



Opinionista • Maryke Bailey • 6 April 2020

Schooling during Covid-19: It's time to strip the curriculum

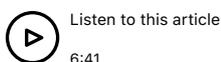
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For the next year or two, we need to consider stripping our school curriculum down to the bare essentials. We need to separate the ideal from the crucial and make it official policy.



I'm on maternity leave and I've been watching from the sidelines the havoc that Covid-19 is creating in our school year.

I applaud all those who have stepped up, shown initiative, and given of their time and skills during this crisis. Different stakeholders have come together to get resources out there to our kids – on TV, the internet and radio. I salute you all!

Yet, from the sidelines, it seems like we are scrambling to cater to the demands of the existing school assessment system and curriculum. This might be possible in resourced schools (although still very difficult), but we have to accept that for too many of our schools it's not going to work out this year or next. We can't assume that after the initial three-week lockdown period is over that we will start returning to normality. We need to prepare for months of disruption of the current school year and probably next year as well.

This is a period of heightened stress and anxiety for everyone, and for too many of our children, it will be a period of increased danger from domestic violence, a period of hunger, and a period of mourning as the virus spreads and takes the lives of caregivers and family.

So let's start mapping out some practical plans that could take some stress off our teachers and kids, and allow us to use the time we do have more productively so that we can bring some certainty and stability into our school situation, and avoid having to cancel the school year altogether.

For the next year or two, we need to consider stripping our school curriculum down to the bare essentials. We need to separate the ideal from the crucial and make it official policy. We'll need to prioritise certain subjects as well as specific topics within the identified subjects. We'll need to rework what and how we assess, and how often we assess. Many teachers and schools will already be doing this, but there are many more that will need blunt directives and guidance from the government before any initiative is taken.

The practical obstacles speak for themselves. Even if we were able to get all our kids online, even if we assume that they are all independent workers with good listening comprehension skills who could read for meaning, and even if we assume we have enough teachers who can successfully navigate new ways of teaching and assessing remotely, we still don't have enough time to finish the current curriculum. One of my colleagues informed us that current research shows that distance learning takes twice as long as face-to-face learning, and this seems to be tallying with many teachers' experience. This can and will change as more teachers work out ways in which to teach remotely, but this won't change overnight, especially in a

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system like ours that is so steeped in traditional teaching practices. So, even if we are able to get the entire nation online and learning, we still won't be able to complete the entire year's curriculum with the time available in the average school day under current conditions.

And we know we won't get the whole nation online soon, so how do we cater to the kids whose only learning will be when they do eventually go back to school? Either we have to increase learning time, and stress, or we halve the curriculum and what we expect kids to cover in the next two years. We can play catch up later with the non-essentials.

Here are some suggestions for the Department of Basic Education to get the ball rolling on how to keep our system going from Grade 4 onwards in a time of global crisis. Please note that these do not need to be implemented universally. Obviously the more a school is able to cover the better, but these could provide some lifelines for our weakest schools.

Grades 4-8

Prioritise certain subjects officially. This is already being done with many lessons and online resources focusing on maths and the languages. But let's bring some certainty to the situation. This means that only these subjects will be required to be assessed formally (whether through exams or other modes of assessment), at the end of the year and only these subjects need to be reflected on the end-of-year report. Thus, some subjects will need to be suspended, or they are taught, but are not examinable. This will take away any pressure of formal assessments or the need to finish the curriculum in non-core subjects.

Grade 9

Either we take the same approach as suggested for Grades 4-8, or students only write exams in the subjects they will take into the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10-12). Perhaps Grade 9s should only focus on those subjects for the rest of the year.

FET Phase: Grades 10-12

Much of the pressure in this phase, particularly in Grades 11 and 12, is that certain topics have to be covered because they are in the matric exam. I would suggest that we consider taking out some sections from the matric exams in 2021 and 2022 to create breathing space for the current Grade 10s and 11s. If these topics are absolutely necessary for university, but unlikely to be used elsewhere after school, we can look at having the minority of students who do get into university cover the topic in the early weeks of January before universities open for teaching.

Grades 4-12

Give schools the option to cancel June 2020 exams and rather use the time for teaching. I know that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is very specific in what it accepts as report marks for the different terms and exams are important in CAPS. But for once, let's focus on learning rather than testing. We might even need to cancel matric preliminary exams and use the time to teach and be more prepared for the end of the year, rather than assess superficial learning.

We also don't need to have four reporting cycles that correspond to the different terms. We can be much more flexible about how and when we issue reports under these circumstances. Of course, special attention will need to be given to Grade 7 and Grade 11 reporting, as these reports are used for entrance to high school and university, but I'm sure if we put our heads together and work with the universities, we can figure something out.

We are in desperate times. As teachers, we are going to have to step outside of our subject bubbles and reflect how necessary our subject or a topic really is in a learner's life during these times. As an education system, we are going to have to rely on time being used for teaching and not endless testing. We will need to put our egos aside, and our assumptions and traditional beliefs about teaching, learning and the curriculum, so that our poorest and most vulnerable kids can still have a fighting chance when all of this is finally over. **DM**

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As Covid-19 spreads throughout the world...

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Washington State and Ohio have just announced that schools will resume in September. My kids stopped schooling at the end of February. Six months of formal schooling will be lost. When days are lost because of snow, they are made up in summer holidays. But even though the Covid 19 curve is flattening in WA state and we seemed to have avoided a crisis we are under lock down till May 4th and it was decided the kids should remain at home as they are often the silent spreaders of the disease. If this is anything to go by then SA schooling is going to be disrupted for a while. While it would be amazing if online learning could be stretched out to all scholars in SA and there are ways to do this via TV, Radio, Cell phones, etc the pedagogy of any online or distance learning system includes lots of adult support. The rural Australian radio school still relied on parents to cajole their kids into some sort of learning and most online courses or online schooling is actually a hybrid of online and bricks and mortar learning. Even full time online courses have regular online teacher meetings or a meeting with a learning facilitator. A plan is needed and the suggestion that the curriculum be stripped down to the bare essentials is a good start.

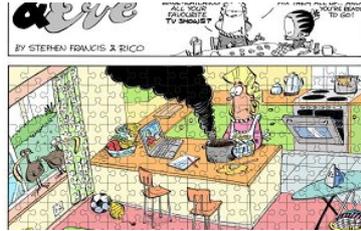
Hector Kingwill 6 days ago

Hear Hear!!

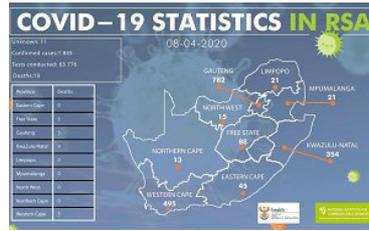
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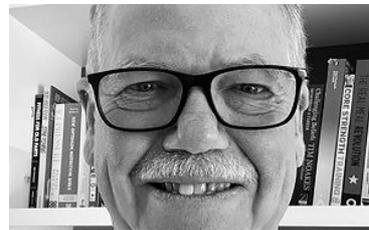
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By Ray Hartley and Greg Mills

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