over the educational edge. The NFE program in Jordan offers a model for how to pair official curricula content with teaching practices that emphasize youth participation and agency, and offer the flexibility to adapt to learners' individual needs and interests. This pedagogy supports learners to not only engage in, but drive their own dialogue-based exploration of the world around them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered a global call to action for education and youth practitioners to identify new paradigms for learning and accompaniment that can pull young people back from the edge of educational disconnect and distress. Freirean pedagogy has a critical role to play in this new, emerging vision of how to educate young people, and prepare them for unknowable, uncertain futures.

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