

Education, Covid-19 and care:

social inequality and social relations of value in the South Africa and the United States.

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Education has not been spared during the Covid-19 pandemic that has exposed deep inequalities across the world along lines of 'race', class, gender and geography, as well as the digital divide. However, many of the policy responses and solutions proffered to mitigate the crisis fail to address the generative structures that made public education institutions so vulnerable to shocks in the first place. Using the work of Nancy Fraser and Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), we argue that understanding the prevailing capitalist social institutional order, and the relations it generates between spheres of production and spheres of reproduction (including education), is fundamental to theories of change that not only respond to the Covid-19 moment justly, but also avoid reproducing and deepening the conditions that made Covid so cataclysmic to begin with. By analysing the conditions of public education across South Africa and the United States comparatively, a case is built for distinguishing between affirmative responses that leave inequitable structures intact and transformative responses that seek to address the root causes of injustice and violence amplified by the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19; education; crisis; social reproduction; social justice.

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Introduction

“For us as a sector (education), the coronavirus is mainly a health problem, then a social, economic and political problem.”

—Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, South Africa (SABC News, 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic has jolted a restless world out of uneasy slumber and into confrontation with its own precarity. Contrary to the quote from the South African Minister of Basic Education above, social, economic and political problems are the crux of the coronavirus problem, a messy knot of racialised, classed, gendered and geographied inequity and deprivation that has forced open the eyes¹ of those who have too long looked away from the violence inflicted by prevailing social arrangements on marginalised communities.

This paper suggests that the Covid-19 moment has shone a spotlight on the relations of capitalist production with the other spheres of life and living which it predates, and sounded a clarion call for a reconsideration of the entire institutionalised social order which perpetuates inequality and violence. By deploying theoretical lenses that foreground the relations of narrowly defined economic production to the social spheres of reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017), education crises prior to and during the Covid-19 moment are analysed across two countries, namely South Africa and the United States, to suggest that prevailing responses to these crises will further exacerbate inequalities if left unchecked.

We outline the pre-existing situations in both contexts before Covid-19, and then examine the effects of the pandemic to exacerbate these. Particular attention is given to techno-philic² and technocratic responses (both of which *affirm* inequalities rather than *transforming* them), and further raise caution about the possibilities for disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007) should policymakers uncritically accept ‘commonsensical’ offerings from profit-seeking interests.

Finally, we suggest that the Covid-19 moment presents an opportunity to *transform* the current unsustainable relations between narrowly defined ‘productivity’ and all other spheres of life-making, including social reproductive activity, calling for transnational political organisation and revitalisation of relations with the natural environment upon which we all depend (the abuse of which has been hypothesised to precipitate the emergence of the novel coronavirus). We argue that noticing these relations cannot but question the prevailing status quo as unfit for human flourishing for all.

¹ Cf Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*.

² Here we mean ‘techno-philic’ to refer to proposals and solutions that assume technology to at worst be neutral, and—more often than not—to be intrinsically ‘good’, without consideration of its unintended negative social consequences (e.g. Bridle, 2019). This is not to be confused with a rejection of technology outright, or as a suggestion that there is a strong case to be made for making access to the internet a universal human right (see Berners-Lee, 2020).

Holding complex axes of inequality: fortified or exposed?

An intersectional perspective requires holding in view ‘race’, class, gender, space, language, sexuality and other forms of oppression produced *by* the drawing of boundaries and the delineation of some as ‘more worthy’ than others inherent in a capitalist ‘institutionalised social order’ (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2017).

With the caveat that binaries loosely represent the world and are not the world itself, we suggest here the terms ‘fortified’ and ‘exposed’, repurposed from Teese and Polesel’s work (2003) on schooling (dis)advantage. Fortification stands as a placeholder for plural, mutually reinforcing forms of advantage: fortified institutions have access to ample material resources, attract students and staff able to supplement the institution with their own reserves of social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), produce and reproduce hegemonic cultural and linguistic forms and knowledges, and enjoy spatial positionings within flows of power and prestige. Exposed institutions, on the contrary, present clusters of multiple forms of **dis**advantage: peripheralised materially, spatially, linguistically and culturally, and produced by and productive of the marginalisation of those who have no choice but to seek education opportunities therein. Institutions are dialectically, but not deterministically, produced by and productive of their members’ concomitant social power.

The binary fortified/exposed is far from neat: specific individual institutions might have localised forms of fortification within sub-circuits of power, yet still be relatively exposed when considered in the broader frame of socio-economic and political influence. What does characterise relative fortification or exposedness are institutions’ capacity to weather shocks and knocks, the stability of their planning horizons, and their relative dexterity in adjusting surface features to prevailing winds of change, while sustaining an stable, adapted core (Black, 2020). These characteristics of fortification and/or exposedness are particularly useful for considering the impact of Covid-19 on education institutions.

Firing up the x-ray: lenses to look through.

In a recent webinar, famed author Arundhati Roy likened the pandemic moment not only as a moment of transition (“the pandemic is a portal”) but also as a moment of *surfacing*, wherein the deep intersectional fault lines of inequality are laid bare as if by an x-ray on the social body (Roy 2020a, 2020b). The Covid-19 pandemic has stripped bare the relations between the narrowly defined realm of economic production and those of socially reproducing human life, including housing, food, education, health, safety, transport, and the natural environment. The prioritisation of “the economy” over these critical spheres of life-sustaining activity along with the retreat of those responsible for sustaining systems of life-making (the state and the ‘public’), has rendered those most marginalised and most exposed unable to sustain themselves or their families (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016).

Dismantling the forces that have hollowed out social systems and safety nets, while responding to (and after!) this pandemic moment, requires thinking collectively at multiple scales—a challenging task under the single biggest global abrogation of the right to move and assemble in living memory.

Firstly, the grammar of solutions, responses and logics cannot be confined to the level of the nation-state: Covid-19 is simultaneously a local, national, regional and global concern, as are the forces and forms of political-economy that rendered it so deadly.

Secondly, transgressive, pro-poor, feminist and anti-racist responses to the Covid-19 moment require not only thinking on multiple spatial scales, but also on multiple time horizons. Capitalist economic arrangements are no stranger to crises, and hard lessons have to be learned regarding how forces in favour of markets and privatisation might utilize a moment such as the pandemic to deepen even more brutal neoliberal approaches to social arrangements (Klein, 2007). Such responses must not only mitigate the ravages of the pandemic in the immediate future, but also build towards disrupting and transforming social and economic arrangements towards a more just social, political and economic system capable of weathering future disruptions and shifts. Climate change has progressed irreversibly, with temperature increases locked in at the global level: thinking about social change cannot be limited to 'returning to normal' when pre-pandemic society was on a trajectory of environmental devastation. All this while accelerating strides in digital technology and machine learning challenge human subjectivities and power flows in the Global North (Wark, 2019), as the Digital Divide excludes the marginalised from participating in these new forms and flows of wealth and power (Gurumurthy, 2020). The very conception of what being human, and being with the 'more-than-human', *means* must be interrogated (Christie, 2020) if genuinely just and sustainable social formulations are to be imagined and forged.

Fraser: boundary struggles and frames of justice

The work of Nancy Fraser provides multiple tools with which to think through Covid-19 and its multiple effects and entanglements. Beyond her own work relating to Bhattacharya's Social Reproduction Theory vis-à-vis boundary struggles (e.g. Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Fraser 2016; Fraser, 2017), Fraser's influential writing on the framing of social justice issues is also fruitful to deploy.

Matters of the frame

Perhaps the best known work of Fraser is her normative typology of social justice (Fraser 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008). This theorising attempts to hold multiple axes of justice in conversation—namely economic, cultural and political—and defines justice as parity of participation for all affected by, and subjected to, particular issues of (mal)distribution, (mis)recognition and (mis)representation.

But beyond the *substance* of justice, Fraser also raises concern about the *frame* of justice which designates the *who* and the *how* when adjudicating those affected and the mechanism by which justice should be pursued. By troubling what she terms the Keynesian-Westphalian frame as the assumed unit of justice (i.e. nation-states and their justice systems), Fraser highlights the difficulties of pursuing justice in a globalising world and abnormal times (2008). Increasingly, nation-states are not autonomous to make policies or arbitrate justice concerns outside of regional and international flows of power, nor are they sensitive enough to be seen to do justice to local concerns and issues. In a financialised, globalised capitalist economy, 'foreign investors'

hold sway and influence over nation-states through debt structuring and liquidity controls, while simultaneously concerns regarding the natural 'commons' as a planetary sink for human waste foregrounds how pollution and environmental decimation ignore humans' arbitrary political boundaries. Fraser also offers productive terms by which to describe the *degree* of a justice remedy, referring to superficial redress as an *affirmative* form of justice, and deep structural change as *transformative* (2005, 2008).

Covid-19 is one such phenomenon which has shown up nation-state borders as both the default unit of organisation and control for pandemic policy-making, as well as being porous and flimsy for containing quasi-natural disasters that show scant regard for nationality. It has also thrown sharp light on how the sphere of social reproduction also escapes nation-state moorings, with both cooperation to share Covid-19 intel, and competition between states for scant supplies of testing equipment and personal protective equipment (PPEs), putting paid to the myth that any country could tackle Covid-19 alone. Transformative responses to Covid-19 require inter-state cooperation at a scale previously unimagined, leaving affirmative responses as the weaker recourse of governments who are themselves vulnerable to the vicissitudes of international markets and upheavals.

Crisis of care: on social reproduction contradictions in contemporary capitalism

Fraser has written extensively about the need to conceptualise a capitalist moment as a totalising 'institutional social order' (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018; Fraser, 2017, 2016, 2014) encompassing more than just 'the economy' but in fact structuring and shaping all facets of human society:

"This crisis (of social reproduction) is one strand of a general crisis that also encompasses other strands—economic, ecological, and political, all of which intersect with and exacerbate one another. The social reproduction strand forms an important dimension of this general crisis, but it is often neglected in current discussions, which focus chiefly on the economic or ecological strands. This 'critical separatism' is problematic. The social strand is so central to the broader crisis that none of the others can be properly understood in the abstraction from it." (Fraser, 2017, "Crisis of Care?" para. 2)

Expanding the concept of class struggle to what she terms *boundary struggles*, Fraser calls forth multiple intersecting axes of exploitation, expropriation and extraction in gendered, raced and ecological forms. Doing so foregrounds the divisions capital and capitalist modes of production rely upon to deny the true cost of production, thereby disavowing the real source of 'surplus value' as a shifting of value from those who produce it in multiple spheres (whether monetised or not) to those who accumulate it at the top of the social pecking order.

This contradictory extraction and flow of value accumulation is intrinsic to capitalistic arrangements and can be identified in different guises and forms throughout different epochs of capitalist history (Fraser, 2017). But constant throughout is the tendency for "capital's accumulation dynamic (to) effectively eat(s) its own tail." (ibid., "Social contradictions of capitalism 'as such'", para. 6), although perhaps this could have been phrased in reference to

Goya's Black Paintings; capital's unceasing appetite for accumulation effectively eats its own children:

“Every form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated *social-reproductive* ‘crisis tendency’ or ‘contradiction’. On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.” (Fraser, 2017, “Crisis of Care?” para. 4)

Education institutions—although differentiated in their perceived social value from ECD to universities—share a common position in the intersection of ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’. On the one hand, capital is keenly interested in the production of workers, particularly their docility and their skills profile that matches demand in the labour market; on the other, education—as social reproductive labour—is feminised, under-resourced and not seen worthy of adequate provision by the state in a financialised neoliberal form of capitalist arrangements unless it speaks to its productivist function.

On describing the specific dynamic between production and reproduction in the neoliberal, financialised era (i.e. the current instantiation of capitalistic arrangements), Fraser notices that such social arrangements...

externaliz(e) care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it. The result is a new, *dualized* organisation of social reproduction, **commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot**, as some in the second category provide care work in return for (low) wages for those in the first. (2017, “Social Contradictions of Financialized Capitalism” para. 3, our emph.).

As we shall explore later, it is this contemporary dualised organisation of education that differentiates fortified institutions, (i.e. supplemented through fees by families who can afford them) from exposed ones (those institutions under-resourced by the state that serve families who bear the burden of social reproduction alone), and hence shapes differentiated responses to, and framing of, the Covid-19 pandemic (and particularly, decisions about whether and how to return to school).

Inequality, Covid-19 and education in South Africa and the United States

We begin by briefly sketching the pre-Covid-19 contexts, outlining the well-documented pre-existing challenges and inequalities—or what we call ‘societal comorbidities’—which the pandemic exacerbated. Systemic concerns of inequality, funding and governance, spatial justice, and curriculum are laid out for the reader to appreciate as well as the uneven terrain onto which an international health crisis descended.

We then outline the actions taken in the wake of the pandemic’s unfolding, and how these pre-existing inequalities articulated with national ‘lockdown’ and the closure of education institutions. Affirmative responses to these challenges included online learning, the efficacy and fairness of which was questioned on multiple fronts.

Finally, we critically evaluate what a just response to these plural crises might entail, not only for immediate relief from the vagaries of Covid-19, but to prioritise life-making over profit-making now and into the future. Different proposed responses belie theories of change rooted in fundamentally antagonistic political positions, characterised by whether the “institutionalized social order” of capitalism is considered viable or not. Cautions are also raised regarding forms of opportunism that arise for new avenues of profit-seeking in the Covid-19 moment, and that naive technophilic responses risk amplifying existing problems.

The state of education pre-COVID

South Africa

“No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long.”

(Fraser, 2017, “Crisis of Care” para. 1).

Fraser’s observation could well apply to the unravelling of the South African social fabric, particularly regarding basic education. Schools sit at the nexus of South Africa’s knot regarding social reproduction: they are—in addition to supposed places of teaching and learning—also places of childcare, feeding and nutrition, safety and health provision (with over 9 million out of 13 million children receiving meals at school). This situation is particularly the case for the vast majority of South Africans whose families are so poorly compensated for their labour—or without earnings at all—as to be unable to provide these basic necessities in “the domestic space”.

Paradoxically, as sites of public social reproduction, schools are also unable to muster the minimum basics: safe scholar transport has remained a huge obstacle to many school-attending children, both urban and rural (Portwig, 2018; Equal Education 2016); schools are also not places of guaranteed safety, positioned as sites of gang recruitment in urban areas, or built to unsafe specifications in rural areas (Equal Education, 2018); and, ironically—burdened as the majority of poor schools are with these additional responsibilities—schools are also unable to establish meaningful rhythms of teaching and learning in the face of more pressing issues (Black, 2020; Jacklin, 2004). “Opening the doors of [quality] learning” has remained elusive for the vast majority of school-attending children in South Africa since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Christie, 2008; 2020), and opportunities for meaningful education on any terms remains slim for those on the wrong end of material, linguistic and spatial inequities, all of which closely align with ‘race’ through sedimented apartheid balkanisation and enduring spatialities.

South Africa has also not escaped global trends regarding the de-valuing and de-professionalising of teachers and their work. Increasingly prescriptive standardised curriculum, a focus on standardised assessment, and a prevailing discourse of teachers being framed as ‘unfit’ for their work have all led to a loss of social status for the profession, along with a crisis of teacher supply (Green et. al., 2014) and alienation amongst the teaching workforce (Chisholm, et. al. 2005; Reddy et. al., 2010). A neoliberal ‘ideal subject of learning’ is enshrined in SA education policy (Silbert, 2012), further (re)producing the hegemonic ideal of students as

individuals engaged in meritocratic schooling, and concomitantly obfuscating structural forces that perpetuate the prevailing (highly unequal) institutionalised social order.

Over this vastly unequal landscape, where 8% of students attend fortified schools heavily supplemented by state provision and the remaining attend exposed schools who cannot (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019, cited in Christie, 2020), sits a bifurcated governance structure which divides responsibility for redress and administration across provincial and national spheres of government. Even during 'normal' times, responsibility for addressing schooling issues is parried between these two spheres of decision-making depending on the theory of change presented (Black, 2020b), or offloaded onto schools at the local level (Karlsson et. al., 2019).

The United States

As the global epicenter of the COVID pandemic, the US provides a stark example of the many layers of inequities of a hyper capitalist society—built on the legacy of imperialism and slavery, the violence of capitalism with its logic of extraction and exploitation, deems some people essential and others disposable. The pandemic has exposed these multiple axes of exploitation, expropriation and extraction in gendered, raced and ecological forms not only revealing but deepening injustices.

The US has not only been the epicenter of the pandemic, but also the epicenter of neoliberal education reform. This view of education is one of competitive markets where students, teachers, and other education professionals are ranked against each other using high-stakes standardised tests as the primary metric for comparison. Teacher unions are seen as a barrier to improving education, teaching is controlled through test-aligned curriculum, and the teaching profession is deregulated through fast-track teacher training or use of unqualified teachers. Public schools must compete for students with deregulated charters or academies run by for-profit or nonprofit management organizations—run by appointed boards—to be compared, judged, and potentially closed or expanded based on test scores and profitability. Education is designed to produce “human capital” and “add value” to the economic needs of society, instead of, for instance, serving the social good, meeting the collective needs of communities, or preparing students to reimagine a regenerative society required for human thriving on the planet. Governance is shifted from democratically elected officials to unaccountable private bodies—eroding the idea that informed citizens should make decisions about their own welfare.

The US has one of the most unequal education systems due to its largely decentralised funding structures and the fact that schools are financed from local property taxes. State and local governments cover nearly 90% of local school budgets and because education is the single largest component of every state budget, it will be especially targeted for the cuts that accompany both revenue loss and redirected spending on medical care, unemployment insurance, and other critical needs during the pandemic. The national government has a significant role to play to reallocate funding where needed and the recovery acts that have been debated in the U.S. Congress will largely determine the extent to which the education recovery goes beyond providing more computers and minimal relief for the hardest hit communities (for example the \$2 trillion CARES Act sent only \$14 billion to public schools—far less than 1% of the total allocation.) Caution is also raised regarding forms of opportunism that arise for new

avenues of profit-seeking in the COVID moment, and that naive technophilic responses risk amplifying existing problems.

Even prior to the COVID crisis, the US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos had been calling for dramatic cuts each year in her proposed education budget attempting to eliminate billions of dollars for primary and secondary programs across multiple areas and programmes (Strauss, 2017).

The prevailing policy ideal is an education marketplace where each parent competes for “the best deal” for their own child, diverting billions away from public institutions to charter schools, voucher programs, private schools and online virtual schools, all underpinned by a new managerialist logic that privileges supposed ‘competition’ as a simultaneous route to ‘efficiency’ and ‘quality’. From the “Choices in Education Act” to the creation of “Education Savings Accounts”, the goal is to divert public school funding to private entities, despite damning evidence of the failings of this approach (Spreen, 2019).

Ensuring families have access to quality public schools that are adequately resourced to serve the students in their communities, including integrating neighborhoods, fully funded public schools, lower class size, and supported teachers are not policy priorities of the current US regime. In states that embrace corporate reform, there are parallel school systems that do not serve all students well, and squander limited public resources. In “choice” and charter states like Florida, Arizona and Nevada, conflicts of interest and fraud are rampant, while laws for profiteering have been bent towards private investors’ interests at children’s expense (Spreen, 2019).

Budget cuts and reallocation come on the heels of the largest wave of teacher strikes in decades, and 2019 was a watershed year for teacher struggles against austerity and private interests in U.S. schools. Teachers have cited the lack of resources, low salaries and the spread of charter schools as some of the challenges they face.

As in South Africa, the US has millions of children who are homeless, food insecure, and without health care: schools serve critical social reproduction functions for the vulnerable beyond their core role of advancing learning, by providing feeding schemes, computers and connectivity to those without, and—in many cases—child care for essential workers.

Pandemic: effects of Covid-19 and inequality on education

Unsurprisingly, the effects of Covid-19 amplified the inequalities described above. Not only do these differentiated circumstances play out in people’s material abilities to physically distance, stay home and follow guidelines to reduce transmission, but in the words of one medical specialist:

Increasingly, it appears that someone’s positionality on the uneven playing field of life will determine her prognosis in addition to biological factors for COVID-19... there is a growing body of evidence pointing to the intersectional stressors of living with inequality, racism, classism, marginalisation or being “othered” **that act at a cellular level even in the presence of adequate medical care.** (Baldwin-Ragaven, 2020, p. 34, our emph.)

These inequities both material and embodied have come down most harshly on poor, black communities in both the United States and in South Africa.

Education institution closures in SA

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic to South Africa re-centred schooling inadequacies again, as well as excavating the problematic role of schools as (fragile) centres of public social reproduction. Once all schools were closed to contain the pandemic, those few schools able to supplement state provision through private fees continued learning online (with mixed success and increasing precarity, as parents' ability/willingness to pay fees for closed schools waned). Students in middle class homes with digital devices, data, connectivity, appropriate spaces for learning and adult mediation, continued to try to cover the normal curriculum even while the country went into one of the world's harshest lockdowns.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of exposed schools had no such option, and most children in South Africa not only had their learning disrupted by Covid-19, but struggled to access more basic needs such as food. That children began going hungry during lockdown led to concerns about the social costs of keeping schools closed, with some calling for schools to reopen for feeding, while others (e.g. the C19 People's Coalition ECD & Basic Education Working Group) called for a decoupling of the provision of basic necessities from schooling teaching and learning operations. That the Department of Social Development struggled to provide food parcels for families outside of schools without significant efforts from philanthropic civil society further exposed the weak reach of the state for effecting basic social support across a broad diversity of contexts (Mbovane, 2020a; 2020b). Pressure thus mounted for schools to be open not as schools, but as sources of food.

Additional concerns regarding gender based violence (GBV) also began to arise as a country wrought with femicide and domestic violence found itself confined to the sphere of the home, economically stressed and without recourse to conflict de-escalation strategies: reports of domestic violence were reported to treble in the five weeks of 'hard' lockdown during late March and April (IOL, 2020). With this came concern particularly for the safety and wellbeing of female school-age students who were argued to not only be more at risk of GBV when outside of school, but also less likely to be able to sustain efforts to do school work at home under increased levels of domestic labour.

Decisions regarding when and how to reopen also became fraught with framing issues, with provinces differentiated in preparedness in line with historical inequities: the legacy of perpetual under-provision of infrastructure in what were the Bantustan territories (Jacklin & Graaff, 1994, Equal Education, 2018)—and the absence of meaningful redress of this legacy—meant that over 3000 schools were still without access to water and basic sanitation required for containing the contagion. While infrastructure is a provincial competence in South Africa, constrained budgets (a shared administrative sphere) posed serious limitations to what individual schools or provinces could do without national support in response to the pandemic.

Despite significant centralization of control and power during the State of National Disaster declared by Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, education bureaucrats still continued to devolve decision-making along traditional lines³, with the provinces exercising relative autonomy and the national Department of Basic Education refusing to annex powers in order to better coordinate Covid-19 responses

Nowhere were framing issues more stark than in decisions made about teachers and their safety. During public engagement Q&A (ENCA, 2020), the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, dismissed queries and concerns about teachers working conditions and safety on returning to work as ‘a labour issue’ which should be taken up with the provincial education departments, who are the official employers of public sector teachers. Concerns about teacher safety and school readiness galvanised a rare moment of unison between the five dominant teaching unions and the three main school governing body alliances, who all called for school readiness before schools could be reopened. However the subsequent gazetted regulations outlined norms and requirements that only fortified schools could meet, once again indicating the hegemony of such institutions as the ‘ideal school’ in the policy imaginary of decision-makers.

Education institution closures in the US

In-person classes were cancelled across the United States from March onwards to contain the spread of the coronavirus. In many states and districts, school buildings were closed for the remainder of the school year, and distance learning replaced in-person learning for approximately 45 million public school students.

Most educational leaders have been operating from the premise that they should aim to transfer business-as-usual schooling into homes as much as possible, with scant regard for the effects of this on social inequalities and how students and their families are positioned:

Although the concern about educational inequities has focused on access to laptops and internet access, there are much deeper inequities at play in the move to recreate school at home. When we assume that the learning that matters only happens at school, we are not only ignoring a robust body of research about life-long learning, we also continue to approach families, especially those from Indigenous or communities of color, as inherently lacking or deficient.

(Ishimaru, 2020)

Contradictions about when and how to reopen schools safely, while still mitigating the expanding contagion, means state and district leaders need to go beyond addressing health

³ In the Western Cape, the single province run by the opposition political party (the Democratic Alliance), the Minister for Education, Debbie Schäfer, in fact ignored the second school opening delay as instructed by the national Department of Basic Education on the 31st of May. At the 11th hour, a 1st June opening was delayed by a week due to school unreadiness: however, the Western Cape declared itself ready and proceeded to readmit students on the 1st of June, despite all other provinces delaying until the 8th of June 2020.

concerns to consider how to systematically address the social inequalities that the virus has laid bare. In addition to the mobilisation of local and state government support, a wide range of organizations, teacher groups and social movements are stepping forward to provide everything from tutoring and legal advocacy, free wi-fi and devices for students who lack them, to meals for families and support for health and childcare. As structural inequities are more sharply exposed in this time of crisis, this moment also holds the possibility that, with purposeful action, these needs can be more fully addressed when schools (and society) return to a “post-Covid” reality, rather than a return to the inequitable status quo.

As education leaders make decisions that they consider to be in the interests of young people and families, the question remains as to what youth and families need and want, and how to ensure decisions are not based on assumptions and policies that reproduce inequalities. As the current #blacklivesmatter protests against police violence and racism have shown, youth, parents, families, and communities may be struggling to manage the multiple impacts of the pandemic, but they are not voiceless: rather, systems routinely ignore or disregard their insights and expertise.

The limits of online learning across both contexts

While online learning was touted by pundits as the ‘solution’ to school closures (e.g. Watson & Calland, 2020; Grootes, 2020), most of these technophilic responses ignored significant limitations to meaningful online engagement (Black, 2020c). Moving online was only an option for a small minority of fortified public primary and secondary schools,⁴ despite only 11% of South African homes having an internet connection into the home, and the vast majority of people relying on (expensive) mobile data solutions for access (Stats SA, 2016). Once again, access to devices, time and space, data and support is deeply classed and raced.⁵

Information on South African students’ ability to ‘keep up’ with the pace and volume of academic work while at home is still unfolding, but the early indicators suggest that learning disparities fall along the lines of inequality as expected. Anecdotal and synthesised reports from the US indicate that the predictors are similar (class as imbricated with ‘race’, access to material conditions etc.)(Carey, 2020). In both cases, it is the *care* done in person and through human-to-human relationships that gets lost in online, asynchronous formats (Black, 2020c; Deming, 2020). That this pedagogical, relational component of teaching and learning is invisible to metrics and technocrats is unsurprising, given that these aspects of education fall into the realm

⁴ While online learning was clearly inappropriate for the vast majority of schools, it was seen as a broad systemic solution for higher education institutions. The discourse regarding Higher Education in South Africa has been dominated by universities, ignoring the 50 TVET colleges and their severe challenges with moving online: see Mafolo (2020). Strong opposition to continuing academic programmes online arose (C19 People’s Coalition Post-school WG, 2020; Black Caucus at UCT, 2020; Bangani, 2020; HSRC, Public Universities with a Public Conscience Webinar, 2020), even while the official line from the South African Department of Higher Education has embraced the shift as the ‘new normal’ (see USAF, 2020). The irony of the DHET’s mantra “No Student Left Behind” was not lost on those aware of its origins in the second Bush administration’s neoliberal education policy framework.

of *social reproduction* and not *production*: as Fraser cautioned, the extractive relations between the narrowly economic ‘productive’ sphere and the sphere of social reproduction must necessarily disavow this reliance to avoid tallying the true costs involved. Narrowly economic measures of educational ‘value’ rarely—if ever—include open-ended ‘soft’ labour in the form of counselling, psycho-emotional support and relationship building upon which meaningful teaching and learning depends.

Another silence in the online discussion has been the intensification of work for teachers and lecturers (cf. Almeida, 2017; Cronin, 2020). Marx (Marx *Capital Vol. 1, Grundrisse*) theorised the role of technology in production processes as a mechanism for increasing ‘relative surplus value’ in the face of the universal rate of falling profit (Harvey, 2019). Given the plethora of neoliberal policy discussions about how to make education ‘more efficient’ in light of decreasing public expenditure and increasing access and enrolment, it is not surprising that technology is seen as a panacea to assist education to ‘scale up access’ through online and blended learning formats, often under the auspices of ‘open education’ interventions (see, for example, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training’s draft *Open Learning Policy Framework*, 2017). But the potentials for such shifts in mode for the working conditions of pedagogues have been largely ignored. Again, anecdotally, lecturers and teachers seem to be experiencing moving online during the pandemic as a significant increase in work volume, both in materials preparation and student support. Those institutions whose students and teachers *do* have online access might experience a hyper accelerationism produced by the new demands of the mode (e.g. Mathabane, 2020), while those who cannot access are left farther and farther behind.

In addition, caution has been scarce regarding shifts to online learning as a form of privatisation of public education by stealth. Given that the digital platforms in use (MySakai, Google Classroom etc.) are all proprietary software—some of which are also heavily involved in machine learning, data scraping and commodification—this is no small concern. We will return to discussing these potentials for disaster techno-capitalism when analysing the proffered theories of change as responses to the pandemic moment.

Beyond the portal

While it would *seem* there have been multiple responses and approaches to the education-COVID crisis, the lens of social reproduction theory suggests that there are two clear families of responses: one with a telos of returning to the pre-Covid “institutionalised social order”, and one which recognises that pre-Covid order as unsustainable and intricately implicated in the production of the pandemic crisis in the first place. Using Fraser’s justice lexicon, the former will be referred to as *affirmative* responses, which seek to leave the pre-Covid order in place but temporarily alleviate extreme suffering, and the latter as *transformative* responses, which seek to leverage the Covid-19 moment for radically reimagining the roots of social relations.

Prior to and after the reopening of schools on the 8th of June 2020 in South Africa, discussions and debates around the impact of Covid-19 on schooling largely pivoted around the issues of online and remote learning, school feeding schemes, ‘school readiness’ in the form of Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs), adequate sanitation, water, class sizes and the possibilities for

physical distancing⁶ at schools. Assessments and the national department's intention to 'save the academic year' also featured prominently. These issues, often cast in technical terms, mask how the virus has exacerbated existing inequalities, as conveyed by Jacklin's ([Jacklin, 2020](#)) observation that there exists a:

(C)onsensual recognition among teachers that this Covid-19 moment has not only exposed inequalities in the schooling system: it has also exacerbated and legitimated these in a way that must be challenged. The dilemma in which teachers are placed can be compared to that of a surgeon who, having previously been asked to do heart surgery with no equipment other than a rusty pocket knife, is now asked to do this in the dark.

While in the US most schools are now closed for the summer holidays, dramatic school funding cuts are happening at the same time that schools will be facing increased expenses due to Covid-19-related needs, including: access to devices and connectivity for distance learning; additional food and social services for students from low-income families; and expanded learning time to deal with learning loss caused by school closures. Schools will also need to increase investments to meet the social, emotional, and mental health needs of their students who will be struggling with the stress and trauma of this pandemic and who have been largely isolated from their peers and other adult support systems for some time (Darling Hammond, 2020).

Further observations include how affirmative calls to 'reopen the economy' and 'send kids back to school' foreground the articulation between spheres of production and spheres of reproduction, revealing the ways in which daily and generational reproductive labour of households, schools, hospitals and elsewhere, also sustain the drive for accumulation (Bhattacharya, 2017) and economic growth—often at the cost of precious life. The enthusiasm and simplistic mania for remote and online learning (Watson & Calland, 2020) both at school and post-school levels without educators and pedagogic processes ignores the need for social relations in the interest of democratic education, critical citizenship, the commons and the public good. Technology can be an effective complement to teaching, particularly in these times, but never a long-term substitute. The latter approach will merely entrench already existing elitism, inequality and a two tier education system.

Understanding the present pandemic as 'mostly a health issue' as shown in the epigraph, ignores both countries' history with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As with that disease, Covid-19 too should not be couched solely in a biomedical framework, and instead must be contextualised and linked to historical and socio-economic dynamics. Most importantly, Covid-19 has further exposed the fissures and fault lines of our societies with growing evidence showing how vulnerable, immunocompromised populations (Baldwin-Ragaven, 2020) with precarious working and overcrowded living conditions correspond to racial, class and gender categories. The present reality brings social reproduction theory in a constructive dialogue with intersectionality

⁶ We choose to use the term "physical distancing" and not "social distancing" as we regard the current moment as requiring social solidarity, not 'distancing'. The term 'physical distancing' expresses more accurately what the pandemic requires.

approaches. In a blog titled, 'The Prospects for Just Schools in the Wake of COVID-19 Responses', Ishimaru (2020) writes of the United States:

Black, Native, and Latinx communities have been hit disproportionately hard by coronavirus; many working class immigrants have been forced to remain in frontline labor or have lost their jobs; those without documentation live with limited access to healthcare, few governmental supports, and constant fear...

These racial inequities profoundly shape how children, youth, and families experience the pandemic. While some privileged families demand online instruction and grades for their children to maintain their academic competitiveness, others experience trauma upon trauma as they care for elders or siblings, respond to rapid shifts, and juggle work, anxiety, and multiple forms of insecurity. Though schools have mobilized to try to address basic needs, the links between educational inequities and food insecurity, housing and job instability, poverty, healthcare and racism are more evident than ever.

Similarly, Jamelle Bouie writes for the New York Times (2020) that:

(I)n Louisiana, blacks account for 70 percent of the deaths but 33 percent of the population. In Alabama, they account for 44 percent of the deaths and 26 percent of the population...The pattern exists in the North as well, where African-American populations in cities like Chicago and Milwaukee have high infection and death rates...**Today's disparities of health flow directly from yesterday's disparities of wealth and opportunity.** That African-Americans are overrepresented in service-sector jobs reflects a history of racially segmented labor markets that kept them at the bottom of the economic ladder; that they are less likely to own their own homes reflects a history of stark housing discrimination, government-sanctioned and government-sponsored. If black Americans are more likely to suffer the comorbidities that make coronavirus more deadly, it's because those ailments are tied to the segregation and concentrated poverty that still mark their communities...What's important to understand is that this racialized inequality isn't a mistake — it isn't a flaw in the system. It reflects something in the character of American capitalism itself, a deep logic that produces the same outcomes, again and again.

(our emph).

The societal comorbidities or 'preexisting conditions' mentioned in these excerpts from the United States also exist in South Africa and schooling too is complicit in reproducing these inequalities. In a statement issued by the C-19 People's Coalition (*'No! to just opening schools. Yes! to opening schools justly'*, 2020), the Coalition, despite the existing inequalities, sounds an optimistic note:

...education should enable and enrich life, learning, and life-making, together for all. It is not just about ensuring that the minority of learners who matriculate have a certificate for an inequitable and unjust job market...Covid19 has shown

us how violently unequal our schools are. During the democratic transition we had an opportunity to create a unified education system that serves all our children justly, freely and equally. We squandered that opportunity. Covid19 has given us a precious second chance. For the sake of our children and those who have yet to come, we dare not squander it again.

The virtues of affirmative responses to the pandemic have tended to be offered by those whose focus is on production. In tacit forms, this is underpinned by the assumption that spheres of *production* are in fact the base upon which all other spheres depend (cf. Van der Berg & Spaul, 2020), although in more explicit messages it might be interpreted as an explicit prioritisation of money over wellbeing (cf. John Steinhuisen in South Africa, and Donald Trump in the US). But affirmative responses, as Fraser outlined, are concerned with surface redress while leaving deeper structures that produce and sustain inequality in tact. In the context of Covid-19, these responses emphasise continued production, and the role of open schools in supporting this, while simultaneously positing the contemporary prevailing “institutionalised social order” as both necessary and sufficient for human life (despite ample evidence that this prevailing institutionalised order does not, in fact, allow for fulfilling the human potential of most people). In South Africa, such lobbying has been strangely motivated by a tacit admission that the vast majority of homes and families are, in fact, unable to bear the burden of their own reproduction without assistance, particularly regarding food provision.

Contrary to narratives from proponents of affirmative responses, the policy options available are not reducible to ‘restore pre-Covid conditions’ or ‘shut education institutions indefinitely’. Noticing school’s entanglement with other spheres of life sustenance such as feeding, safety and health, while remaining concerned for school rejuvenation so as to fortify exposed schools, presents an imperative to imagine policy responses to these concerns that do not place school *opening* as the only mechanism of relief. Some posited suggestions include: maintaining feeding schemes while school infrastructure is addressed, with the added benefit of using feeding scheme for community infection monitoring; creative deployment of distance education via broadcast media, supported with distributed print materials⁷; utilizing closures as opportunities for developing multilingual, locally relevant learning materials for students; amongst others (see cf. the C19 People’s Coalition statement “Open Schools Justly”). To reiterate Fraser’s words from earlier: “‘critical separatism’ is problematic. The social strand is so central to the broader crisis that **none of the others can be properly understood in the abstraction from it.**” (Fraser, 2017). Affirmative responses cannot help caricature transformative suggestions, given their necessary tacit premise on ‘critical separatism’ and the consequent abstraction from—and invisibilisation of—the relations that are of central concern to transformative imaginaries.

Despite the pandemic, the gross irresponsibility of corporate interests determining public policy continues, and genuine social solidarity as expressed by the axiom ‘the free healthy

⁷ Given that schools were inevitably likely to reopen and close repeatedly as the pandemic deepened, such non-contact methods were far more likely to sustain some form of learning for the vast majority of children during the crisis.

development of each conditions the free healthy development of all' across local, regional and national boundaries is lost on those making economic and policy decisions at a nation-state level. Clearly there are no bold radical moves, in either the US or in SA, to suggest a re-evaluation of past practice and certainly scant indication of questioning the underlying structural characteristics which have given rise to the crisis of neoliberal economic and social policies. The effects of the latter policies can be seen not only through the lens of the present pandemic but in the more enduring longer term attributes of the social stratification brought about by patriarchal, racial capitalism which is increasingly propelling inequality, food insecurity, environmental degradation, racism and xenophobia, egregious levels of unemployment and the wide scale psycho-social trauma of marginalisation leading to a process of more or less continuous conflict in society.

A transnational response for a global problem

The Covid-19 pandemic has made manifest Fraser's critique of the nation-state as the base unit of social justice (Fraser, 2009). Fraser reminds us that we cannot...

forget political questions, about, for example, the hollowing out of democracy by market forces at two levels: on the one hand, the corporate capture of political parties and public institutions at the level of the territorial state; on the other hand, the usurpation of political decision-making power at the transnational level by global finance, a force that is unaccountable to any demos.

(Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018 p. 3)

Both these sets of forces, at the national and transnational level, have shaped the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic in multiple ways.

The first is through absent or inadequate preparation for what was, by many accounts, a predicted pandemic. Despite intelligence forecasting COVID or a similar viral outbreak, nation-states such as South Africa and the United States opted rather to gut public services (most notably, but not limited to, health) in favour of market forces and profit-seeking in spheres of public social reproduction, rendering ailing hospitals, care homes and schools unable to respond to a crisis appropriately. As Bourdieu (2003, p. 35) pointed out, health is particularly hard hit by the prevailing neoliberal policy zeitgeist: "The most exemplary case is that of health, which neoliberal policy attacks from two directions, by contributing to an increase in the incidence of illness and the number of sick people (through the correlation between poverty and pathology...) and by reducing medical resources and the provision of care".

Secondly, whether originating internally or externally—and in spite of mounting evidence that contradicts the approach's efficacy—austerity politics has dominated even in the face of the pandemic, clipping the fiscal wings of governments to respond to the pandemic with fiscal policy targeted at the most vulnerable.

And thirdly, through profit-seeking even in the moment of pandemic (what Klein refers to as "shock politics"), whether through large corporate tax bailouts in the United States, or massive prices for PPE materials and water provision to protect students in South African schools. In

particular, caution is required to trojan-horse affirmative proposals that—while superficially seeming to address an immediate ‘need’—in fact exacerbate existing crises, whether deepening inequalities premised on class, ‘race’ or gender relations, or by pursuing practices that exacerbate environmental degradation (including increased activity online: see Tarnoff, *The Internet is a Fossil Fuel Industry*, 2020).

Stepping through to a more just world: what needs to change?

This crisis will not be resolved by tinkering with social policy. The path to its resolution can only go through deep structural transformation of this social order.

(Fraser, 2017, “Another mutation?” para.3).

...there are limits to what the current system can achieve...it’s basic design has limited capacity to address apartheid injustices, overcome the deep inequalities in schools, or provide equal quality for all in terms of experiences and outcomes.

(Christie, 2020, p. 201)

Transformative strategies to reopening schools will require both a denaturalising of the institutionalized social order, along with equitable collaboration and listening to the “deliberately silenced or preferably unheard” youth and families in our systems (Roy, 2004), and not assuming privileged parents and middle classes speak for all families or that only policymakers or education reformers know what’s best for them. Transformative imaginaries must dispel austerity logics rammed with a TINA⁸ rationale, be vigilant against disaster capitalism strategies and remain awake to the social nature of the existing institutional order—that such systems are of people’s making, and hence within the realm of people’s unmaking. In all this, the temptation to seek localised private solutions must be resisted, as to truly dismantle usurious relations between production and reproduction, “abandoning the public mandate of the state is not an option.” (Vally, 2020, p. 3). Only with incisive analysis of the structures and systems that brought the world to such inequitable conditions can we truly step through the Covid-19 portal to a more equitable, sustainable and just society.

⁸ TINA: There Is No Alternative

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