

Why has SA's education not been improved by tech?

By [Glenn Du Toit](#)

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South Africa is a paradox. We have significant development, natural resources, and skilled people. Yet we also have incredibly high poverty levels, few opportunities for unskilled people, and a struggling education system. If there were any doubts, the pandemic's impact on schools clearly defined these challenges, specifically around technology's roles in our schools.

The South African education system, for the most part, is far behind our global peers. Two years later, many fee-paying private schools remain ill-prepared and ill-equipped to shape their learners' futures with technology.

What can we do about it?

Fortunately, South Africa's education problems aren't unique. Taiwan, in the 1980s, was in a very similar position. Though earmarked as a leader among semi-industrialised nations and a top developing nation that could become a global power, Taiwan struggled with a massive education backlog and a largely unskilled workforce.

Yet today, Taiwan ranks well inside the top 50 most prosperous nations with a thriving technology sector, sits at the centre of semiconductor manufacturing.

How did this nation change its fate? A lot of energy and focus went into education.

Companies like Acer took the lead, supporting technology-focused learning and creating workforces for the country's new era.



Glenn Du Toit, director of Acer Africa. Image supplied



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Education sparked Taiwan's rise and can do the same for South Africa. Our future depends on how well we prepare today's people for tomorrow's needs. So, let's just give schools lots of technology, right?


But that doesn't work. It's not as if South Africans have been doing nothing. Smart classrooms and connected learners have long been topical for us. Then, where are the results?

Fixing tech in schools

Too much education technology was essentially box-dropping: putting devices in the hands of educators and learners, then expecting the magic to happen organically. This outcome didn't materialise. We need to do more to equip educators, not just with hardware, but with the skills to use devices, software and resources to their full potential.

We must define technology's purpose in the classroom: what is it meant to do? How should it work? Many schools and stakeholders didn't fully grasp this question until the pandemic provided answers.

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In hindsight, edutech enthusiasts forget about people first, then processes and, lastly, technology. Simply giving a learner a laptop won't do the job. There needs to be a well-designed plan for that laptop's purpose and role in the education journey.

How will we accommodate the laptops on classroom desks, especially in the primary phases where desk size is restrictive? What about security, not only on the device but concerning theft and damages?

Get such details wrong, and every stakeholder will push back, negatively impacting learning. The Covid-19 era has made this apparent: it showed schools how to use technology effectively, and there are many good news stories of schools leading the way in day-to-day teaching using technology to its full effect.



Photo by August de Richelieu via www.pexels.com

Enabling schools

It matters how and why we choose devices. A device at half the price yet a fraction of needed functions is not as good as something that might cost a little more yet delivers. Yet the journey starts with people - educators and learners - and how they reach their goals. How do we enable educators to adopt technology and adapt their lessons?

Enablement means supporting schools with programmes. These programmes give educators self-learning resources, case studies and international support groups.



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The pandemic revealed South Africa's education opportunities by exposing our education shortcomings and the challenges of introducing technology into classrooms. It illuminated a clearer picture of what is possible, and what educators and learners need. It's about much more than a laptop for each learner. It's about enablement, cooperation and support.

South Africa's literacy rates are staggeringly low, and our dropout rate for learners is shockingly high. Of 25-34 year-olds, 15% have a tertiary qualification; the average across OECD countries is 47%. We need to change this, and we can.

Countries like Taiwan show that starting at the back and ending at the front is possible. Let's take the lessons from the pandemic's impact on education, learn from the hard knocks whilst capitalising on the wins, and use them to create a future for education worthy of all our people.

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