Learning Possibilities

White paper

Education 2021- A Blueprint for School Recovery

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The long-term impact on education systems caused by the Great Pandemic of 2020/21 will take many years to play out. The OECD has recently estimated that globally, 1.7 billion children have suffered significant learning loss as a result of school closures[1]; in truth, not a single family has been unaffected by the huge social experiments that lockdowns have precipitated. Before us we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-imagine education and all that it entails.

It is against this background that technology companies are now working hand in hand with governments across the world to build continuity and resilience into schools, schooling and lifelong learning as John Dewey said, back in 1900, "….education is not a preparation for life, it is life itself".

The panelists for the webinar hosted by Learning Possibilities all share a focus on Middle East and Africa, a region where decades of education progress have been affected in just a few months, and where a re-imagining of education is no longer a distant theory, but an immediate necessity. How can EdTech be a partner to reverse these losses, build a better and more resilient education system?

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Michael is a senior education consultant, with more than 30 years of professional experience in the fields of Education Technology, Capacity Building, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Lifelong Learning including technical advice on technology in education to governments in European countries, The Middle East, South America and South East Asia. Michael holds a Doctorate from the Institute of Education at University College, London.

Mehool Sanghrajka, the CEO of Learning Possibilities, introduced the panel each of whom shared their own take on the current crisis and the lessons from their Organisations:

Deema Bibi, CEO at INJAZ, shared the findings of focus group discussions with senior school students in the region. Whilst on the plus side students have welcomed some of the freedoms and greater sense of responsibility for their learning, they reported many downsides, with which most readers will be very familiar:

- Problems with motivation, coping with distractions and time management issues with online learning with only minimal social contact possible with teachers and fellow students
- Technical limitations related to the nature of their devices and the connectivity
- Poor quality courses, especially in those subjects requiring conceptual learning, such as the sciences and little interaction and feedback with teachers
- No attention given to the different learning needs of diverse groups, types and individual learners

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[1] Home, OECD. Education and COVID-19: Focusing on the long-term impact of school closures.

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The students in the focus groups had some clear ideas about how things could be improved – they wanted:

An interactive learning platform, not just a data repository, where students could have dialogue with teachers and their peers; and at least one dedicated class per week dedicated to questions and answers

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Fair and equal assessment systems able to reproduce the conditions of face to face examinations - their on-line assessment experiences suffered from technical issues and concerns about security and reliability.

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Opportunities to take part in artistic, creative and sporting activities

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Access to a school counsellor to discuss their personal and learning issues

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A curriculum that would be more skills-based with slimmed-down content

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The findings from the focus group discussion in the region showed how existing social and learning problems have been exacerbated through the pandemic crisis, such as: many students, in large families, having to share devices at home; lack of suitable places and spaces for learning in their homes; elder children having to care for and support younger siblings, with these responsi-bilities resting disproportionally on girls; for the students in the most senior grades, fears about their long term prospects with the cancellation of high stakes national examinations for which progression onto university is so dependent.

Luc Serviant, from Airtel Africa, stated his view from the perspective of the 14 countries in Africa that Airtel serves. He has found that mobile connectivity is the key to learning, and that as well as the traditional IT media, such as fibre, microwave, satellite; mobile connection, through 4G, is now really taking off across the continent of Africa.

Airtel is committed to the affordability and accessibility of network access for all, including a distribution of network base-stations and mobile recharging facilities. They have several low-cost solutions, such as their bulk SMS facility for schools to message students and parents; and affordable access facilities, such as 'zero-rated' websites where the users can access materials free of charge with the usage being paid for by the learning establishment, such as a university. Whilst recognising that, at the moment, 4G is fulfilling a short-term need, he is extremely optimistic about the promises that 5G will bring to on-line education. The faster access and increased bandwidth will revolutionise how learning can happen, with ten times the bandwidth and speed, and a corresponding reduction in latency, interactive classrooms with augmented reality will become attractive, afford-able and highly compelling alternative to conventional schools.

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Susanna Ackermann from Acer for Education endorsed the trend that we are seeing where computing, after such a long period in-captivity, is being released from dedicated, locked and barred computer suites into more widespread classroom use, and now, in schools without walls. She reflected on the journey travelled for technology in education from the pencil and the ballpoint pen of yesteryear to the current reality where computers in schools have moved beyond specialist suites, either in locked rooms or on wheels, to become portable devices that are key enablers in a blended learning environment.

She shared the old African adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" and put this into the context of blended learning where the devices are now part of a much bigger ecosystem of connectivity, eLearning resources, and transformational approaches to learning and teaching. Susanna reflected upon Albert Bandura's social learning theories[2] which emphasise the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

Susanna noted that social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behaviour. The shift to ways of learning where students take more responsibility for their own progress requires both optimising the environment through having access to the best possible devices and content, and also changing the relationships between teachers and learners. We are now looking at a new generation of digital devices for learning where the technology is able to create enabling learning scenarios through, for example onboard apps and local wireless server capabilities where 'always-on' internet connectivity is a problem in remote areas.

Several other innovations for devices in Africa include technologies that reduce power consumption to prolong battery life, and charging facilities using solar energy. Collectively these will help to create the conditions that will help to transform the learning opportunities for students across the continent.

Suraj Shah from the Mastercard Foundation emphasised the work that the Foundation is doing in building teachers' skills in the digital world. The transformation that we have witnessed in these past months has included a shift to different modes of learning including the incorporation of education broadcasts on radio and TV. In the race for digitisation, he posed the conun-drum – which do you prioritise, skills or devices, in a way that moves away from the logic of 'if you build it they will come' ? For sure young learners will quickly get the hang of a new technology and make it work for their needs, but for a more solid and reliable trajectory, it is necessary to systematically build new skill sets in the digital eLearning environment. These include, not only remodelling curriculum and assessment, but also in-building modern skills for the new industrial age which must include, for example, digital entrepreneurship, coding and skills for employability. Teachers are the key enablers but designing successful programmes for their continuous professional development (CPD) can be a challenge.

Whilst sharing the Foundation's commitment to CPD through its work in seven African countries for teachers' professional development programmes for the digital environment, he stressed the need from education ministries to mandate compulsory CPD for teacher career progression. The programmes need to be ambitious yet pragmatic in recognising, for example, that only 47% of the learners on the continent can access broadcast radio or TV, and tailoring solutions accordingly. To enable growth, the Foundation is advocating the creation of new models of public-private partnerships that go beyond the historic precedents of single private entities forming agreements with governments, but new partnerships that embrace the whole range of stakeholders all of whom will benefit from agreements that can benefit all parties.

Michael Lightfoot from Learning Possibilities spoke of the opportunities that now exist, as governments begin to rebuild their education systems, post-pandemic. In particular he stressed the importance of alternative and authentic approaches to assessment systems that are embedded into the learning and have contained within them the ways in which a broad range of learner attributes are evaluated. These include assessing more than just the ability to memorise a curriculum and reproduce their learning in time-limited written tests to determine advancement and progression. For example, a digital ePortfolio provides a vehicle through which learners can curate faithful performance evidence that represent not only their subject mastery but also their skill progression and learning journey. Some writers call this 'assessment as learning'3 and digital technologies are key enablers to make it happen. The ePortfolio tools embedded into the LP+365 learning platform are there to track and record the growth, development and mastery of the 21st Century skills of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, character and citizenship; additionally, the digital tools can be oriented to provide routes to the evaluation of any **series**

[2] Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (2003). Albert Bandura: The scholar and his contributions to educational psychology.
[3] Dochy, F., & Segers, M. (2018). Creating impact through future learning: The high impact learning that lasts (HILL) model. Routledge.

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of performance skills, such as, for example, realistic assessment of the necessary practical skills in the STEM subjects.

Looking forward to rest of 2021, the panelists shared their hopes and expectations for the coming year; **Mehool** prompted the panelists with a series of provocative question – do we really just go back to the old normal, or is there realistic scope for reimagined education future ? How do we cope with the psychological impact of long-term distance education? What do we do about inclusion? Can we be innovative about the expected learning outcomes of students?

Luc from Airtel sees that hybrid learning in here to stay with increasing demand lowering the costs for connectivity; he expects new partnerships to be developing between governments, NGOs and the tech companies providing a more coordinated joined-up approach to access and entitlement. **Susanna** expects the rapid evolution of devices so that they become indispensable learning tools; but the adoption of integrated hybrid learning is dependent on both national policies and enlightened school leadership. She sees Acer being part of an emerging ecosystem between telcos, learning platform providers, governments, NGOs and entrepreneurs. **Suraj** hopes that the lessons learnt in 2020 school closures will result in a radical reset of the systems. He notes that, in the African context, where there is much instability, school closures are not only caused by pandemics but often through social and political strife, so hybrid models for learning continuity are highly needed. He looks forward to education systems geared towards the knowledge workers for the jobs of tomorrow.

Mehool concluded with his two takeaways – hope that we can all work collectively to re-engineer a better future in schools; and recognition that this will be a difficult task requiring root and branch reforms at all levels, and must include curriculum remodelling, initial teacher education and professional development, innovation from the EdTech industry partners and novel ways of financing to ensure sustainability.

For its part **Learning Possibilities** has a big role to play here, firstly by awareness-raising through this regular series of webinars, broadcast on the LP YouTube channel, with representatives from governments, private sector partners, NGOs and thought leaders, and more importantly by continuing to build upon its partnerships with governments across the world. With its secure and stable cloud-based solutions built on Microsoft technologies. LP has the skills, knowledge and experience to intervene at any stage of complexity, be it at school, school cluster, or at whole national system level.

To assist in system recovery and renewal in these challenging times, LP has devised a five-stage intervention, the detail of which can be customized according to local needs.

1. **OASIS** – Online Assessment System In Schools – is a tool that measures e-readiness for blended learning. The gap analysis allows schools and governments to prioritise interventions and funding, with data showing areas of strength and weakness.

2. **LP+ IDAM** – IDentity and Access Management – is a tool to allow schools and governments to move their learner and teacher data into the cloud to enable authentication and single sign-on for all cloud services, ensuring that correct levels of access are permitted to tools and content.

3. **LP+365** – is a learning and collaboration platform that fully integrates with Office365 giving scale and security at affordable prices. By using LP+365 students build the digital skills necessary for future employment.

4. **LP+ Device Management** - allows the teacher to manage student Windows and Android devices, even at home, to ensure focus during lessons and assessments.

5. **LP+ ADOPT** – is an award-winning framework for technology adoption in schools, used widely in the UK where it is the national standard.