

Yidan Prize
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Creating a better future through education

Yidan Prize Summit
5 December 2021

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Founder, Yidan Prize

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Executive summary

On 5 December 2021, we held our first hybrid summit: while some guests were able to join us in person in Hong Kong, others joined us virtually from around the world.

This year, the discussion focused on how education can change lives, communities, and even countries—as well as on the practical, measurable solutions we can use to transform education.

Professor Eric A. Hanushek, our 2021 Yidan Prize laureate for Education Research, joined a panel to talk about how learning losses lead to economic losses. He stressed the importance of making sure that the world's most resource-strained countries can evaluate research and choose the most effective interventions.

Our 2021 Education Development laureate, Dr Rukmini Banerji, has spent her career developing scalable, child-centered programs that meet the goal of 'every child in school and learning well'. In another panel, she talked about her work, and observed that wealthier countries too must learn how to catch children up, following two years of disrupted schooling.

Above all, the message from our laureates, distinguished guests and speakers from the Yidan Prize family was one of opportunity and momentum. Pandemic disruption continues, yes—but education should not—must not—lag behind the progress we make in other areas of our lives. The response to COVID-19 sparked changes in work, travel, and logistics, and more. So how do we make sure education keeps up? It could make all the difference to our shared future.



Read more highlights from our panels and keynote speeches in this report. For the full picture, [watch the summit online](#).

Welcome from Dr Charles CHEN Yidan

How do we create a better world through education? COVID-19 continues to highlight and add to our challenges—so what practical, measurable solutions can we use to tackle them?

Dr Chen set the scene for an in-depth discussion about the future of education. For the Yidan Prize founder, three points are central to making progress.

First: we have the opportunity to reimagine and transform education for future generations.

He referred to UNESCO's November report on the futures of education, and the deep reflection we must do to create "a new social contract for education".

Second, research and practice shows we need to place learners at the heart of education.

Dr Chen pointed to Dr Rukmini Banerji's work at NGO Pratham, and how they scale up effective, child-centered learning interventions.

Third, innovations have the potential to accelerate educational progress.

Here Dr Chen gave the example of learning through play. But he also pointed to innovative research—such as Professor Eric A. Hanushek's, which connects education and economics.

“Let’s reimagine the future. A future where teachers and schools place learners at the heart of education. A future where innovations bring real and impactful change. This is a future we can create and a world we would all be very happy to be a part of.”

Dr Charles CHEN Yidan

Founder, Yidan Prize



Panel 1: Putting effective education policy into action today

Speakers

Professor Eric A. Hanushek

2021 Yidan Prize for Education Research Laureate, and Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution of Stanford University

Dr Jaime Saavedra

Senior Director, Education Global Practice, World Bank Group

Professor Ludger Woessmann

Professor of Economics, University of Munich, and Director, ifo Center for the Economics of Education

Moderator

Ms Barbara Bruns

Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University, and Non-Resident Fellow, Center for Global Development

In conversation with

The Hon. Bernard Charnwut Chan, GBM, GBS, JP

Convenor of the Non-Official Members of the Executive Council, HKSAR

As you might expect, our panel opened with reflections on the pandemic

Over the last two years, school closures have meant less face-to-face interaction for teachers and students. In turn, this hasn't only damaged learning quality; it's exacerbated global inequality in education.

“Many countries have had almost two years of school closures with no online support.”

Ms Barbara Bruns

Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University, and Non-Resident Fellow, Center for Global Development

So what's the fix? There are several (such as closing the digital divide), but for Dr Saavedra, it's most important to support teaching as they recoup learning losses. And fast:

"We need to do something today. That's not a metaphor —today means today."

Dr Jaime Saavedra

Senior Director, Education Global Practice,
World Bank Group



Putting Effective Education Policy into Action Today

#2021YidanPrizeSummit



Professor Eric A. Hanushek



Dr Jaime Saavedra



Professor Ludger Woessmann



Ms Barbara Bruns

For this group, learning losses mean economic losses

Professor Hanushek expressed frustration at macro economists defining the impact of the pandemic with past recessions as a yardstick. For him, this misses one crucial detail: schools didn't close in past recessions.

Economically, we'll be feeling the ripple effect of this disrupted learning for a long time, he says. In fact, entire nations will 'take a hit' when it comes to the quality of their labour force and by association, GDP. For instance, Dr Saavedra estimates that earnings will dip in developing countries by 17 trillion dollars.

Professor Hanushek is focusing on African education and the economy

This project builds on his work with Professor Woessmann—as they were assessing the global value of education together.

Professor Hanushek believes firmly that better schooling creates a healthier economy. So with his Yidan Prize funding, he's launching a fellows program: a cohort of young African economists working on education.

“With local people who understand the capacity and demands in Africa, we have a better chance of putting policies in place. We’ll have a select group of fellows whom we’ll train in evaluation methods. They’ll learn from worldwide researchers, then go back to their own countries—taking what is known and putting it in place.”

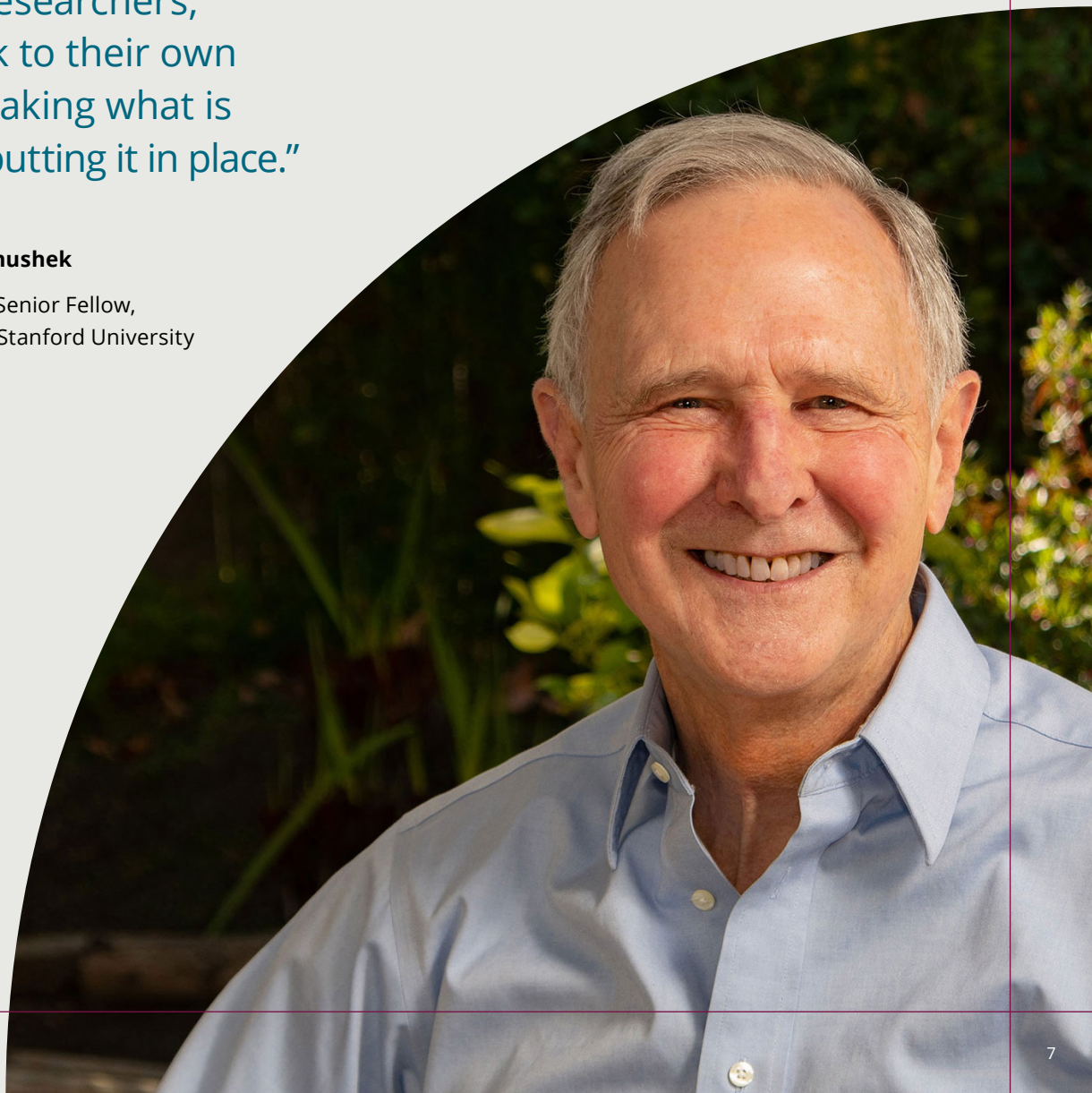
Professor Eric A. Hanushek

Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow,
Hoover Institution of Stanford University

After the panel, Mr Bernard Chan added the specific perspective from Hong Kong

As an education leader in the region, he says many schools are now operating with half days. It’s a total rethink, and it’s working better for certain subjects than others—math, he adds, is a subject where students really benefit from face-to-face help.

It’s an example of how local authorities must adapt their education policies as situations evolve. “This will be the new norm,” he says. “At least for a little while. It’s a global phenomenon, and the experience of learning will never be the same.”



Panel 2: Placing children at the heart of teaching and learning

Speakers

Dr Rukmini Banerji

2021 Yidan Prize for Education Development Laureate, and CEO, Pratham Education Foundation

Professor Abhijit Banerjee

2019 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics, and Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Professor Esther Duflo

2019 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics, and Abdul Latif Jameel Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Moderator

Mr Ronnie C. Chan

Co-Founder and Chair, Centre for Asian Philanthropy and Society, and Chair, Hang Lung Properties Limited

There's a learning gap in education today

Dr Banerji defines this as a 'catch up'; a child attends school for several years, but still struggles with math or literacy. To stop this from happening, it's crucial to place each individual child at the heart of their own learning. After all, children arrive at school with different backgrounds, experiences, and learning levels—rigid and fast-moving curricula mean some get left behind.

"A lot of children can't get onto the ladder in time. And then the ladder has become too steep."

Dr Rukmini Banerji

CEO, Pratham Education Foundation

In developed nations, school systems and families tend to notice when a child falls into this learning gap. But that experience isn't echoed everywhere. For example, Pratham's reports show that by fifth grade, 50% of children in India are lagging when it comes to basic reading and writing.

In her work, Dr Banerji looks to close this gap

Working with a child for just one or two hours a day over a month or so is often enough time for them to grasp these foundational skills. In that short space of time, they'll be able to read basic sentences and do basic sums—something they might not have been able to achieve in five or six years of school before then. Again, Dr Banerji believes this progress happens when you look beyond rigid curricula and support the child from where they are (not where they 'should' be).



Placing Children at the Heart of Teaching and Learning

#2021YidanPrizeSummit



Dr Rukmini Banerji



Mr Ronnie C. Chan



Professor Abhijit Banerjee



Professor Esther Duflo

It's noble work—not just for individual learners, but for the society

Professor Duflo points out that Pratham challenges the idea that school is most important to a child's development. In fact, she says, Pratham proves that most crucial is learning: in school, outside of school, in pre-school, in vocational training. In the 90s, this was a huge shift in thinking.

And Professor Banerjee adds organizations like Pratham can create huge change—not only in education systems, but in society.

“Access to education is fundamental in how we conceive of a democratic society. Education creates potential. It gives people the option of being who they can be.”

Professor Abhijit Banerjee

Ford Foundation International
Professor of Economics,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The secret to a real impact? Scale

Professor Duflo points out that progress comes for the masses when you're constantly tweaking, adapting and measuring.

“You make progress not by looking for the perfect solution for 10 children, or 100 children, or 1,000 children. You make progress by finding out how to lift the learnings of hundreds of millions of children conceptually.”

Professor Esther Duflo

Abdul Latif Jameel Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**After all, more and more children will be
'catching up' in light of coronavirus**

Here, Mr Chan returned to the conversation from our first panel: the learning gap is now a global problem. How can Dr Banerji's work help children across the world?

She says first, nations need to build (or perhaps rebuild) foundational, stable education systems. And then they need to look beyond prescriptive curricula to help children *learn to learn*. She says this is key to preparing children for an unknown future.

**"Then as the world
changes in dramatic ways—
sometimes going forward,
sometimes in crisis—you will
have the skills to cope."**

Dr Rukmini Banerji

CEO, Pratham Education Foundation



Panel 3: Creating a better future through education

Speakers

Mr Leong Cheung

Executive Director, Charities & Community, The Hong Kong Jockey Club, and Co-Chair, Council, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Hong Kong Chapter

Mr Andreas Schleicher

Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills, OECD

Dr Sobhi Tawil

Director, Future of Learning and Innovation, UNESCO

Professor Rocky S. Tuan

Vice-Chancellor and President, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Co-Chair, Council, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Hong Kong Chapter

Moderator

Dr Christopher Thomas

Director of Partnerships, Yidan Prize Foundation

Dr Tawil opened with the challenges education (and the world) face today

Yes, there has been undeniable progress in educational development—but we still haven't delivered on past promises of quality education for all. Too many people are denied meaningful educational opportunities, particularly in low-income countries.

"In low-income countries today, 3 out of 5 adolescents are not in secondary education, and 2 out of 5 women are non-literate."

Dr Sobhi Tawil

Director, Future of Learning and Innovation, UNESCO

On top of this, he says the future looks uncertain: widening inequality, wealth concentration, the climate crisis. We need to change course.

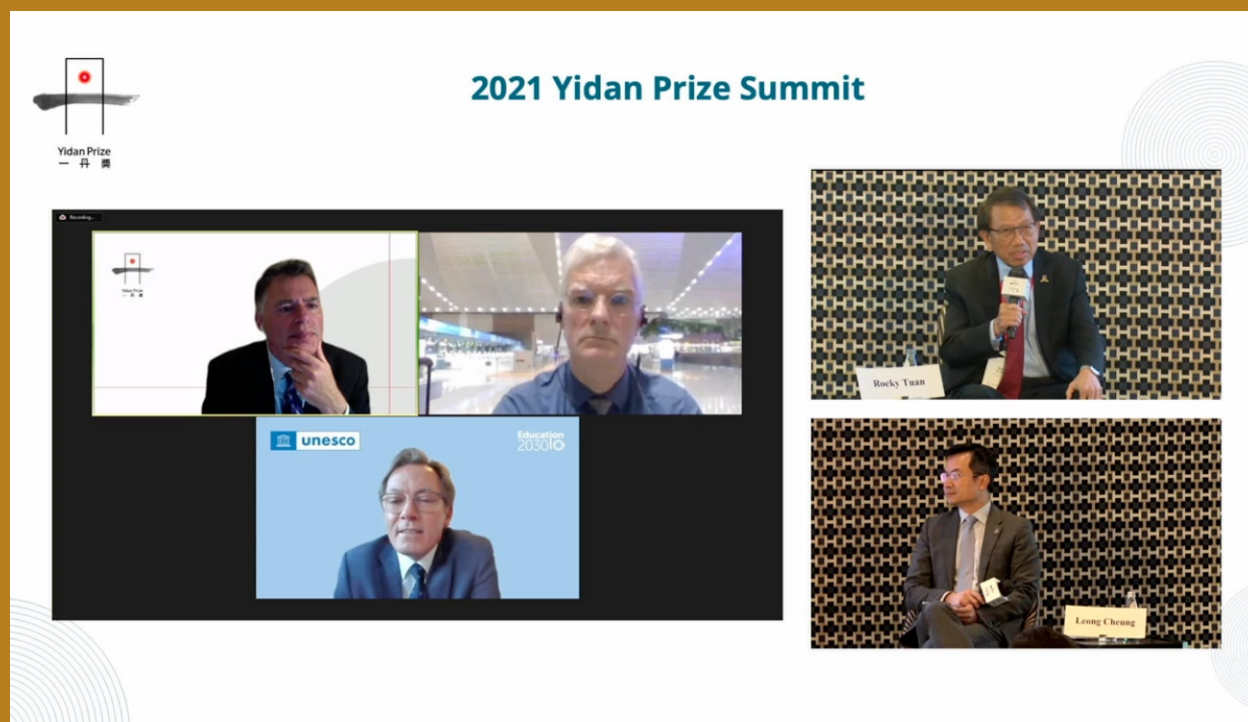
Education can help us redefine our relationships

Our relationships with each other and our relationships with the natural world. Dr Tawil says we must create new pedagogies of co-operation, collaboration, and solidarity. We must use education systems to unlearn biases and prejudices. And we must double down on teaching around science and the ecological crisis to re-orient ourselves as humans on this planet.

“Our schools today will be our economies and societies tomorrow.”

Mr Andreas Schleicher

Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills, OECD



(From left to right, top to bottom) Dr Christopher Thomas, Mr Andreas Schleicher, Professor Rocky S. Tuan, Dr Sobhi Tawil, Mr Leong Cheung

But all initiatives should let students lead the way

For Professor Tuan, 'success' for a student has to be self-driven. He cites the Grand Challenges initiative in Hong Kong schools a good example.

Students define social problems together, then use computer coding to solve them. For example, "my grandparents struggle to call a taxi. Let's build an app that makes it easier for them." Because all their ideas are self-generated, the scheme builds a sense of ownership in students.

And as well as agency, students must learn *co-agency*

When the OECD assessed collaborative problem-solving in 2015, Mr Schleicher says students, teachers, and policymakers alike felt confused. Schools were so geared towards independent thinking. They couldn't understand why group exercises mattered.

If we want a collaborative society, we need to get better at this, right from kindergarten.



“We need deliberate, intentional spaces—for students to collaborate, for teachers to collaborate. It’s the hallmark of high-performing education.”

Mr Andreas Schleicher

Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills, OECD

Even students’ physical environments need to be considered here. Mr Cheung mentions seating. In Hong Kong schools, children sit in rows—can we change the layout of the classroom so it’s easier to work together?

As the world evolves, we need more *experiential learning*

For example, the panel cite the power of vocational experience: real people, real problems, real consequences. In fact, Professor Tuan says the university is building an element of this into all their courses—students should see that building a better world is something they have the power to start today.

Panel 4: Learning through play: global and China perspectives

Speakers

Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

Stanley and Deborah Lefkowitz Professor of Psychology, Temple University, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Dr Junjie Shang

Associate Professor, Graduate School of Education, Peking University

Professor Yang Rui

Associate Dean, Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong

Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen

Chair of Learning through Play, and Vice-President, The LEGO Foundation

Moderator

Dr Zhaoli Meng

Research Advisor, Chen Yidan Foundation

In China, there's a 'no pain, no gain' philosophy when it comes to education

Dr Meng explained that traditionally, Chinese society has seen learning as a labor: studies should feel like hard work. So it's unsurprising that the learning through play model has been slower to catch on than in other contexts.

In particular, Dr Thomsen and his team at the LEGO Foundation have seen huge success, working with governments across the world to spread the philosophy far and wide.

“Given the world we’re living in today—more change, more uncertainty—there’s not just a need for knowledge. We need to support children to be creative, to feel engaged and to keep motivated.”

Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen

Chair of Learning through Play, and Vice-President, The LEGO Foundation

So what is play-based learning, anyway?

Professor Hirsch-Pasek defines it as ‘teaching in the way that human brains learn’. The science shows us that’s when we’re active, engaged, working together, having fun, feeling creative, and confident. In other words, all signs point to play—and it shouldn’t be confined to the classroom.

“We’re transforming transport architecture into playful learning architecture; where people can grow their minds and grow their enjoyment as they’re waiting for the bus.”

Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

Stanley and Deborah Lefkowitz Professor of Psychology, Temple University, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution



Learning through Play: Global and China Perspectives

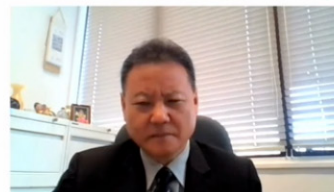
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Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek



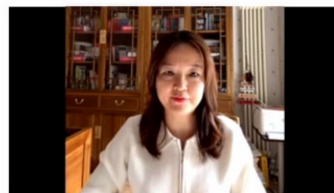
Dr Junjie Shang



Professor Yang Rui



Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen



Dr Zhaoli Meng

While this idea might be new in China, it's now gaining momentum

Attitudes are changing. Professor Hirsch-Pasek and her team surveyed both Chinese parents and US parents, asking: 'how much overlap do you see between learning and play?' US parents saw a 95% overlap; Chinese parents said 78%.

Similarly, there's a national five-year plan for child-friendly cities with playful learning opportunities (like the bus stops). There's a policy to reduce homework, leaving more time for play. In fact, Professor Hirsch-Pasek believes China is beginning to lead the way.

Although Dr Shang's research shows us that opinions are still split

His team interviewed and observed over 2,000 people across six provinces in China. They found most students, teachers, and parents from middle class families recognize the idea of learning through play—but 46% think isn't working efficiently enough in education systems today.



Certainly in Hong Kong, Professor Yang tells us there's work to do

The picture is complicated. While schools and education authorities might theoretically be on board with playful learning—the idea has been around for three generations—Professor Yang sees little of it in action.

He points to several issues that make playful learning hard to roll out in Hong Kong: the school systems are exam-oriented, there's little physical space in schools, it's a competitive environment.

“We need to create an environment that allows our young learners to fully develop their strengths—individually and collectively. We need to give priority to young people’s interests and their joy.”

Professor Yang Rui

Associate Dean, Faculty of Education,
the University of Hong Kong

Closing remarks

“What is going to change in education?”

Professor Cheng’s big question summed up the spirit of the summit. He talked about the purpose of the Yidan Prize being to ‘do something’ to shape the future of education. The summit, he said, was a great demonstration of this purpose.

Professor Cheng pointed to how the world reacted to the pandemic, “speeding up change in society—change in the world—which would otherwise take decades, in just a few months. Work, office space, logistics, and more are all changing almost overnight.”

Education, he said, “takes a long journey to change to cope with the new society”, but it’s clear that it “cannot stay as it is”. We could think of destruction as both a negative as a positive. The pandemic has indeed wrought destruction—but that can also be the catalyst for long-needed change.

Expressing his thanks for the expertise of our laureates and distinguished guests, and acknowledging the hard work of our Secretariat, Professor Cheng brought the event to a close with another positive thought: looking forward to the 2022 Yidan Prize.

Professor Cheng Kai-ming

Convenor, Advisory Committee,
Yidan Prize Foundation

Watch the conference in full:

yidanprize.org/events/2021-yidan-prize-summit/

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