

# Unmasking the state of basic education in South Africa

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The Covid-19 lockdown period laid bare the fibre of South African society: poverty, homelessness, welfare dependence, domestic violence, police and military brutality, healthcare and hunger are all suddenly under national and international scrutiny. From the onset it was clear that, as a nation or a state, we cannot continue to pay lip service to the social justice agenda of the country as the anxious population were suddenly exposed to the inside workings of the national ministries and departments. It was clear that the nexus between the state and the populace is a broken one. There is a global tension about the origin and management of the pandemic, but families in poor communities just want to survive.

Although the immediate focus has to be on staying safe, we can't but wonder if this is also not the time for reimagining the current schooling system for the poor in South Africa. It is already clear that only widespread testing will provide the necessary data to inform a social and economic response for schools. The envisaged 5% sampling testing plan for schools did not materialise.

The most pertinent threat amid the Covid-19 pandemic is the challenge of poverty in South Africa. In August 2017 Statistics South Africa published poverty stats that tell a dire story: that 55% (R30.4-million) of South Africans earn less than R992 per month. One can derive from this that there is a significant section of the population just above this line but who can also be regarded as very poor. Adequate food for a whole month, small overpopulated houses, informal dwellings, a lack of basic sanitation facilities, lack of electricity, dense housing settings and dependence on public transport – these are all realities that underlie the need to lead a decent and productive life.

Based on the research done over the past 10 years on poverty and schooling, a stark picture emerges. On average, racial groups still perform according to apartheid education trends and efforts to improve, equalise and sophisticate the schooling system did not change that trend in our country. Class sizes have increased to almost the same levels they were at under apartheid, and money still talks. There are two public schooling systems, one for the poor and one for the rich. Socially our society is thus under pressure to create and secure developmental opportunities for all, and has been for some time now.

Learners from the middle class can navigate their way through the online platforms that provide schooling support, keep abreast of information from schools, adapt when and where necessary, stay focused and keep working towards their aspirations. The challenge lies with the 70% to 80% learners from poor school communities.

I suggest that this pandemic gives us the opportunity to relook at the schooling system and ask hard questions. We need to reimagine schooling. Some key considerations in the schooling response to Covid-19 should include the global plea that science must lead the response. In this case it should include educational scientists and teachers. We have seen some drastic changes in the schooling experience over the past year or so: for example, the curriculum was trimmed and the timeline adapted to ensure the fundamental knowledge aspects are covered, the foundation and intermediate

phases are limiting exposure in the school, and timetables have been adapted so that all learners don't attend school on the same day and have breaks at the same time. Because most learners in South Africa do not live in fairly stable and safe home environments, challenges such as hunger, exposure to violence, the lure of crime to survive both economically and socially are all challenges during this time.

In my view there is a lack of innovation and creativity to build and strengthen an aligned vector across the different components (policy, administration, teaching structure and support services) of the education system. Over the months of schooling under lockdown, learner absenteeism, the challenges of "masked" teaching and learning, the timeline of the trimmed curriculum, time-consuming screening of learners, and validity and reliability of assessment became the major challenges, whereas less overcrowding in schools and classrooms, more orderly school days and better consolidation of learning materials are noted as positives.

The same endemic challenges remain, however, if there is no real change during and after the pandemic. A review of research in poor school communities revealed that an overhaul of the basic education sector is long overdue. We should start by unpacking what "quality education" means in our context. There is currently no common understanding of this notion in South African schooling, hence we are not experiencing improvement in the lived experiences of learners, teachers and the post-school youth.

Statistics of pass and throughput rates and the test scores of South African Grade 4, 6 and 9 learners, when compared with other African countries in the same tests, are indicators that as a system basic education is not doing well. Engaging with the notion of "quality education" will provide us with clear policy directives to configure a life-aware, life-worthy and life-ready school experience, whereas practices such as overcrowded primary school classrooms, the switch to English as a language of teaching and learning in Grade 4, an overbearing testing regime that supports teaching to the test instead of teaching to learn, and outdated conditions of service for teachers will be seen as the obtrusive and debilitating uneducational practices that they are.

The lessons learned from the pandemic so far points us to the generation of political will to reflect on political direction in order to leverage strengths such as re-imagination and collaboration. These processes must, however, be underscored by a moral consciousness to ensure that relevant stakeholders become trusted partners in sense-making for quality education and in particular for basic education in South Africa. If we want to view the pandemic as a "life-quake", as Bruce Feiler describes it, the meaning of life itself lies in the opportunities for growth and, dare I say, in the opportunity to re-order the basic education system to serve the poor majority in our country.

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A school in Bergville Picket.  
Image: GroundUp