



Covid-19
**Are we
asking
the right
questions
about...**

**Reopening
schools?**

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on education systems around the world. It represents what the World Bank calls “the largest simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetimes”.¹ The latest figures show that nearly 1.2 billion learners – more than two-thirds of all learners enrolled worldwide – are affected by the closing of schools globally.²

South Africa took early steps in this regard, with schools closing on 18 March 2020, merely 12 days after the first case was reported. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has proposed a staggered reintroduction of public schooling, starting on 1 June. It is not clear, however, if this plan will be implemented effectively, as the levels of preparedness are reportedly low, while uncertainty around how opening schools will affect the spread of the virus remains high.

This short report addresses two inter-linked questions about which we urgently need greater clarity. If schools cannot (or should not) reopen for all learners anytime in the near future, then how do we ensure that more learners are able to learn from home? On the other hand, if the vast majority of learners cannot learn at home, does that provide impetus for opening schools sooner rather than later? The report lays out the debate on these two critical questions.

When should we reopen schools?

Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga has repeatedly stated that schools will reopen for matrics and Grade 7s on 1 June, with other grades gradually returning to school on a fortnightly basis, starting with Grade 11s and 6s, and ending with Grade Rs.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) welcomed the Minister's announcements, but expressed concern about the capacity of several provincial education departments (PEDs) to implement the various safety prerequisites.³ The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) called the reopening of schools in the context of the coronavirus “a state-engineered massacre”.⁴ Although couched in less sensational terms, various other organisations have expressed their concern that the DBE would not be able to ensure the safety of learners and school staff alike



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During the Covid-19 pandemic, CDE will release a new series of publications titled: 'Are we asking the right questions about...'. These will be short reports that contribute to public discussion about the crisis and how the country is responding.

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(including members of the ruling party, NPOs Equal Education and Section 27, and various teacher unions), especially in schools where overcrowded classrooms are a reality and where water and sanitation measures are inadequate, never mind additional safety precautions such as masks or hand sanitiser.⁵

Education expert Professor Jonathan Jansen expressed concern about the DBE's proposal to "cram" as much knowledge into learners before the end-of-year exams by shortening school holidays. Jansen further said that it would be unfair to expect teachers to make up for lost time and unfair on poorer learners if schools were to function again as usual, as it would "ensure that the rich get richer ... and the poor get poorer".⁶ Prof Jansen believes that the school year should be scrapped, with learners being passed to the next grade, with a bridging curriculum for matrics who enter university in 2021.⁷ A representative of UNISA has pointed out that "nothing prevents us from extending this academic year into the next one".⁸ The proposal to cancel final school exams is currently also being debated in France, Canada, and the United Kingdom.⁹

Not everyone agrees. DBE spokesperson Elijah Mhlanga called Jansen's proposal "laughable".¹⁰ One parent indicated that the possibility of the school year being lost was inducing high levels of anxiety in parents, who "need reassurance [from the DBE] that a whole year would not be lost".¹¹ The DA has also called for "every effort ... to save the teaching year".¹² It has suggested that the DBE develop a protocol "to determine when and why each individual school may open or close in difficult situations ... to prevent the ad hoc closure of schools if and when infection is discovered".¹³

Around the world, there have been suggestions that schools represent low-risk sites for transmission of Covid-19. Education expert Nic Spaul has pulled together the global evidence on children and their vulnerability to the disease. While admitting that the studies on children and Covid-19 come from relatively few countries and that information is "being rapidly updated as new papers come out", he reaches some strong conclusions.¹⁴ There is convincing evidence, Spaul argues, that children are much less likely to acquire the infection than adults. The research Spaul cites from other countries points consistently to the fact that "children are less likely to get infected (either from each other or from adults) and they are less likely to transmit even where they are infected".¹⁵ He contends that, given these facts, school closures do more harm than benefit. In his estimation, "for the poorest 80% of learners in South Africa there is virtually no curricular learning that is taking place during lockdown".¹⁶

Concerns remain about how government will manage the infection risks for the adults who are required to get schools started again. They would include teachers, principals, administrators, and transport workers. There is also a more general issue of ensuring that children can be kept safe during their transportation to and from schools. It will also be necessary to replace the adults who, because of their age or co-morbidities, are high-risk. But Spaul points out that children least at risk are those from Grades R to 3. These are also the children who are most likely to prevent parents or caretakers from leaving the house to work because they require supervision.¹⁷ Broadly speaking, the evidence Spaul marshals indicates that arguments against opening schools based on safety grounds appear less and less compelling.

Another motivating factor for getting children back to school is the issue of hunger. Malnourishment in children is especially injurious, leading to physical and mental stunting in the medium- to long term. This already affects more than one in four children under the age of five in South Africa.¹⁸ 9.6 million learners depend on the National Food Nutrition Programme, which provides meals at schools.¹⁹ This programme was shut down by the DBE at the start of the lockdown. The only province that has reopened schools in order to hand out food is the Western Cape, which has been handing out meals to 100 000 learners per day²⁰ (usually close to 500 000²¹). Minister Motshekga has confirmed that learners who go back to school from 1 June will receive school meals.

The threat of learning loss posed by the possibility of extended school closures is a short-term problem, but, as with insufficient calorie intake, it can produce deleterious long-term consequences. Global studies have revealed that learners who experience a protracted gap in their education experience long-term disadvantages relative to their peers who missed no schooling, including weaker educational results, life earnings, and economic opportunities. Societies as a whole lose out on human capital.²²

Getting learners back to school should therefore be a priority. However, the concerns of teachers and their unions around safety are understandable. On 20 May, five unions released findings from a survey of almost 9 000 public schools (out of a total of almost 23 000) across South Africa. The survey showed that by 18 May, "94% had not received hand sanitisers, 78% did not have soap and water, 99% had not received the delivery of

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sufficient masks for learners, and 92% did not have material for cleaning and disinfecting surfaces during the day".²³ This suggests that unless there were dramatic changes since mid-May, the vast majority of schools will not be ready to reopen as scheduled.

Whether schools do receive these materials from government before 1 June remains to be seen. The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the largest teachers union in the country, has called on teachers not to return to work.²⁴ If school closures do continue, however, it will be important to develop methods of mitigating these negative consequences. The best way to do this is to keep learners learning at home.

How can we keep learners learning?

President Ramaphosa stated in his address to the nation on 24 May that "no parent will be forced to send their child to school if they are worried about safety".²⁵ Thus, even if schools are ready to receive learners on 1 June, it is not clear how many will return. All learners who are not in matric or Grade 7 will continue to stay at home in the meantime. If, as Spauld says, no learning is taking place for the vast majority of learners, how can this be remedied?

One controversial proposed solution to the problem of a lack of learning during the lockdown is one that some tertiary institutions and private schools have adopted: online learning. Is it feasible to shift teaching and learning online for schoolchildren? If so, to what extent?

During the 2019 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa promised that the government would, over the following six years, provide every schoolchild with a tablet. He also promised that coding and robotics were subjects that would be introduced. Some advocates of technology see the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate the trend of digitisation in learning. Makano Morojele, Head of Education Reform at Absa, has indicated that online learning represents a new opportunity for reimagining the upcoming decade of education. This is because the medium- to longer-term perspective can help us to sift through our priorities, she noted.²⁶ Sarah Gravett, Dean of the Education Faculty at the University of Johannesburg, has argued for the "necessity of preparing pre-service teachers to teach with technology".²⁷ Elsewhere, it has been argued that one benefit of online learning is that "it is so much easier to scale-up than ... face-to-face education".²⁸

Blended learning, which is a combination of traditional learning methods along with online education, could be an especially productive dual approach to learning that mitigates the negative effects of traditional and online learning processes. It also potentially helps with the limitations of teachers and can reduce costs for schools. SPARK schools have been experimenting with this kind of approach for years now. A report by John Bailey and Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) notes that distance learning could provide an "opportunity to extend the learning day with both in-classroom work and at-home learning" once schools reopen.²⁹ Just recently, private school group Curro has announced the opening of an online school that will offer "a learn-from-home online model that is aligned with Curro's enhanced CAPS curriculum".³⁰

As for public schools, however, Prof Jansen and many other local education stakeholders and experts have argued that any attempt to introduce and rely on online or other digital education methods right now will exacerbate South Africa's already wide inequalities in school.³¹ The statistics are revealing. Only 10% of all households, and 2% of rural households, in South Africa have access to the internet at home. This jumps to 65% and 45% respectively if you include access to mobile data, but there are concerns about prohibitive costs.³² Another worry is that not all mobile devices support access to learning materials. Overall, four out of five learners do not have access to the requisite facilities.

Massive differences in the quality and outcomes of basic education in South Africa have always been a feature of our education system. The sources of inequality are manifold, including differences in access to resources and household situations. Many households, for example, lack a consistent supply of electricity. In addition, teacher quality plays an important, although difficult to quantify, role, meaning that learners in richer areas tend to outperform learners in poorer areas.

South Africa suffers from extremely high levels of what the World Bank calls 'learning poverty', and it is concentrated amongst the majority of poor learners. PIRLS, an international benchmark test that assesses reading proficiency, shows that Grade 4 learners in the most affluent schools (9% of all learners) achieved a score that is 39% higher than the average scored by the remaining 91% of learners.³³ In TIMSS, the mathematical equivalent of PIRLS, this differential was 45%.³⁴ The same PIRLS test found that 78% of all Grade 4 learners

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were unable to understand a simple age-appropriate story.³⁵ This explains why so few learners – only two out of five who enter the basic education system – manage to pass matric.

Some efforts to address the digital divide have been introduced. At the end of March 2020, the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies announced a partnership with the DBE to ensure online learning is a reality during the nationwide lockdown. Virtual classrooms would be set up, where pupils have access to online and broadcast support resources. However, further information about this initiative – how it is meant to work and whether it has indeed been set up – does not seem to be accessible.³⁶ E-readers have also been made available for learners via online platforms in partnership with Vodacom, MTN, Cell C, and Telkom, although it is not clear how many have benefited. Vodacom has also set up a free (i.e. zero-rated data) 'e-school' that provides curriculum-related material for learners from Grade R to 12 in all the major subjects.³⁷

Unfortunately, the conversation around the provision of online or blended learning often lacks analytical depth and is not sufficiently grounded in South African realities.³⁸ Merely providing a child with a laptop or tablet and giving them access to data or zero-rated websites, even on the assumption that they have access to internet and electricity, does not provide a full solution to the educational challenges faced by learners in South Africa today. That is because the learner's social environment may not be conducive for learning, as may be the case for learners living in shacks in informal settlements. Parents may be out working and so unable to help learners, or are often unable to assist. As one parent was quoted as saying, "Because I'm uneducated, I've been facing difficulties helping them [my children] with their school work."³⁹ On top of that, proponents of technology simply assume that teachers, many of whom are older, already struggle with subject content knowledge, and have never been trained in other education modalities, are capable of teaching with the use of technology, which is at best overly optimistic. This line of thought also forgets that many materials and pedagogical practices, perhaps especially for younger children, are not readily transferable to teaching online.

Given the extreme nature of this pre-existing inequality and a lack of access to the internet, one group of academics is calling for an alternative way of learning, arguing that "unilateral implementation of online teaching and learning by education institutions will result in an academic disaster and will exacerbate the Covid-19 humanitarian disaster".⁴⁰ Neither teachers nor learners possess the means to make this shift in such a quick turnaround, they say. A research report by JET Education Services concluded, "The internet is not the best way of communicating with even relatively highly educated families, and must therefore be a poor choice for communicating with the large majority of South African homes."⁴¹ The World Bank recommends that lower- and middle-income countries use a multi-modal learning plan that makes use of extant infrastructure rather than switching everything online.⁴² Home learning during the time of school closures has been aided by online tools in most parts of the world. However, given that so few people in southern and eastern Africa have access to internet (one in five households), and that 84% of the rural population in this region has no access to electricity, UNICEF has been working with governments and education partners to provide learning access via radio, SMS, and printed materials.⁴³ In El Salvador, a free national call centre was set up to provide support to learners and parents in the delivery of educational activities.⁴⁴ Television has also been widely used in other countries. This has also been implemented in South Africa, but in a small-scale study, fewer than half of parents indicated that they knew about this development; even fewer said their children used it.⁴⁵

Improving access to these non-traditional forms of education is therefore a crucial priority for South Africa, which government must pursue at the same time as it seeks to reopen schools. JET Education Service's Nick Taylor argues that "far and away the most useful channel for providing learners with study materials is through print".⁴⁶ He recommends that schools provide these materials, along with simple guidelines and suggested study timetables, to learners.⁴⁷ According to one estimate, three million readers could be printed for primary school learners in three weeks. The Minister of Basic Education has announced that learners can collect books from schools. Now, says University of Cape Town Education Professor Ursula Hoadley, it is up to government to ensure that learners can access books and other supplementary materials.⁴⁸ This will require coordination on a large scale across the different tiers of the state. It will also require a clear channel of communication, perhaps via SMS, as this is the best way to reach the majority of parents and learners.⁴⁹

Concluding Remarks

Covid-19 has had an extremely disruptive impact on education around the world, and South Africa is no exception. There are several challenges that come as a result, ranging from food distress in the short term to widening inequality in the long term.

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Given the negative effects of extended school closures on individual children and on society as a whole, the reopening of schools is rightly considered a priority, especially since the risk of infection and death for children is very low. Yet schooling cannot resume if safety precautions have not been provided to learners and school staff alike. Government must speed up the provision of these measures to ensure that school communities are kept safe and healthy – this is not a small task. The department needs to report to the public, parents, learners and parliament on what is happening in each province and school district. In addition, plans need to be made and communicated to all education stakeholders, including learners and parents, about what will happen if the virus surfaces at a given school.

For those learners who will not be restarting school activities on 1 June, other forms of non-traditional learning need to be ramped up. Digital learning is clearly not a panacea in light of South Africa's socioeconomic realities. Printed materials and other supplementary forms of learning, such as radio, could be the best alternative. Learners who will be staying home need to be able to go to school to safely collect textbooks and other learning materials, as well as food.

Online education processes, practices, and pedagogies are set to increase, adapt, and improve around the world. Some people argue that this should be seen as an opportunity for South Africa to devote resources to using these modalities more effectively. Such efforts would include training teachers on how to use some online resources to potentially complement face-to-face learning. The challenge in South Africa is that the education system performs at a very low level, which was apparent long before the pandemic. Unless we address the fundamental causes of this underperformance, any attempt to add online teaching methods into the mix will inevitably fail.

It is critical therefore that we use this crisis to re-energise a broader drive to reform the education system. As the World Bank put in a report on policy responses to the Covid-19 shock: "The drive for better education must start now".⁵⁰

Notes

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