

## **MOET SHOULD NOT BE SEEN WIDENING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

**H**enrietta H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director is on record positing that, “Lack of connectivity doesn’t just limit children and young people’s ability to connect online. It prevents them from competing in the modern economy. It isolates them from the world. And in the event of school closures, such as those currently experienced by millions due to COVID-19, it causes them to lose out on education. Put bluntly: lack of internet access is costing the next generation their futures.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

Two [2] weeks ago, internet service providers in the country [MTN, Swazi Mobile, SPTC] were invited by the Ministry of Education and Training [MoET], during the cluster sessions [Monday to Wednesday] to make presentations on alternative models of online teaching and learning that the Ministry could adopt amidst COVID-19. Other stakeholders such as the UNICEF and Royal Science and Technology Park [RSTP], Emlalatini were offered the equal opportunity to play their cards on the table on what they imagine education in Swaziland during COVID-19.

What dawned on some of us was that, as a country, we are indisputably far from embracing what contemporary countries have realised as concrete realities brought forth by the global pandemic that has disrupted education systems all over the world in an unprecedented manner. Our predicament is unique, magnified by the regrettable focus from March 2020 on the external classes instead of mobilising necessary resources through Public Private Partnerships [PPPs] to securely open schools in 2021.

Talking of alternative learning models, it is common cause that two thirds of the world’s school-age children—or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 years old—do not have internet connection in their homes, according to a new joint report from UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 191 million in Southern Africa, including Swaziland. The report ***How Many Children and Youth Have Internet Access at Home?*** notes a similar lack of access among young people aged 15–24 years old, with 759 million or 63 per cent unconnected at home, perpetrating the existing inequalities and widening the digital divide in Africa.

In the same vein, it is paramount that we ask ourselves on what other countries have done to ensure that learning does not stop and that the No Child Left Behind Policy is fully actioned as Education Cannot Wait? Despite the challenges of limited access to internet connectivity, electricity or computers, countries, kept learning active through various remote learning methods such as radio and television programmes, in addition to online platforms and social media.

As the MoET wrestled with the best framework on reopening schools, I have seldom asked myself on the whereabouts of the ICT Ministry. UNICEF, for instance, through its Reimagine Education [Learning Passport] initiative, is poised to assist countries address the learning crisis and transform education by giving children and young people equal access to quality digital learning. A key to achieving this, which is leitmotif, is universal internet connectivity thus the concern that the silence of the ICT Ministry is too loud during this COVID-19 crisis.

This week, I laid my eyes on a Memo from one Secondary School in Manzini, dated 04 February 2021 addressed to all parents of learners in the school. The Memo listed registration days for Form 1 to Form 5 and a host of demands to parents. My interest in the letter to the parents, as signed by the Principal of the school, was the directive that each student to enrol in the school must have a smart phone or tablet to access online lessons whilst at home. Talk about a cart before the horse approach.

The letter confirmed my fears on the laissez-faire approach of the MoET in the operations of schools. Each school is run from the Head of the Administrator with the MoET helplessly gazing from a distance. The other day, I met a survey form from one of the Regional Education Officers [REOs], requesting Administrators to provide information on the feasibility of schools to embrace online teaching and learning. The survey [18 items] focused on access to and use of information communication technologies [ICT] in teaching and learning in the school. Whilst awaiting analysis of the findings, out of the blue, an Administrator wakes up to make such irrational demands from parents as the school ventures to online learning.

It is indisputable that no one size fits all with schools during COVID-19; however, at this juncture, online learning is an inevitable possibility together with the shift system. In fact, most countries shifted swiftly to

virtual learning immediately after lock down. The elephant in the room for a third world country such as Swaziland is network coverage which will enable learners to access internet in their respective homesteads. The Education Cluster mandated the MoET to quantify the impact of the Media Lessons that were provided last year [2020] by the UNICEF through the Global Partnership for Education US\$70,000 grant. Initially, the home-based learning focused on external examination grades (Grade 7, Form 3 and Form 5) thereafter opened-up to include other grades towards the end of the year.

The grey area that raised eyebrows is that the programme was rolled-out under the premise that more than 80% of the population has access to radios, a hypothesis yet to be tested. We are yet to lay our eyes on the Assessment done by the MoET on the impact of the Media Lessons, considering that elective subjects were offered through the print media [Times and Observer]. One wonders whether an IGCSE Learner at Qomintaba Secondary had access to the lessons or not. We cannot, therefore, permit a situation whereby the MoET advocates for the widening of the digital divide in the country, as visible. A case in point is a Swazi TV YouTube stream of November 26, 2020 which had 292 views, including viewers who are not learners. The long and short is, few learners benefited from the Media Lessons from SBIS 1 and 2, Swazi TV.

If the MoET was meaningfully seized with the current issues, it ought to wake up from its slumber, realise that the only answer in the country's unequal teaching environment, is a customised version of blended learning. Since objective No.9 of the RSTP is to stimulate high tech innovation, in the country, the IT Park division should lead the way in ensuring that schools have zero-rated platforms where educators and learners shall download learning content in different [static, motion] formats.

There is no denying that when blended learning is used by a trained teacher, it can add valuable new dimensions to the learning process. It can allow learners to work at their own pace and teachers to fill content gaps. In essence, this is what defines the Fourth Industrial Revolution [4IR] which the MoET sees as a far-fetched dream.

In many developed countries, blended learning is a well-established practice. It has enabled these countries to adapt to the demands of the current pandemic. Digital remote learning and teaching is backed up by dependable infrastructure and skilled, motivated teachers.

Anne Mathews & Cheryl Ward in their April 25, 2019 paper entitled **Effective Practices of Successful Blended Learning Schools** note that blended learning is a teaching technique utilizing face-to-face teaching and online or technology-based practice in which the learner has the ability to exert control over the pace, place, path, or time of learning. Schools that employ this teaching method often demonstrate larger gains than traditional programmes due to their increased ability to differentiate and quickly assess student learning. The UNESCO notes that empowering people through “information and media literacy” is an essential precondition for equitable access and inclusive knowledge societies

It gives me sleepless nights on how the MoET fails to associate with global initiatives such as the ‘One Laptop per Child’ and the ‘Hole in the Wall’ initiatives aimed to increase ICT access for disadvantaged children in Africa.

On a parting shot, I cannot agree more with G.B. Gudmundsdottir in her 2010 study, ***From digital divide to digital equity: Learners' ICT competence in four primary schools in Cape Town, South Africa***. That school leaders, administrators and educational policy-makers have a special responsibility to equalise computer use by making ICT meaningful and empowering for all societal groups. As schools reopen this year [2021], the SNAT cannot overemphasize the importance of teacher support and training as they influence meaningful integration of ICT. Indeed, there is a great challenge of building up expertise and adapting technology. The MoET cannot be seen promoting the digital divide thus the expectation that all 933 schools be capacitated with the necessary resources, infrastructure and training to provide customised blended approach as schools undertake rotational learning. We submit.

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