SOCIAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES

# COVID-19 and the 'New Normal' in Education: Exacerbating Existing Inequities in Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper considers education responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, with specific reference to South Africa, examining how inequality has been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. It outlines how education policy choices are shaped and how the (mis)use of evidence highlights the lack of meaningful and robust involvement by key education stakeholders and social science specialists, particularly from the critical tradition. COVID-19 has intensified and sharpened social, political and economic fragilities and inequities globally, forcing governments to (re)think responses to social problems and disruptions. This paper underscores three dimensions of inequity in education as a result of the pandemic: equitable teaching and learning during the lockdown and school closures; inequities that may result from the (re)opening of schools in the 'new normal'; and the lack of attention to psychosocial support and professional development. The paper argues that while this pandemic may be new, it has exacerbated existing inequities in education provision, intensified by the COVID-19 disaster management and education policy. The paper argues for a progressive approach to education transformation in response to this pandemic and future crises and disruptions.*

**Keywords:** Policymaking; Education policy; Equity; COVID-19; Pandemic; Teaching and learning; South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic – socially, politically and economically – have been felt worldwide as the global economy is "estimated to contract by 2.8% in 2020" (Buheji et al., 2020, p. 213), impacting most adversely the countries of the Global South. The pandemic resulted in the closure of institutions and the lockdown of entire countries and, more subtly, exacerbated inequalities between different groups within countries and between different countries. The short-term effects of the pandemic on the impoverished have been significant. The pandemic resulted in, for example, an increase in hunger, extreme poverty and adverse social effects, including a rise in gender-based violence (Mbunge, 2020). The World Bank (2020a) reports that in 2017, 689 million people lived on less than $1.90 day, and the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust an "additional 88 million to 115 million people" into extreme poverty, resulting in more than 729 million affected persons (para. 9). The low threshold of extreme poverty in monetary terms belies the extreme deprivation that the impoverished face (and will continue to face) as a result of the pandemic. The difference in effects between the rich and the impoverished is most vividly illustrated in the South African context, where some people – the wealthy – complained about being deprived of the freedom to surf during the lockdown (Grobler, 2020; Ishmail, 2020; Qukula, 2020) while the impoverished faced a bleak reality of food deprivation for the young since school feeding schemes, critical instruments of poverty alleviation, were halted during the lockdown.

The current pandemic is as much a crisis of the environment as of health. As Mitchell (2020) astutely notes, "COVID-19 is a stark reminder that our assault on the natural world has consequences . . . Humans may not have created the coronavirus, but we have cultured the unnatural conditions needed for nature to toss a $10 trillion-dollar time bomb into our economy" (para. 1). The pandemic does not exist in isolation from ongoing crises and disruptions. The World Health Organization (2020, np) notes that "almost 690 million people went hungry in 2019 – up by 10 million from 2018, and by nearly 60 million in five years." The majority of food-insecure communities are based in Asia but are quickly expanding into Africa. Hunger remains a serious problem, to the extreme detriment of the impoverished, who are even more adversely impacted by hunger during the pandemic. This pandemic must be understood relationally as part of a system of mutually exacerbating inequalities.

In education, specifically, by mid-April 2020, schools in over 188 countries closed their doors, affecting 1.5 billion learners globally (UNESCO, 2020a). The pandemic has not only disallowed students – from kindergarten to university – from attending face-to-face learning at education institutions but has also left millions of students all over the world without any formal access to learning. School closures, unsurprisingly, have impacted the impoverished the most. In this context, this article examines the effects of policy responses to education during the pandemic.

This article is divided into five parts. After the introduction, the second part explores the study methods employed in the development of the paper. The third section discusses who is consulted about education policies during the pandemic, and what serves as evidence to support decision-making in South Africa. The fourth section discusses policy choices in relation to education globally, and South African education policy is used to illuminate global trends. The concluding section discusses the implications of education policy choices, specifically in relation to the post-COVID future.

## METHODS

This paper is largely based on a review of existing literature on the topic. This review covered journal articles, popular media and opinion pieces, academic commentary and grey literature produced by civil society organisations, national governments and international organisations, globally publicised at the onset of the pandemic and, in some cases, before the pandemic. In addition, four interviews were conducted with purposively selected key education policymakers and teacher representatives in South Africa involved in formulating education responses to the pandemic. Two teacher representatives and two government officials from South Africa participated in the study. The critical analysis of literature and interview data draws on critical policy analysis (CPA) to examine how power and inequality are (re)produced. There are different approaches to policy and policy analysis (Apple, 2019; Rizvi, 2006) that are tied to the different educational approaches. In line with Rizvi's (2006) views, we argue that policy is not just factual but also normative and contested. Policy texts are not neutral facts – they are inextricably shaped by and reflect contexts like the current neoliberal discourses on education. CPA is used to examine the question: How has the pandemic impacted equity in education? We draw upon the conceptual framework of Fraser (1997, 2009) – which foregrounds distributive justice as central to the public good and social justice in education – in framing our analysis. More specifically, Fraser (1997) argues for the recognition of marginalised groups as a conduit for achieving social justice. Collectively,

these data offer an opportunity to deconstruct the beliefs, assumptions, values and socio-political dynamics that have informed the development of policy on education governance.

## EDUCATION POLICYMAKING IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

While, understandably, much attention and commentary focus on the effects of the pandemic, it is crucial to unpack the way in which and by whom policy choices are made. In this respect, South Africa, like many other countries, has sought to respond to the pandemic in policy terms as an 'emergency', invoking emergency legislation to ensure a quick and compliant response from citizens (Ramaphosa, 2020). The South African state invoked the Disaster Management Act (57 of 2002) to respond to the crisis. The Act required that an advisory council be established upon the declaration of the disaster, which should include a number of senior personnel from various governmental departments, organised business, organised labour, traditional leaders, religious and welfare organisations, medical organisations and professions, institutions of higher education and institutions able to give scientific and technological input (Section 5(1)*(e)* of the Disaster Management Act). However, despite this mandate, the advisory board appointed to advise the government lacked diversity, curtailing consultation from other key stakeholders in society. A teacher union official in South Africa remarked as follows:

> *There is a very limited role that we play because the government was using the Disaster Management Act to close areas of consultation. We had to force to be consulted because in terms of the National Education Policy Act there are two structures that needed to be consulted on policy trajectory. That is your council for education minister, the provincial MECs and then the professional labour, meaning the teacher unions that are registered under the Education Labour Relations Council. It is a mandatory issue, but the government was not doing that and we had to force the government to ensure that on any other policy we are consulted. (Interview with South African union official, September 2020)*

In invoking emergency legislation, South Africa was not very different from other countries that sought to centralise decision-making during the pandemic. Of note was the nomenclature of related structures, with names such as the authoritarian-sounding Command Council signalling the centralised process of policymaking. Yet, as events unfolded, it was evident that managing the crisis from the top was not effective, given the diversity of localised contexts. That approach even threatened the democratic values

that most Western societies are built upon. Hattke and Martin (2020) note that, "[h]istorically, emergency and disaster management (EDM) has typically prescribed a command-and-control approach to civil defense to protect the population in case of armed aggression", adding that during the COVID-19 pandemic, "[m]any governments have assumed emergency powers, which in some cases are so far-reaching as to undermine the division of power that is traditionally enshrined in democratic constitutions" (pp. 1–2).

In fact, one lesson of the pandemic is that while centralised oversight may be required, the implementation and management of responses to the pandemic are best decentralised. This collective approach to crisis governance is echoed by Hattke and Martin (2020), who argue that "coordination, cooperation, and collaboration can help tackle crises such as the current pandemic" (p. 2).

The approach that the South African government has taken, as is the case in many countries, suggests that a policy response to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 is largely a centralised process. However, a more effective response to the pandemic was evident in Venezuela, where the policy response to the pandemic straddled both centralised and decentralised approaches. Maldonado et al. (2020) note as follows:

> *The government announced further investment to strengthen the Centralised Public Procurement Plan, which manages state purchases of social goods, and it encouraged the creation of ways to bring food from the countryside into cities … [and] [i]n addition to such measures by the state, a key part of the Venezuelan response has been the centrality of public action. (p. 28)*

What the case of Venezuela demonstrates is that decentralised policy approaches allow for more effective responses to social challenges and add legitimacy to policies made at the central level. While the social, political and economic volatility of Venezuela is acknowledged, that country's response to the pandemic is effective. The efficacy of a hybrid approach to managing this public health crisis has been recognised by others (Aubrecht et al., 2020; Topîrceanu et al., 2020).

A common response by governments to navigate the effects of COVID-19 was the establishment of an advisory board to guide policy responses. This was a trend globally. For example, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was established in the UK and the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) was established in South Africa. However, these bodies are predominantly

comprised of scientists, with very little representation from other sectors, including social scientists. Furthermore, to justify government policy responses relating to the pandemic, the refrain 'we are led by science' was frequently echoed by ministers and heads of state to attest to the scientific value and apparent impartial rationalism of their policy choices.

Relying almost exclusively on scientific evidence (with the inclusion of behavioural sciences) implies a complete trust in science in terms of which science is deemed nearly infallible and as outside the realm of the political. This is an erroneous position, as Stevens (2020) points out: "But to rely on science as the determining influence on policy is to misunderstand what science is. And the process of organising knowledge for policy through [an] advisory committee is political, as well as scientific" (p. 560).

The invocation of 'science as evidence' and the argument that policymaking is evidence based are premised on a hierarchy of what constitutes good evidence, with scientific research deemed more valid than research situated in social discourses. There is a narrow-minded view that tacit forms of knowledge, including lived experiences, wisdom and the voice of citizens, are less valid and less able to influence policymaking. Court et al. (2005) argue that when governments seek evidence to develop and support the policy process, several aspects (such as accuracy and objectivity of the evidence, credibility and generalisability of the study and rootedness) are considered to ascertain if the evidence is grounded in reality. The privileging of the sciences by policymakers is based on the misconception that science consists of 'truths' that are irrefutable and that all scientists are in agreement and follow the same methods. Ridge (2020) asserts:

> *We now know that our scientists – like our politicians – are fallible. They disagree. We can't just blithely "follow the science" because there is no such thing as "the science" – just different interpretations of incomplete evidence . . . If you thought the policy debate between politicians was fiery, it's nothing compared to the rows raging among scientists. (para. 3)*

A few worrisome and questionable policy trends have emerged as a result of the privilege afforded to scientists and scientific research, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The approach to policymaking during the pandemic reveals a belief in a linear and almost causal relationship between scientific evidence and policymaking. Russell et al. (2008) comment as follows:

> Academic debate on health care policy-making continues to be couched in the dominant discourse of evidence-based medicine, whose underlying assumptions – that policies are driven by facts rather than values and these can be clearly separated; that 'evidence' is context-free, can be objectively weighed up and placed unproblematically in a 'hierarchy'; and that policy-making is essentially an exercise in decision science. (p. 40)

In spite of the backlash against the manner in which scientific evidence has become the default source that informs policymaking (refer to Hammersley, 2013; Parkhurst, 2017), the evidence-based policymaking approach has established a strong foothold in the context of both developed and developing countries.

Reliance on hard science as the basis of evidence assumes that research by social scientists is less credible, less useful, less reliable and inferior to scientific research. In this respect, it is instructive to note that the South African Command Council (MAC) consisted of more than 50 advisers from the medical profession, including the advisory head, and had very little representation from other walks of life. Paterson (2020) states:

> *[T]he government's ministerial advisory committee comprises 51 doctors and medical science academics, including clinicians, public health specialists, pathologists and researchers. In addition, other key positions for responding to the crisis – the minister of health, the minister for disaster management regulations, the minister of home affairs, and the leadership of the National Planning Commission and the power utility Eskom – are all occupied by medics. (para. 2)*

Critique has emerged from a number of social scientists, ranging from historians and philosophers to educationists, in response to the South African government's restricted reliance on scientific evidence. Phillips (2020), a South African historian, contends that "[t]he critical value of having such historically informed perspectives is well demonstrated when this lens is applied to the COVID-19 pandemic enveloping our country, for South Africa is no stranger to pandemics and so ought to be able to draw on these historical encounters to a good effect today" (p. 1). One of the most glaring limitations of scientific research is its inability to make value judgements and solve ethical conundrums. Metz (2020) makes the following point in his example of the balancing of interests during the pandemic:

> Ethicists, and specifically philosophers of justice, argue about how to allocate benefits and burdens in ways that are fair. Such issues abound in the context of COVID-19. Consider, here, debates concerning how to balance the interests of the elderly against those of the young. Most who die from COVID-19 are older than 60, while Africa has a relatively large population of young people. How should trade-offs be made between them? (p. 1)

The unfairness of this trade-off is noted by Mphahlele (2020), as well as Van Bruwaene et al. (2020): "Children are the victims of the measures taken to halt the spread of COVID-19. They have been denied basic rights of access to healthcare and education. Schools have been closed, and for many vulnerable pupils this has meant an experience of isolation, anxiety and hunger" (p. 574).

Furthermore, while the lockdown may have reduced the transmission of COVID-19, Madhi et al. (2020) point out other co-existing medical trade-offs in relation to TB and health treatment for children. They state: "The potential impact that an excessive and poorly implemented response to COVID-19 may have by interrupting of essential mother-child services in low-income countries could indirectly lead to 235 500 – 1 157 000 additional child deaths over a 6-month period" (p. 725).

Globally, there were exceptions to the medical/scientific approach. Germany, for example, elicited advice from a 26-strong expert panel that mainly consisted of historians specialising in industrialisation and early Christianity, specialists in the philosophy of law and several pedagogical experts. Natural scientists, virologists and medical specialists were in the minority on the panel (Matthers, 2020).

This section looks at *who* is consulted and *what* constitutes evidence in pandemic policymaking. The current global trends in evidence-based policymaking during COVID-19 suggest a non-democratic approach to policymaking. This is contradictory because policy responses, in most instances, are developed for democratic contexts. Thus, it is not surprising that these policy choices have had adverse effects on notions of equity and equality globally. As the next section will demonstrate, citizens in both the Global South and the Global East, a locus for the world's most vulnerable populations, have suffered irreparably as a direct result of these policy responses and paradoxically (un)democratic policy development processes.

## EDUCATION CHOICES AND EQUITY AND EQUALITY

As stated earlier in this paper, the policy responses to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have wrought a number of adverse effects on equity and equality. Some of these adverse effects include interrupted learning, particularly for impoverished learners, learners suffering from poor nutrition due to the suspension of school feeding schemes, a rise in learner dropout rates, increased exposure of children to violence, a lack of access to technology for teaching and learning, a lack of psychosocial support for teachers and learners, increased social isolation and increased anxiety among teachers and learners (UNESCO, 2020b). To illustrate these effects globally, and specifically in South Africa, three aspects are discussed here: first, teaching and learning during the lockdown phase of the pandemic; second, teaching and learning in the 'new normal'; and, finally, the limited psychosocial support and professional development available for teachers and learners.

### EQUITABLE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING LOCKDOWN

By mid-April 2020, about 1.7 billion students in the world had been affected by school closures, representing about 99% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020c). Most countries, apart from Sweden, agreed that closing schools was the most effective way to limit the spread of COVID-19. This response manifested differently across the world, with teacher and learner populations in the Global South and Global East suffering the most adverse effects.

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), school closures impacted 170 million learners regionally. While other regions reopened schools as early as May 2020, many schools in the LAC region remain closed owing to continued high rates of infection. As of September 2020, the region reported about 7.9 million confirmed cases and approximately 300 000 deaths, making it the worst-hit region in the world (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). Zorzoli (2020) states: "School closures are hurting education and, as in many countries, job prospects for them are particularly bad. If the region cannot control the virus and kickstart its economy, we will see the growth of a 'lockdown generation', trapped in unemployment, informal jobs and in-work poverty" (para. 3).

In sub-Saharan Africa, as in LAC and South Asia, school closures have adversely affected the impoverished and already vulnerable learner populations. Of the multiple negative effects of school closures, the suspension of school feeding programmes, which are run in the majority of countries in

the region, and the loss of learning days have resulted in a further debilitating crisis in the region. Although a school feeding scheme is a common response to food insecurity in the region, many countries, such as Mali, Uganda and Ethiopia, had to suspend their school feeding schemes, leaving millions of learners deprived of their main source of nutrition (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020). The situation in South Africa illustrates how the policy response of closing schools has resulted in adverse effects for the already marginalised learner population. Sambu (2019) states that, in South Africa in 2018, 2.1 million children "lived in households that reported child hunger" and "over 9 million learners in approximately 20,000 schools" (p. 234) depend on and receive meals through the National School Nutrition Programme. Households faltered under an additional financial burden of needing to provide a main meal for children who would otherwise have received a meal at school under a school feeding programme, especially since household incomes decreased and unemployment soared during the lockdown.

The closure of schools also meant that households faced an added financial burden of childcare, particularly in cases where both parents worked. The pandemic has made it difficult for parents to balance childcare responsibilities with paid employment. As a result of school closures, "99 per cent of the world's 2.36 billion children found themselves in a country with some movement restrictions, including 60 per cent under some form of lockdown" (Gromada et al., 2020, p. 1), forcing children to stay home and making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for caregivers to source childcare.

School closures have had a stronger negative impact on female working caregivers since women are frequently the default parents who manage childcare responsibilities. "This imbalance has major implications for women's employment and income opportunities", adversely affecting progress towards global gender equity and equality (Gromada et al., 2020, p. 1). In South Africa, women-headed households make up 40% of households in the country, which also happen to be among the poorest households with a high number of dependants and generally low levels of income (Moore, 2020). These households have plunged into even deeper economic despair.

School closures have resulted in a high incidence of child abuse and neglect, particularly in communities where physical violence, domestic abuse, sexual abuse and gender-based violence (Mittal & Singh, 2020) are prevalent. Childline South Africa, a non-profit organisation providing free counselling services to children, reports that since the start of the lockdown in March 2020, "21,827 calls [have been] received – up 67% from the same period last year" (Hartford, 2020, para. 6).

School closures have also impacted learning among impoverished learners. Schools in the region have been closed since March 2020, and many schools are still only partially open for the most vulnerable learner population in the region, amplifying the learning loss. In response to lockdowns and school closures, many governments have sought to institute home learning using online learning, TV programmes, radio broadcasts and, in some cases, instructional packages (OECD, 2020). However, this approach reveals the fault lines of learning inequality in South Africa and elsewhere, where a lack of infrastructure restricts the efficacy and even distribution of these modalities. One union official observed that the manner in which radio and TV were used to facilitate learning at home was problematic and unprofessional:

> *So, we found ridiculous things . . . We had lessons for your Grade 5s at midnight because that was when they could give us this free time, etc. But there were other glitches, and this is where professionalism really was given a knock. Where the Department of Education thought it would be a great idea to draw in celebrities into these lessons, and we objected very strongly saying no, no, teaching is not about simply talking or reading off a script. There are other things to teaching that you must be professionally trained for. And then we saw the disaster with some of our celebrity presenters where they didn't know basic things and, of course, presented terrible lessons and that helped can that type of idea. (Interview with union official, September 2020)*

Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, states that "[f]or at least 463 million children whose schools closed due to COVID-19, there was no such a thing as remote learning", and the large majority of these learners were from sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2020a, para. 2). Figure 1 demonstrates the extent to which various modalities have been accessed by learners per global region.

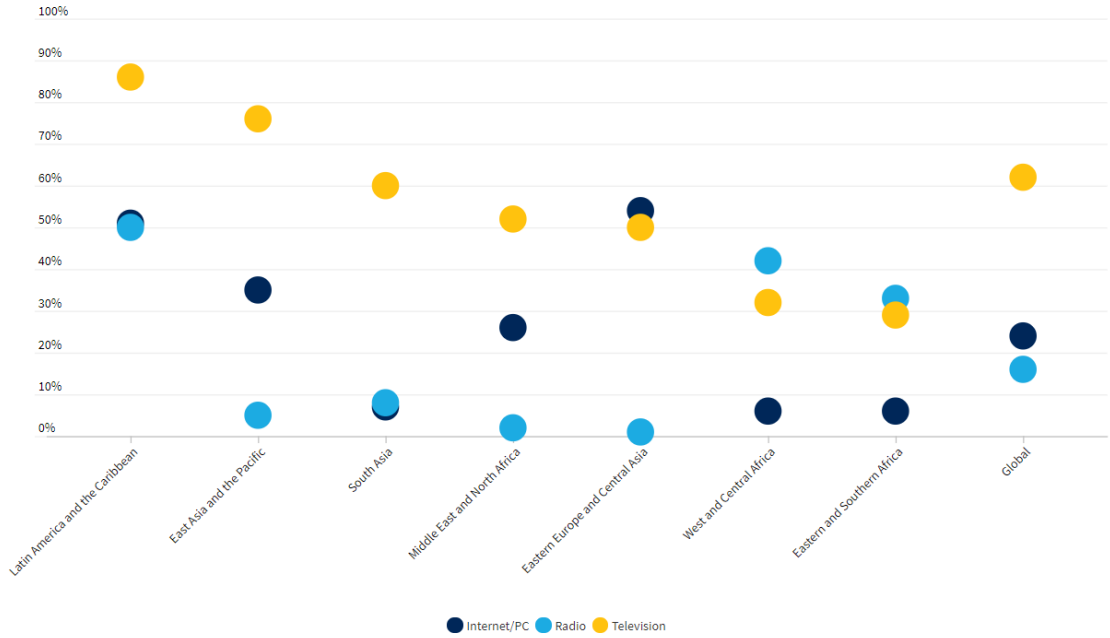


Figure 1: Share of Students (Pre-primary to Upper Secondary) Potentially Reached by Different Types of Remote Learning Policies by Region.

*Note.* Figures are calculated, using weighted averages based on the number of students across countries. Extracted from UNICEF (2020b). Copyright 2020 by UNICEF.

Figure 1 demonstrates that, globally, Eastern and Southern Africa have the lowest number of learners who can be reached via the Internet or who have access to personal computers. A joint survey conducted in 110 countries by UNESCO et al. (2020) found that online platforms are mainly used by lower-middle-income and upper-middle-income countries, whereas radio is the most commonly used modality in lower-income countries (refer to Figure 2).

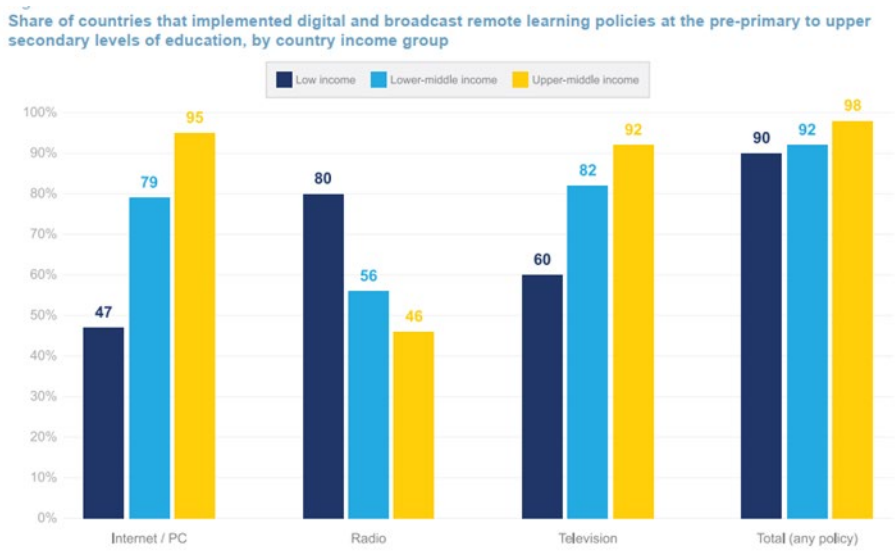


Figure 2: Share of Countries that Implemented Digital and Broadcast Remote Learning, by Country Income Group.

*Note.* Figures are estimated using simple averages across countries. Extracted from UNICEF (2020b). Copyright 2020 by UNICEF.

While many online resources, targeting learners from kindergarten to the end of secondary education and even into higher education, have been made available to learners globally, only learners who have access to these technologies and services benefit from them.

In South Africa, for example, the General Household Survey found that, in 2018, 90% of South African households did not have access to the Internet and only about 21.5% of households owned a computer (StatsSA, 2018), a situation that was compounded by the cost of data. Policy responses that were made to the delivery of education in South Africa did not factor in that many teachers and learners do not have access to technology for remote teaching and learning. This challenge was acknowledged by the South African Department of Education, as expressed by a government official:

> *These online platforms that we expected teachers to use require that teachers have certain gadgets: either they have laptops, or they have tablets, or they have smartphones, with which they could actually deliver these lessons; but not only them, but learners as well. We're expected to have these gadgets, because these were the modes through which they would access this content. So, the issue of the availability of these gadgets, or the tools of trade, was one challenge. Secondly, for those who had these tools of trade, there were issues of connectivity.*

> *We know that, historically, [in] our country, particularly in the rural areas and some of the remote areas, problems of lack of electricity, poor infrastructure, poor connectivity, are some of the historical challenges that we have. And so, during this period, those challenges really came to the fore, in the sense that without connectivity, and without these gadgets, there was no way that that learners in those areas could access some of these offerings that we were making. (Interview with government official, September 2020)*

While the closure of schools may well have been the most suitable action to take to mitigate the spread of COVID-10 at the time, experts from other discourses could have provided policymakers with context-sensitive alternatives for mitigating the effects of school closures on the impoverished. For example, one union member noted that people living in poverty, specifically those in rural areas, have been disenfranchised the most as a result of policy choices, stating:

> *It was assumed that in the rural areas they would focus on the radio lessons. But the majority were not [able to access this]. Basically, it was like no education was taking place at all . . . [and], almost 29% of the students and the teachers had no contact during that particular period because they could not access them at all whether through SMS or other things because they could not access them. (Interview with union official, September 2020)*

However, since these effects cannot be undone, it remains to be seen how various governments worldwide will address the educational needs of the impoverished in the 'new normal' post-COVID-19.

## EQUITABLE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE NEW NORMAL

Efforts to reduce inequities in and through education are negatively impacted by policy responses to the reopening of schools. Globally, countries have fully reopened schools, partially reopened schools or not reopened schools at all. The rationale for reopening schools is based on several factors, ranging from local infection rates to the availability of optimal teaching and learning spaces.

In East Asia and the Pacific, for example, many schools remain closed or are opening in pockets. In Indonesia, only schools in low-risk areas are opening. Mongolia and Cambodia are still using distance learning, as schools remain closed. Only schools with low infection rates and that have appropriate school infrastructure are cleared to reopen. Many schools in Latin America and the Caribbean, sub-

Saharan Africa and South Asia face similar challenges in being unable to reopen owing to inadequate school infrastructure.

The challenges faced by schools in the Global South and the Global East are illuminated through a situational analysis of South Africa. When the South African government announced in the *Government Gazette* (29 May 2020) that schools would be reopening in June 2020, it was agreed that they would reopen on the basis that each school was able to ensure the safety of learners by implementing social distancing protocols and practising enhanced sanitation practices. This meant that school management teams, in conjunction with local and provincial government, were obligated to ensure that teachers and learners had the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitisers, ablution facilities and clean running water, and that learners would be separated by the required distance of 1.5 metres during school hours. More specifically, the *Government Gazette* noted that there would be a phased-in return of learners and that only those schools and offices "that have complied with the minimum health, safety and social distancing measure[s] on COVID-19" would be allowed to open and "a school or office that had "failed to comply with the minimum health, safety and social distancing measures on COVID-19 . . . [would] remain closed until all the health, safety and social distancing measures [were] in place" (Department of Basic Education, 2020, p. 8). This policy response was asserted against a backdrop of a drastically unequal public-school system in South Africa. Shockingly, the latest National Education Infrastructure Management System report (Department of Basic Education, 2019) shows that, in South Africa, 6 089 schools still use pit latrines, 1 148 schools still receive water from mobile tankers, 7 449 schools harvest rainwater to accommodate their water needs, 169 schools have no electricity and 582 schools use generators to generate electric power.

This policy illustrates the inequities that policy choices inflict on the vulnerable. First, given the dire disparities in education resources between the rich and the impoverished in South Africa, it is unlikely that schools in Quintiles 1–3 will be able to open safely. Secondly, such schools often have an excessively high learner–educator ratio (LER). The current average LER in South Africa is 33–1. In some instances, the LER is 50–1, which is double or triple the average of the OECD's international average of 16–1 (West & Meier, 2020). The question that must be asked is whether or not schools with a high LER will be able to provide a safe and effective learning environment for impoverished learners. A union official described how the application of social distancing measures, even in the wealthier provinces of South Africa, is not realistically possible:

*We've ended up adopting a system that says we must have 50% of the school back at a time so that we split every class by 50%. In theory, that attends to social distancing, but in reality doesn't, because many of our schools, even in Gauteng that is one of the wealthier provinces, still have classes in some of our areas exceeding 60. So, even when you split that class in half and you have a class of 30, you still have too many pupils for social distancing. (Interview with union official, September 2020)*

The South African case demonstrates how particular policy choices throw the differences in schools and the dichotomous schooling environments of the rich and the impoverished, not only in South Africa but globally, into sharp relief.

## LACK OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of 2018 revealed that teachers in South Africa and worldwide generally do not receive adequate professional development to ensure they use effective pedagogies for quality teaching and learning experiences (OECD, 2019). Data from the TALIS report, as shown in Figure 3, further show that many teachers in both developed and developing contexts are not able to use ICTs effectively for teaching and learning, illuminating gaps in teacher knowledge. This challenge is more pronounced in countries such as South Africa, France, Japan and Belgium (French).

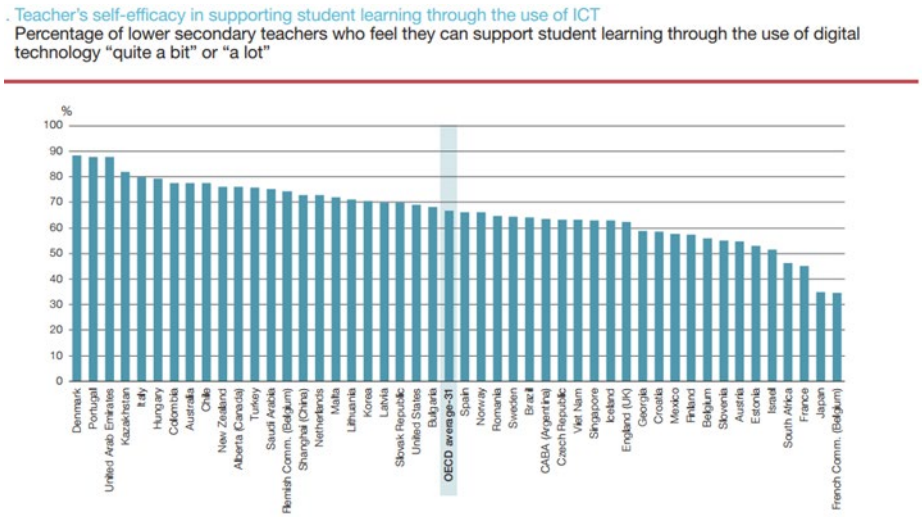


Figure 3: Teachers' Self-efficacy in Supporting Student Learning Through the Use of ICT.

*Note.* Values represent teacher's self-reported efficacy in supporting student learning through the use of digital technology as noted in the 2018 TALIS Report. Copyright OECD, 2019.

Teachers worldwide were expected to continue teaching and learning during their countries' lockdowns in spite of inadequate professional development and support. In some cases, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, teachers were threatened with non-payment and job losses. Okajima (2020) states:

> *Though the government claim to be encouraging and providing the necessary support and the use of digital tools to ensure that teaching and learning are not affected, in most of the countries here in the Asia-Pacific, the public education system has poor infrastructures, the teachers and students have insufficient access to online platforms, teachers have not been adequately trained in the use of technology, and students – particularly in the rural areas – do not have access to internet in most cases and to computers to some extent. Another worrying trend that is being reported is that the contract teachers, teachers in private schools, and the ECE sector in several countries – the Philippines, Nepal and Sri Lanka to name but a few – are either losing their jobs or left with unpaid salaries. (para. 8–9)*

Apart from a lack of professional development to improve teachers' pedagogical skills, teachers around the world have also not been adequately supported to manage their anxieties or the anxieties of their learners during the pandemic. Again, the South African case illuminates this trend.

Since the commencement of the lockdown in South Africa, teachers have been expected to continue teaching on alternative platforms without receiving sufficient training or adequate infrastructure to do so. More importantly, there has been very little support for teachers concerning 'how to teach' during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A union official responded as follows in response to a question about the provision of psychosocial support to teachers by government:

> *Well, that is where the biggest problem lies. There has been very, very little done . . . and you may be shocked to learn that for example, the Free State . . . they [government] declared to us as the unions . . . [they] have one school psychologist appointed in the province and [they] have two social workers. That is the Free State – that is what they have in the Department only. So how do they service the almost 3 000 schools in the Free State? That's near impossible. (Interview with union official, September 2020)*

When asked about psychosocial support mechanisms available for teachers, a government official replied that the Department of Education has developed online guidelines for teachers on ways to manage their anxieties during the pandemic, as noted below:

> *The Department kind of provided clear sources of the information for teachers to engage with, so that they have the facts. They know … the standard operating procedures, they know the procedures they need to take when they want to apply for concessions around co-morbidities. The Department kind of provided clear sources of the information for teachers to engage with, so that they have the facts. (Interview with government official, September 2020)*

The response from the union official clearly demonstrates the lack of human resource capacity within the Department of Education, while simultaneously revealing a lack of understanding of what teachers actually need. Online manuals on standard operating procedures do not constitute effective psychosocial support. While no one could have predicted the manner in which the coronavirus would spread and the devastating effect it would have on education globally, many adverse effects could have been mitigated if available resources and expertise were used in a more sophisticated and consultative manner. Furthermore, this review stresses the importance of the ongoing professional development of teachers. Continuous professional development is not just a conduit to ensure quality educational experiences as highlighted through the Sustainable Development Goals, it also forms part of a preparation strategy to address future crises, particularly in the Global South and the Global East, where multiple crises interlock.

## CONCLUSION

This paper considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, examining how policymaking is shaped and evidence relied upon by governments in their responses to the pandemic. It further examined the effects of the pandemic on education, with specific reference to widening of inequities in education. In particular, it highlighted that education policy choices relating to teaching and learning during lockdowns, or a lack of such choices, have impacted and are impacting the impoverished with much more severity than the wealthy. It further highlighted the absence of meaningful psychosocial and professional development support for educators during the pandemic, which is a continuation of a pattern that Sayed et al. (2018) identified and that became evident before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has revealed stark inequities in society, in general, and education, in particular, casting a light on how a crisis such as COVID-19 intensifies and exacerbates such inequities (Weible et al., 2020). In South Africa, the pandemic has revealed most sharply the legacy of colonisation and apartheid. Yet, this pandemic has caught the imagination of the public, mainly because the middle class and the rich have also been impacted, even though they have a multitude of resources to manage the situation adequately.

Globally, and in South Africa, the pandemic has revealed the structural weaknesses of the public sector, particularly in education, disclosing decades of austerity cuts driven by a neoliberal approach to public services. Policy responses to this pandemic and future crises should entail a social justice approach to education, supporting, nurturing and strengthening public education systems, and a commitment to the common good, active citizenry, global collectivism and solidaristic sharing. In this respect, education policy choices and policymaking need to reinvigorate space for public and stakeholder engagement consistent with a commitment to a vibrant democratic order. The policy choices that have been made during the COVID-19 pandemic and the manner in which inequities are either addressed or ignored shape the reality of the impoverished in the present and in the future. In lamenting the lack of a more equitable education system in South Africa, a union official explained:

> *We don't want a new normal. We want a better normal and we are saying what we need to learn from this and what we need to be doing with COVID is building back better. (Interview with union official, September 2020)*

COVID-19, according to Motala and Menon (2020), "brings with it a prolonged period of disruption with a possible continuation of these levels of disruption prevailing in the foreseeable future" (p. 80). How inequities might be escalated over time is a point that needs consideration in our planning to mitigate the effects of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that "between social reforms and [transformation] there exists an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is the means; social [transformation] its aim" (Luxemburg, 1970, p. 8). As education choices and choices in all other sectors are (re)made during and after the pandemic, it is crucial to create a comprehensive policy reform package committed to social justice and the redistribution of privilege and wealth.

## DISCLAIMER

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