Ed tech could increase inequality, experts warn

By Sophie Edwards // 26 March 2019

Jay Varkey presents the Next Billion Prize trophy to Doreen Kessy of Ubongo. Photo by: GESF

DUBAI — Education technologies risk exacerbating inequalities, promoting superficial learning, and burdening education ministries in low and middle-income countries with expensive and useless equipment, education experts have warned.

The role of ed tech in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, was much discussed at this year’s Global Education & Skills Forum, which wrapped up in Dubai on Sunday.
The two-day long forum, which attracted some 1,700 education experts, advocates, politicians, and tech entrepreneurs, included the presentation of a $25,000 ed tech prize designed to help scale three promising innovations.

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— Andreas Schleicher, founder, PISA

This year’s overall winner was Ubongo, founded in Tanzania, which broadcasts educational cartoons and other storytelling resources in local African languages via radio, television, and mobile phones, to promote literacy and numeracy among children in low-income households.

While Ubongo is a fairly low-tech approach, other devices highlighted at the forum were more sophisticated, including India’s largest adaptive learning app, BYJU’S, and a mind-controlled drone, pioneered by personalized neuroinformatics company EMOTIV, and which can create “dynamic new ways of learning,” according to the press release.

A number of sessions also talked about the potential of artificial intelligence, and other technological innovations, to improve learning outcomes in low-resource settings.

However, Doreen Kessy from Ubongo, who was in Dubai to compete for the prize, questioned the relevance of such high-tech solutions for her target population, which includes low-income households in 31 countries across Africa. Ubongo currently reaches 11 million children per month, she told Devex.

“We have to be realistic about technology and contextualize it ... It would be amazing if [we] were able to bring AI and tablets to rural Tanzania, but is it
realistic? You have to look at the cost and think about what is possible ... and how you can have impact faster,” she said.

A number of education experts at the forum also raised concerns about the way education technologies are being implemented in low and middle-income countries.

“We all agree on the potential of technology but when you look at the reality ... it often does more damage than good because of the poor quality,” Andreas Schleicher, founder of international education ranking system the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, warned during one of the sessions, adding that “if we don’t get better there could be a backlash due to poor operationalization.”

Schleicher said governments need to do more to regulate and ensure quality, instead of allowing relatively untested ed tech models to be “dumped” onto classrooms.

Jaime Saavedra, head of education at the World Bank and former education minister for Peru, added that technology could increase inequalities within education systems if not carefully implemented.

“The potential for technology to be an equalizing factor is big ... [but] unless we do something, the technology of now ... [has] the potential to be the opposite,” he said, pointing to the fact that ed tech often requires an internet connection, hardware, and digital literacy among teachers and students, making it inaccessible to many in lower-income countries.

Schleicher agreed, saying “the risk is that technology will super empower those that have the right skill set to draw learning from it, and disempower those who [do not].”
The PISA boss also said he is concerned that ed tech in its current form could make learning “more superficial” since “the kinds of things that are easy to teach [and] easy to test have become easy to digitize.”

“You want to encourage deep conceptual understanding but technology works on the surface,” he said.

But delegates including Stefania Giannini, assistant director-general for education at UNESCO, also said that if done in the right way, AI has huge potential to “personalize learning and teaching” and move it away from traditional, standardized education models.

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