GCE 7th WORLD ASSEMBLY

22 - 24th November 2022
Johannesburg-South Africa

The Future of Education Re-Imagined

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Discussion Paper 4:

Digital Learning and Transformation

1. Introduction

This discussion paper engages with practical discussions on digital learning and transformation. More specifically, it discusses how the Global Campaign for Education understands the role of technology in education, its benefits and potential associated risks for securing everyone's right to education. The paper draws on recently published scholarship and policy debates around the digitalisation of education.

Following this introduction, section 2 provides an overview of the policy challenges around the use of technology in the education sector and explains how these challenges relate to GCE's Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns work. Section 3 identifies some of the most critical areas in which digital learning practices and policies should be transformed to effectively contribute to protect the right to education, rather than putting it at more risk. The paper ends by providing a set of questions to motivate discussions around education technology (EdTech) at the World Assembly and to identify key areas for the movement to engage with during the next four years.

2. Context analysis and its relation to GCE's advocacy, policy and campaigns work

Education technology has increasingly been used during the last seven decades to expand access to education in many regions of the world, particularly in universities (Watters, 2022) and for those students living in remote regions or emergency situations lacking school facilities and qualified teachers (Cant, 2020). With the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown of schools in most countries of the world, the use of technology to deliver lessons has become part of most learners' everyday life. Its use has helped to mitigate the impact of school closures and gives continuity to learning activities (United Nations, 2022). However, neither all countries nor all learners have the same capacity to successfully engage with online learning and in this sense the pandemic has further unveiled deep-rooted inequalities in education systems across the world (Murat and Bonacini, 2020; Azubuike, Adegboye and Quadri, 2021; Boly-Barry, 2022). Those inequalities, which are often framed around the concept of 'digital divide', can be perceived within and across countries. The term digital divide comprises several interrelated dimensions of inequality: access to technological devices and the internet, digital skills, teacher skills, parental support to use technology, and adaptation and management of the learning environment (Coleman, 2021; Železný-Green & Metcalfe, 2022).

The multiple dimensions of the digital divide are interrelated and can be appreciated in all four dimensions of the right to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. To begin with *availability*, the closure of schools revealed further inequalities associated with the lack of digital infrastructure for sustainable, fair and inclusive online learning. This dimension includes lack of electricity, electronic devices, internet connection and qualified

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teachers to deliver online lessons and follow students' work (see NORRAG, 2022; Železný-Green & Metcalfe, 2022). *Accessibility* to those resources are also compromised and therefore those who had been historically excluded from education have seen their learning opportunities further compromised. Girls and women are often excluded from the use of the limited technology available in families living with low-income and patriarchal societies (see Karalis, 2020; Sahlberg, 2021) and are often subject of online abuse (UNICEF, 2021). Similar gaps had also been identified to reach students with disabilities (Disability & Development Consortium, 2020; Humanity & Inclusion, 2020; Singal, 2022), ethnic minority groups (Prehn, 2022) and people living in emergencies, notably those on the move, affected by conflict and climate change-related emergencies (see Shohel, 2022). As Kwani (2022) argues, all these multiple inequalities intersect and therefore governments and policymakers must embrace an intersectional approach to effectively eliminate digital divides. Concerning *acceptability* of education, online learning often fails to fulfil minimum standards of quality, associated for example to lack of qualified teachers and training for teachers, parents and students (Železný-Green & Metcalfe, 2022). As Anand (2022) argues, the different skills individuals have to control and adapt to a digital world influence the quality of education and its inclusiveness. Teachers with limited digital skills tend to be more focused on the use of technology than implementing pedagogical strategies to meet the needs and abilities of students. Although education technology companies are supposed to support schools to overcome the 'pedagogical vacuum', there is little evidence that these companies offer solutions for hard-to reach children (Anand, 2022). Lastly, concerning *adaptability* of education, online teaching has been rarely adapted to the specific needs of children with disabilities and consequently children who are deaf or hard of hearing can struggle to access the same educational content either by computer online lessons or radio (EASG 2022; Singal, 2022). Children from minority ethnic groups who do not communicate in the country's official language can be also excluded from the benefits of online teaching or TV/radio educational programmes (see Prehn, 2022).

Although the multiple dimensions of the digital divide are more prevalent and widespread in countries of the Global South, as it is well illustrated by Železný-Green & Metcalfe, (2022) in eight Sub Saharan African countries, they are also important to be addressed in countries of the Global North. Recent evidence for the UK reveals that children and youth from black and Asian families did not only struggle to access technological devices but also to access a reliable internet connection to attend online teaching during the Covid-19 school closures (Coleman, 2021). To overlook the situation of minority ethnic groups in the most powerful economies of the world not only perpetuates the idea of the 'so-needed' developing countries but also leaves the educational needs of those millions of children living in wealthy economies unattended.

All the multiple dimensions of the digital divide outlined above directly relate to GCE's mission and vision and therefore the movement is willing to advocate and campaign for strong public education systems that integrate technology as an important tool to facilitate access to education in regular times and especially in emergencies. However, *GCE wants to emphasise that any form of technology can replace the school environment, the benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning, and the opportunity of interacting with peers and teachers*. The school

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is a privileged space for social interaction and human development and thus an essential component to effectively fulfil everyone's right to education (Boly-Berry, 2022). As the Education & Academia Stakeholder Group (2022: 3) stresses '*The problems of our world are not technological, but pedagogical, therefore the challenges that the education sector has to meet cannot be solved alone by digital tools, learning e-platforms and artificial intelligence. The right to education must not be replaced by the right to connectivity, but pursued in parallel'*. More broadly, technology constitutes a tool to give students the continued possibility to learn during school closures and also to facilitate learning in 'regular' times. However, technology is neither the panacea to close existing gaps in the provision of education nor the pedagogical vacuum (see Anand, 2022).

3. Advocacy and campaign work around digital learning and transformation

Drawing on the previous discussion, this section identifies some of the critical themes GCE members can engage at regional and national levels to advocate for the positive transformation of digital learning and more generally for the use of technology to serve the purpose to expand people's opportunities to enjoy the right to education. Rather than a comprehensive list, the section highlights some of the themes that have been identified in recent research and policy debates as the more urgent to overcome the digital divide and therefore to secure sustainable, fair and inclusive digital education.

Conflict, disaster and climate change-related emergencies, have always been posing significant challenges for education policies. However, the massive closure of schools following the Covid-19 lockdowns, which left over one billion learners out of school (see Onyema et al, 2020), has no precedents. In response to the closure of schools, EdTech emerged as part of the solution for some learners but many more were left behind partly because of the digital divide. Along with lack of electronic devices, electricity and reliable internet connection if any, teachers, students and parents struggle to navigate the challenges of online and remote learning. What is more critical, many of those who could not access online learning, may never return to school. Evidence suggests that the longer children are out of school following closures in the aftermath of natural hazards such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods, the less likely they are to return (Baytiyeh, 2018: 215).

In this sense, the ongoing pandemic has provided new evidence of long-lasting inequalities and forms of injustice that characterise education systems worldwide. Gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and disability-related inequalities intersect and aggravate the impact of the pandemic on the distribution of educational opportunities (Blundell et al, 2021; Kwami, 2022). More broadly, all these forms of injustice affect students' wellbeing and academic performance (Tarricone, Mestan and Teo, 2021).

Long hours of online teaching and learning can bring about significant impacts on students and teachers mental health (Irawan, Dwisona, and Lestari, 2020; see also Cheshmehzangi, Zou and Su, 2022) and other social problems, including domestic violence and other forms of abuse,

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mainly against girls and women (see McKinney, 2020 and Železný-Green & Metcalfe, 2022). Policies to address these problems should include but not limited to programmes to provide counselling support for students and teachers experiencing emotional distress and anxiety due to the closure of schools and extensive online-learning without face-to-face interaction (see Irawan, Dwisona, and Lestari, 2020).

Sustainable domestic financing for education and progressive forms of taxation play a critical role in the provision of education worldwide and in the countries' possibility to rapidly react to emergencies. While most high-income countries may be in the position to quickly allocate financial resources to move from face-to-face teaching to digital learning within weeks, the allocation of resources to implement these policies in low-income countries could take years if ever secured. Closely related, while wealthy economies may adapt schools for a safe reopening, i.e., securing social distance and providing enough toilets and washing facilities within a short period of time, schools located in informal settlements and refugee camps may never get the resources to a safe reopen and therefore remain closed or put students and education personnel in avoidable risks. These contrasting differences further reveal that governments should invest at least 6% of their GDP to invest in education and secure additional resources to mitigate the impacts of emergencies. Although international cooperation and aid should contribute much more and support low-income countries to address emergencies, students' right to education cannot depend on these unstable sources of resources. Rather, all countries should adopt progressive taxation systems to ensure sustainable financing of education for all at all times.

Lastly, it is important to briefly mention concerns related to the role of private actors in the provision of education in contexts of emergency. Recent research suggests that private actors have been taking advantage of education closures during the pandemic by, for example, selling online schooling platforms, online learning resources and the commercialisation of school online solutions (see Williamson & Hogan, 2020; Železný-Green & Metcalfe, 2022). Some of the commercial practices implemented by big tech companies, including government-commercial partnerships can promote further privatisation and commercialisation of education and subsequently compromise the financing of public education systems (see Williamson & Hogan, 2020). In short, as Boly-Barry's (2022) latest report stresses, all members of the society should be aware of the 'profit-driven' agenda of private companies and corporations working on education technology.

4. Leading questions to support the discussion

- What are the main dimensions of the digital divide in your country? Who are those who are excluded (i.e. girls, students with disabilities, migrants, internally displaced people, refugees)?
- Whether and how a digital learning transformation is needed for your country? What aspects of your country's digital learning policies should be transformed?
- What policies need to be introduced in the country to make digital education sustainable, fair and inclusive for all?

- What changes need to be undertaken in the country's digital learning policy to secure a safe online environment and the protection of students and teachers' personal data?
- What changes need to be undertaken in the country's digital learning policy to address online learning-related mental health problems amongst students and teachers?
- What is the role of private actors in the provision of digital learning and what policies should be undertaken to avoid further privatisation of education systems?
- What changes in education policies around digital education should be undertaken to the country being prepared for future emergencies?
- What changes need to be undertaken at the domestic level to secure more funding for education (i.e., progressive taxation mechanisms) and reserve financial resources to quickly respond to emergencies?
- What has been the role -if any- of civil society organisations in the design of digital learning policies in the country?
- What are the main limitations CSOs face to actively engage in policy discussions around the use of technology for education?
- Is there any policy/message in the country aiming to replace face-to-face teaching for digital education?
- Now that schools are reopened in most countries, is there any risk that progress made towards digital learning being demoted?

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