**Public Sector Future podcast**

**Detail: Episode 19 -- Stefania Giannini**

**Interview Transcript**

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**Talent:**

**1.** **Olivia Neal [host]**

**2.** **Stefani Giannini [guest]**

**Assistant Director-General for Education (unesco.org)**

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello, and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes.

I’m your host, Olivia Neal. Together, we explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change. We meet the people behind the stories, hear their firsthand experiences and lessons learned.

Throughout the series, we discuss technology and trends as well as the cultural aspects of making change happen. I’m joined today by Stefania Giannini. Ms Giannini was appointed UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education in 2018, becoming the top UN official in the field, and is responsible for leading the Education 2030 Agenda, encompassed in Sustainable Development Goal (or SDG) 4. Prior to taking on this role, Ms Giannini has a served as Senator of the Republic of Italy and Italian Minister of Education, Universities and Research.

We’re going to talk today about her goals for inclusion and sustainable development in education, and action taking place to make this happen. We’ll learn how how priorities have shifted with the rise of digital learning and how UNESCO is supporting teachers through this.

Ms Giannini, welcome to the show.

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I wonder if we could start by just giving our listeners a bit of context as to what the education sector at UNESCO does. What are your objectives and who do you support?

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** Well, let me first recall what UNESCO is about. UNESCO is the only UN agency which mandate to cover all dimensions of education.

So, since the establishment of this organization 76 years ago, we have been driven by a very clear, principle and idea, which is about education is a fundamental human right, the bedrock of personal, economic and social development. And as our constitution put it nicely and famously, so to say, part of how we can build peace in the minds of people.

Given this mandate, what UNESCO is supposed to do now in this century, it’s about running the very ambitious and universal goal set within the 2030 agenda of the UN and is the implementation of SDG 4. That means achieving quality, inclusive education for all by 2030.

So, you can imagine it’s a mission which has a lot of responsibility in terms of coordinating all the efforts that member states as well as international organizations are doing to achieve this ambitious goal, and also to support concretely on the ground on some specific actions. And we could see UNESCO as well as UN system in action, responding to the pandemic and the unprecedented impact that the pandemic still has and had on the education systems worldwide.

So, we are a global platform. We convene ministers of education and all partners involved in education. And we are in charge of setting normative instruments, whether it’s about fighting discrimination or education or supporting teachers, and we are also present on the ground. We have ~~a~~ 53 field offices and we are very much supporting especially lower-income countries to make children going back to school now in this recovery phase, for instance, or to, ~~you know,~~ work on some literacy program in countries where literacy is still a big issue. I wish to mention Afghanistan, for instance, where UNESCO was running the largest literacy program that has been running for a decade.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, your role within the education sector is very broad, so you’ve got a very clear and well-articulated objective in achieving SDG 4 by 2030, which is now only eight years away, so, really starting to move forward very quickly. And you’re doing activity both in terms of bringing countries together and being in individual countries on the ground.

How did you, as an individual when you came into your role as the assistant director general for education. How did you decide where to start and where to prioritize?

[TCR 00:04:56]

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** Well, my background is in academic profession. I am a university professor and have been rector of a public university in my country, which is Italy, had a background in politics as well as being a senator and minister of education in my country. Actually moving from the national and European dimension to this global platform and having this global responsibility, I felt a little bit like, how can I say, conductor, director of a big orchestra. So, you have the piano, excellent players of the piano, you have the drums, you have all different instruments and they’re good and excellent work. But your job, my job actually, is to try to make a very well sounding polyphony. And it’s not an easy job, of course.

However, since the beginning, I understood that challenges then four years ago were very much about making the system of international organizations, focusing on education, working more and better together, focusing on some results-oriented priorities and actions on the ground. I can mention education in emergencies and education for migrants that, four years ago, was one of the top priority in many countries as a political priority.

I can mention girls education has – this is still a big issue in many countries, not only in the global south. And then we prioritize immediately ~~this –~~ this topic as well.

So, it’s very much listening to country needs, watching carefully the big picture we have, and looking at the specific context, how we can support communities to prioritize education, to give education as a as a human right to every single child and learner in the world.

And I think that UNESCO added value in this exercise is very much having these, how you say, humanistic approach to education, understanding education not simply a way for skills development, which is a very important component, of course, but very much about sharing values, and transmission of better knowledge and awareness of the importance of cultural diversity, respect, tolerance.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, in your role, you have a very unique perspective in that you get to see, and understand and listen to people who are active on the ground in all different regions around the world. And I’m wondering how you’ve seen the use of technology and digital approaches in education and if there are areas where you’ve seen that work well, and if there are also areas where you think that there needs to be continued awareness of some of the challenges.

[TCR 00:09:38]

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** I mentioned already the COVID pandemic as a big game changer. I would say that the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the role of technology and increased reliance on education technology and digital learning. I would say that today, digital learning is the topic of the year, for sure, and it’s demonstrated an agility or capacity for innovation.

I mean, you can imagine virtual classrooms by overnight just became the new normal, and all the education system had to reorganize itself around this new normal. That means from the government perspective, it was about putting in practice new policies on digital learning, and making the system agile.

From teachers’ perspective, it was very much about being reskilled in many countries, not always having the right support to do that.

And so, digital learning was about assuring continuity of learning. And this is the positive side of the story, and this is something we have to recognize.

The second point I wish to highlight through this global laboratory for innovation that we actually could observe, we could see very much room for reinventing the system for leveraging the power of technology and to use technology – and that’s the challenge we have now – at the service of inclusion, at the service of equity, at the service of reaching out to the most marginalized and not the other way around.

But now, if we look at data we have, sincerely, it’s time to take a critical look at how to put inclusion and equity at the very center of EdTech. And as you know, there are somecritical point

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One, and the first, about one-third of the world’s students still – it’s about 500 million students – couldn’t access remote learning opportunities. And that is about exclusion. Then we can say that digital divide actually amplified inequalities that we already had before the crisis.

And now, the stakes are really huge. To close the digital divide and to leverage technology for learning innovations and inclusion is one of the musts we have and is one of the priorities we have in our common agenda in education.

And the second point is about building an ecosystem around technology and education. I think EdTech requires an ecosystem of innovation, which is not yet ready everywhere. So, that’s why, as UNESCO, we took the leadership on that side. Supported by the private sector, a partner Dubai Cares, we gather experts, we led consultation to chart a new course for connected learning.

And now we have what we call global declaration on connectivity for education. We focus on three key principles: First, innovation to be centered on the most marginalized. Second, it’s about investing in open, free and high-quality digital contents.

And third, it’s about supporting innovation, especially pedagogical innovation. Moving from the traditional classroom to the digital ones is not simply putting on the screen contentIt’s very much to rethink, to rebuild, to reimagine education. And this is the other positive, so to say, outcome of these unprecedented two years we are all living in the crisis.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think one of the things that a lot of people listening to this will be very aware of, maybe much more so than before the pandemic, is the role that teachers have to play directly in the quality of their children’s education and how quickly those teachers had to adapt during the pandemic. And you touched on that briefly before, that this isn’t just the case of taking your existing material and putting it online, but teachers really had to pick up new skills, pick up new technologies, engage students in a very different manner than they had before.

And I wonder if there’s anything that you’ve seen through the pandemic, which we could learn from in the future about how teachers can best be supported in that role, as we think about other, more gradual transformations, are there things that we should be doing to help support teachers in their roles?

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** Well, teachers have been, for sure, on the frontlinesthroughout this health crisis and its huge impact on education, a little bit like medical doctors in the hospital, so to say, no? (Laughter.) And I think that it’s not been easy for them to manage such a huge change. You know, it’s been also very fast-changing landscape.

So, it was about the change in the system of teaching, but it’s also very much about the change in the role of teachers in the system, in the classroom. So, it’s obvious to me that teachers have to be directly involved now in the design and the use of technology in their practice. This is very much about their training. This is very much about their social, emotional support. And I think that teachers more than ever now require systematic professional development to teach with technology.

Let me mention some data I have in mind. According to a joint survey we just published with the UNESCO and the World Bank, two-thirds of advanced countries offer special courses on digital skills during the health crisis, while only 20 percent of low-income countries did so.

And we also had a survey for teachers, and we cover 60,000, representing a broad constituency worldwide. And more than 65 percent, they said, well, we are not ready. We are not well-equipped to address this new scenario.

So, I think it’s very much now time to understand how we have to prioritize teaching profession and supporting teachers. We are doing something at UNESCO through our global teacher campus, which is a special initiative that we are building under the coalition we established to support countries in the pandemic. And we are in the process of empowering some one million teachers with digital skills. I mean, it’s still a small number in comparison with the need we have globally. (Laughter.) However, is already first step. And I think that this new kind of strong partnership we are having, including Microsoft, can really help us to boost the system on this side.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, we’ve touched on the pandemic and some of the goals that you have. But just thinking a little bit more broadly about your work towards SDG 4 and the target date of 2030, some of themes that I’ve heard come out from what you say have really touched on the need for dialogue, for collaboration, for partnerships to help move that forward and to help that – that orchestra create a beautiful symphony.

But I just wondered if there’s anything in particular which you would pick out, as your areas of focus or your priorities for the next couple of years, which you would like to see move forward as we go towards 2030.

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** I think building on this need for change and unlocking the potential of education for change, I think that we have a tremendous opportunity to use education for sustainable development to become the driver for change.

That means what? That means building on a green curriculum, for sure, more, and this is about advocating with countries to keep this as a priority in the coming years. This means also making learning environment sustainable and sustainability oriented.

We call green schools; that means the school itself should become a model of sustainability. Either we talk about energy, you know, waste and trash collection, either we talk about learners being more in contact with nature, having good experiences of biodiversity, all these issues, they are not so yet very much embedded in education systems. And according to our recent survey from some 100 countries, we found that only half of them made reference, for instance, to climate change, and it’s a question of now really to reorient the system.

And the key word in this phase between recovery and resilience is transformation. I think that the power of education is about transforming society, individuals first, giving knowledge, awareness and changing behaviors, and as a second step, change in society and the environment around schools.

And this is something that we are very much focused in this year. As you maybe know, there will be a big initiative convened by the UN Secretary General Guterres on transforming education. And the idea is to wrap up the lessons learned from this pandemic, to prioritize education as a key game changer around the topics we’ve just discussed, more or less, and – and I mean, advocating with the heads of state, with governments to put education on top of their political agenda. And this means, of course, more investment, not less, given also the challenges that countries are still having because of the impact of the pandemic on their economic systems.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Wonderful. And that makes – that makes a lot of sense.

So, just one final question from me: In terms of the – the work, which you just discussed, embedding sustainability within the education system and really starting to make that a foundation for how transformation can happen and then how recovery can build on that, are there any examples of that work which you’ve seen happening in any countries or schools or universities where you’ve seen success, which you would recommend people have a look at?

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** At university level, I see an unprecedented movement of universities taking the leadership on this topic. There is a specific network I wish to mention, led by Bergen University in Norway. They are very much convening many other institutes of research and universities to focus on sustainable development to be prioritized in terms of their curriculum, their programs, but also broadly speaking, as I mentioned before, to be the new normal for research. So, it’s a nice movement.

And in terms of schools systems, we have at UNESCO School Networks, and there are around 11,000 all over the world in all countries, I would say. And especially in Japan, these children and teachers are very much developing the model of sustainability at school level. So it’s another kind of interesting example of education for sustainable development in action. And you can find all these – these nice concrete examples on our website.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic, thank you. Well, we’ll make sure that we include those links along with this podcast as well, so people can find them easily. That’s been wonderful.

**STEFANI GIANNINI:** Thank you very much.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Stefania Gianinni. And thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own digital transformation journey.

If you enjoyed today’s episode and want to help others find it, please share, rate, and review the show. It really does help people find new shows like this one. And remember to listen and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Check out our show page for links to all of what was discussed today and visit us at wwps.microsoft.com.

If you’re interested in hearing more about the use of digital approaches in Education, check out our earlier episode with Mohammad Almadani, the CEO of Classera

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