



MISTRA Online Roundtable: *Challenges facing basic education in the context of COVID-19*

19 August 2020

On 19 August 2020, MISTRA convened an online roundtable on the challenges facing basic education in South Africa in the context of COVID-19. This event served as a follow-up to the research undertaken for MISTRA's project on the transformation of South Africa's post-1994 basic education system, culminating in the launch of the 2017 publication, *Reimagining Basic Education in South Africa: Lessons from the Eastern Cape*. The roundtable event brought together panellists from the field of education research and a range of stakeholders in government, academia and civil society, serving as a contribution to the way forward for basic education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It featured presentations, from **Dr Logan Govender**, Senior Lecturer at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies at the University of Johannesburg, on *teacher-unions and the state in management of the pandemic*; **Dr Lindiwe Tshuma**, Teaching and Learning Advisor at the University of the Witwatersrand, on the *impact of COVID-19 on language transition and development*; and **Dr Michael Gastrow**, Senior Research Specialist in education and skills development at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), on *implications of online learning for inequality and access*. Presenters and participants examined the challenges, possibilities and future for basic education in the context of the pandemic, and the ways in which teachers, learners, families and the state might best respond.

The enduring context of a divided and unequal system of education informed the roundtable discussion. The unforeseen nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced contestation over the current system and its associated inequalities, and the need for a marked shift in South Africa's education discourse if gaps in provision and access for the majority are to be met. There is emerging consensus, however, on education as a collective interest and the need for its reconfiguration post-COVID-19. Moreover, given the depth of the digital divide in South Africa, technology and digitisation in education must themselves be seen as components of social justice, redress and economic growth.

The discussion emphasised the requisite of multi-medium forms of education that make use of increasingly available digital technology, and of existing tools, such as television and radio, which are accessible to most South Africans. It also underscored the importance of multi-site education that provides opportunities for alternatives to classroom-based learning. The social distancing required by COVID-19 and the onset of the fourth industrial revolution raise the opportunity for technological

advancements in education and thus the imperative of developing the skills amongst teachers and learners to use such technology.

The panellists also advocated, among other things, for the establishment of a COVID-19 education workstream for the management of a return to school, involving government, teacher unions and parent representatives, as well as robust, anticipatory planning mechanisms for education provision in the context of emergencies. The concentration of teaching resources must also be geared towards the most pressing needs of learners in the context of the pandemic. Focus on the key assessment years (Grades 7 and 12) has, unintentionally, generated other risk groups, such as Grade 4 learners who would have transitioned in 2020 from mother tongue instruction to English language medium. English language learners, especially in under-resourced schools, are falling behind as a result of pedagogical disruption. A focus for the remainder of this year on core skills, such as phonics, spelling and reading for meaning are imperative, alongside development of teaching resources to support parents, guardians and communities to facilitate childhood education outside of the classroom.

The arguments and discussion from the roundtable will contribute to a report by MISTRA on the impact of COVID-19 on basic education in South Africa and reflections for the way forward.