

CELEBRATING YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE CHALLENGES THEY HAVE OVERCOME DURING THE PAST YEAR

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It is no secret that children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have faced a plethora of challenges since the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020. However, from school closures and social isolation to exam worries and university experiences, education technology (EdTech) and digital infrastructures more widely have played a key part in facilitating – and sometimes even enhancing – pandemic life. In this piece, Al Kingsley, chair of two multi-academy trusts and CEO of NetSupport, considers how EdTech might continue to support young people in navigating the educational landscape, as we slowly but surely embark upon a path back to 'normality'. Whether it's helping boost academic attainment and content 'catch up', or bolstering mental and emotional wellbeing, it's clear that EdTech is here to stay for the 1.12 billion young people aged between 15-25 around the world.

Around most of the world's countries, autumn marks the beginning of the 'back to school season', with millions of children facing the start of a new academic year. However, this year's return is like no other. Across the globe, children are returning to a dramatically different learning environment, where ventilation and rapid Covid testing are just as commonplace as school lunches or the lollipop lady, after an unprecedented eighteen months of remote learning.

Whilst teachers and students alike deserve praise and recognition for their resilience and adaptability throughout the pandemic, the return to in-person teaching provides an opportunity to embrace the learnings and developments triggered by the necessity of online learning.

Mental health and wellbeing concerns

From school closures and social isolation, to exam worries and loss of university experiences, Covid-19 has significantly impacted students' mental health with more than one third of young people reporting that their mental health had declined during the pandemic. Suddenly almost completely reliant on remote

learning technologies and communication platforms, teaching and learning was transformed overnight with EdTech at the heart of the rapid adaptations. This dramatic switch demonstrated the huge potential of EdTech going forward, particularly throughout the current readjustment period.

With social isolation and the interruption to interpersonal relationships caused by the pandemic, a focus on strengthening bonds between peers and staff must be prioritised over the coming months to support student wellbeing effectively. Additionally, supporting students to once again feel more comfortable at school should also be addressed before the any academic learning loss can be tackled.

Teachers can help achieve this by incorporating EdTech into various parts of the school's fabric, such as regular feedback surveys, which help effectively monitor student progress and wellbeing – a key tool which was adopted during the pandemic and should remain part of the learning experience. Similarly for teachers, using platforms which support scalability and provide evidence of impact will help ease the burden of teachers' workloads. Together, this will ensure the benefits of digital systems will still be felt across the school by those who need them the most.

An emphasis on feedback and communication between teachers, students and parents via digital channels will ensure dialogue and transparency remain a priority within education. Everyone working in education appreciates just how important parental engagement is, not only for children's academic attainment, but to provide a thorough and effective support network to bolster mental wellbeing. The flexibility provided by digital communications enables parents with limited time capacity, accessibility issues, or geographical limitations, to become much more involved with their children's school life.

A collaborative return to the classroom

The adaptability of both students and teachers has well and truly been proven throughout the pandemic, with educators demonstrating an incredible growth



mindset in their approach to the hurdles of the last 18 months. Supporting and helping each other has been a key facet to all Covid-19 success stories, and the education sector is no different.

Sharing stories of what worked and why, and advice on how to better support students, empowered teachers and students alike to adapt quickly and effectively. From individual teachers sharing 'crowd-sourced' tips and tricks or the UK government's EdTech Demonstrator Programme, which encourages best-practice sharing from tech-leading schools, the collaborative efforts throughout the pandemic must continue as we return to the classroom.

In-person peer sharing can also be complemented by engaging with dedicated online forums or #EduTwitter, where teachers can find top tips from supportive peers all around the world. By working together and learning from each other (both on and offline), teachers will be able to maximise the benefits of EdTech and apply key learnings from remote teaching experience.

Attainment gaps, learning loss and 'soft skills'

Understandably, a current area of concern is the attainment gap, caused by an average of **1.7 – 3.7 months of learning lost across subjects and age groups**, with pupils from disadvantaged areas significantly more affected. EdTech can be particularly useful in the personalisation of education to address a child's individual gaps instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to catching up. **Feedback and assessment tools** allow schools to better identify areas of concern for students, better positioning schools to personalise learning and interventions. AI (artificial intelligence) and online learning resources will play a key role in this individualisation as schools seek to help students from all backgrounds and close the attainment gap.

Despite worries around the attainment gap, it's important that we simultaneously acknowledge some of the 'soft' skills children have been able to further develop over the past eighteen months thanks to the increased use of technology. From obvious skills such as increased computer and digital literacy through to creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and even social skills, children have been able to develop more practical skills through this challenging time. Additionally, the temporary shutdown of 'normal life' meant many young people also picked up hobbies like coding or game programming – both of which provide excellent experience for future careers in technology.

A future of blended learning, as we have seen throughout the pandemic, has the potential to better support and empower students through the creation of a more rounded and individualised learning environment. With the help of EdTech tools such as one-to-one devices, online progress trackers and cloud platforms for resources and feedback, schools have built upon the adaptable and resilient spirit of pupils and teachers since March 2020 to overcome huge obstacles to learning and progress. We are only just starting to see the potential of EdTech to unlock new avenues of learning, development and support for students, delivering a more creative and stimulating learning environment which holds the wellbeing

and needs of the students at its core. Just as EdTech allowed the focus to remain on students' wellbeing and progress throughout the pandemic, it has an equally, if not more important, role to play in the return to the classroom and in the ever-evolving future of education.

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