The Differing Provision of Ed-Tech Demonstration and E-Learning in Europe, Asia, and America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores examples of the digital divide within diverse countries and across the globe, and presumptions about the West's preparedness for online learning are questioned. The scale of the effects of the pandemic are used to highlight the juxtaposition of the great potential of online learning with the stark reality that though the West can debate the extent of their e-learning during the spread of the coronavirus while poorer nations have great swathes of disconnected and vulnerable youth without the interventions of their teachers, the fact is that there is little evidence that all the conditions of effective online learning exist throughout the world. Ed-tech demonstration of affordable internet, different approaches to learning online, availability of digital equipment, teacher incentives and training, and providing quiet places to study at home, as well as other initiatives to resolve some of these issues in Europe and the wider world are explored and questioned.

INTRODUCTION

The global school closures over 2020, as an attempt to contain the contagion of Covid 19 (Kuhfeld et al., 2020), affected more than a billion children worldwide (Figures

1 and 2). Luckily, education did not grind to a halt, but it transformed and moved online, in keeping with advances to e-learning halted by the scrapping of funding of the Serco-led Curriculum and Pedagogies in Technology Assisted Learning (CAPITAL), which was itself based on the Digital Classroom of Tomorrow (DCOT) from Wales (Bishop, 2004; Bishop, Kingdon, & Reddy, 2012; Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2012). As schools shut down in the face of the crisis, online learning opportunities have been elevated from a supplemental extracurricular facility to a critical lifeline for education (Edy, 2020). However, this also highlighted socio-economic differences in the digital divide as the disparity of internet access and the need of suitable technology around the globe became apparent.

A European Perspective

Over three billion people actively use the internet, which is almost half of the world's population, and roughly 70 per cent have a social media account. This speaks volumes about social interactions in our tech-centric world. More and more people are turning to the internet to reach out to stay informed and in-touch. Even before the pandemic at the start of 2020, many low-income homes had no access to computers and broadband, with access varying widely across the European Union (EU) depending on household income noted by the Statistical Office of European Communities in 2019 according to Eurostat. This underpins the reality that more than one in five young people across the EU fail to reach a basic level of digital skills. The EU's Digital Education Action Plan outlining the European Commission's vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe noted that almost 60 per cent of the respondents they surveyed during 2020 had not used distance and online learning before the crisis. Teachers are also feeling ill-equipped: the 2018 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that less than 40 per cent of educators felt ready to use digital technologies in teaching, with wide differences across the EU. The digital divide prevailing in the EU is closer to home than one might believe. In late December 2020, former Education Minister Lord Baker, conceded in a Radio 4 interview that despite the roll out of laptops to those children in most need in 2020, about 40 per cent of school children in England had not had proper access to the internet during the pandemic. Robert Halfon MP, Chairman of the Education Select Committee, did not subsequently challenge the figure in the same broadcast item. Furthermore, the current Economist E-Learning Index (2015) suggests that England may have been lagging behind a number of European countries before the pandemic.