*Challenges Facing Basic Education in the Context of COVID-19*

**A MISTRA Report**

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Challenges facing the basic education system in South Africa have been exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, foregrounding debates about the reconfiguration of education provision and access and the urgency of policy responses. Drawing on research presented by panellists at a MISTRA roundtable into the impact of COVID-19 on basic education, this report examines some of these challenges, including state and teacher-union responses, pedagogical disruption and language transition, and the urgency and unevenness of digitalisation. By highlighting the intersection of existing educational inequalities and the impact of the pandemic, the report contributes to recommendations for a way forward post-COVID-19.

**Introduction**

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 research undertaken for MISTRA's project on the transformation of South Africa's post-1994 basic education system, culminating in the 2017 publication of a book, titled *Reimagining Basic Education in South Africa: Lessons from the Eastern Cape*. The roundtable discussion brought together experts in the field of education research and a range of stakeholders from the education sector, including government, teacher unions, school governing bodies, academics, civil society organisations and the media. Held just as South Africa transitioned from Level 3 to level 2 of the lockdown regulations, from 17 August 2020, and as public schools began preparations to re-open from 24 August 2020, the roundtable served as a contribution to the way forward for basic education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report is collated and written by the Humanity Faculty at MISTRA. It draws on both the arguments presented by the panel presenters at the roundtable (listed below) and on the discussions and contributions of the roundtable participants. These contributions (referenced) form the basis of the report. Background information, summative inputs and synthesis of the arguments and recommendations from the roundtable are provided by the report writer.

*Presentations*

*COVID-19 and the return (or not) to school: Teacher-unions and the state in management of the pandemic* – Dr Logan Govender, Senior Lecturer, Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of Johannesburg.

*The impact of COVID-19 on language transition and development: Grade four learners of 2020* – Dr Lindiwe Tshuma, Teaching and Learning Advisor, University of the Witwatersrand.

*Implications of online learning for inequality and access: COVID-19 and beyond* – Dr Michael Gastrow, Senior Research Specialist, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).


### The pandemic and basic education

It goes without saying that COVID-19 has had vast economic and social impacts, both nationally and internationally. In South Africa, since 26 March 2020, teachers, learners, parents/guardians and communities have been impacted by the closure of schools. The interruption of schooling, and partial transition to home and online learning has had both social and pedagogical implications, while raising important political debates about state management of education, not least in times of national crisis.

Public debate and recent court cases regarding the legality and correctness of government's response, highlight the complexity of education strategy in the context of a pandemic. This is complicated by the knock-on effects of disruption to key assessment grades (seven and twelve), as well as the very rights and responsibilities involved in education provision: The right to education and the role of state in protecting citizens; and the developmental impact of school closure and state responses to increased community transmission.

Panellists and participants at the MISTRA roundtable highlighted that discussion of the challenges facing the basic education sector in South Africa must be framed by the enduring legacy of unevenness and inequality. This is increasingly marked by the resource disparity between public and private schools and the hallmarks of a segregated education system. Both media and scholarly commentary on the pandemic's impact has coalesced around its role as a force multiplier, exposing challenges in the provision of basic education that are not so much consequences of the pandemic as they are exacerbated by it.

COVID-19 has both exposed the magnitude of challenges facing the education system – including inequality, school capacity, resource distribution, and technological change and access – and accelerated the urgency of policy responses. In particular, it has brought to the fore the role of technology, and our tremendous reliance on it, in an environment of social distancing. Extending access to online, digital and other technologies is wrapped up in debates around broader inequality as well as the potentially uneven developmental impact for South Africa of the fourth industrial revolution.

Drawing on the research presented at the roundtable, this report sets out some of these very challenges – ranging from the state's response to the pandemic, to the pedagogical risks and socio-economic ramifications of the pandemic's impact on vulnerable learners – while providing recommendations for meeting these challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The first section discusses the need for a reconfiguration and reimagining of education, both as a result of the pandemic's impact and in order to build a resilient and accessible system for the future. It then discusses the role of schools, teacher unions and the state in management of the pandemic, and the nature and impact of the pedagogical disruption experienced by learners. Finally, it considers the importance of education as a collective endeavour, beyond the confines of the classroom, including the critical role of technology in education and the challenge of the digital divide. The report concludes by synthesising the roundtable's recommendations, suggesting priorities for the sector and policymakers in supporting teachers, learners and families to build needs-responsive learning and sustained educational *quality*.

**Reconfiguring and reimagining education provision**

A recurring theme in the MISTRA roundtable discussion was the entirely new terrain onto which state and society have been thrown by the coronavirus pandemic. On the whole, many of the challenges for the education sector are not new. The pandemic itself, however, was undoubtedly unexpected. It has revealed an education system that was deeply unprepared for the challenges that COVID-19 has created. However, to a limited extent, the system has already made considerable strides in creating solutions to enable the continuation of learning, albeit with varying success.

The presentation by Logan Govender (2020) argued that education must be viewed as a 'collective interest' that goes beyond the direct impact on learners: The decisions and actions taken about its provision – in the context of a national disaster and into the future – are issues of public good, and the holistic development of South Africa. Perhaps most importantly, this national disaster has foregrounded the need to reconfigure education post-COVID-19 (Govender, 2020).

What such a reconfiguration might look like was one of the subjects of the roundtable discussion. However, it will also need to be explored further by researchers, educators and policymakers as we move through and beyond the pandemic. The vast inequalities that remain in South Africa's education system render unrealistic the assumption that all schools, 'with sufficient effort and "quality control" improvement measures' will be able to provide 'the same quality of education' as those schools that are well-resourced (Christie, cited in Govender, 2020). During COVID-19, efforts to enable the continuation of education provision, while protecting learners and teachers, have exposed precisely this weakness, bringing to the fore the vast disparity in resources and capacity between the public and private school sectors, and within these categories of school themselves.

Govender's presentation drew on Fataar and Badroodien's observation (2020: 4, cited in Govender, 2020) that the national disaster has engendered a visible rift in the debate on schooling: Between 'dominant power hierarchies', pursuing solutions to education provision in a highly unequal system, and those for whom the COVID-19 pandemic provides the opportunity to challenge the present system's limitations in serving the needs of the majority. These very debates, Govender (2020) suggests, form part and parcel of the 'decolonisation' of education in South Africa, an endeavour that must stretch beyond the higher education sector – where its discourse has been most apparent since the #FeesMustFall movement – to the point at which learners enter the education system.

The ideas exchanged at the roundtable, and summarised here, take us further toward this endeavour, by re-envisioning the provision of education through multi-site and multi-medium formats, and by addressing issues in education that relate fundamentally to social justice.

*The role of teacher-unions and the state*

In addition to contestations over the nature of the current education system, South Africa has witnessed a mushrooming of public debate and legal contestation[i] over the government's response to the coronavirus. The extent of the pandemic's impact on the economy and society is reflected in the breadth of stakeholders engaging government. Key amongst these are the bodies associated with the education sector, such as teacher-unions, school governing bodies (SGBs), and sector-based non-governmental organisations.

The early part of the pandemic, Govender notes, was characterised by disagreement between government and teacher-unions over education solutions and, particularly, the re-opening of schools. He characterises this as a return to 'old-style' teacher-union state relations and 'resurfacing of unilateral decision making' reflective of the inherent tension between establishing a working relationship with government and advocating for the interests of members (2020). Divisions between the state and teacher unions has played out in calls by the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) for government to close schools until the virus' peak has subsided (Mthetwa, 15 July 2020).

However, as the pandemic has progressed, there has been increased collaboration between government, unions, SGBs and schools. At the MISTRA roundtable, participants and union representatives noted that this collaboration included the use of surveys conducted by unions on school readiness for re-opening, as a basis for joint planning with the DBE, and union participation in curriculum amendments. Where official channels of communication provided by the DBE for liaising with schools have proven insufficient, the roundtable representative of SGBs highlighted that they have also worked with the unions to establish direct communication mechanisms with schools in order to establish readiness for safe reopening. Participants therefore highlighted that regular engagement between unions, SGBs and the national and provincial education departments has taken place to address the requirements for safe learning and teaching.

As South Africa moves through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration between schools, unions and government – whether through existing forums or new partnerships and structures – will be more critical than ever before. Collaborative initiatives that span government and civil society speak to the notion of education-as-collective-interest in ways that highlight school capacity, learner needs and teacher professionalism as part and parcel of the same public good (Govender, 2020).


*Pedagogical disruption*

At the centre of debates and plans surrounding education provision in the COVID-19 is the issue of pedagogical disruption and, ultimately, learner progression. For this reason, government's response has prioritised the progression of the key assessment stages, grades seven and twelve.[ii] Regardless of efforts to minimise the number of lost school days, all learners have been impacted by temporary closures – either through adjustment to online learning (where schools have been able to implement this) or the absence of class contact time altogether. This is accentuated for learners whose home environment is unconducive to learning, or in communities where schools lack the means and facilities to provide for distance learning. A perhaps overlooked grade in educational prioritisation during

COVID-19, highlighted by Lindiwe Tshuma's roundtable presentation (2020), are those learners currently in grade four.

*Language transition and development*

Grade four is the transitional language year in the South African education system where learners move from the language of instruction in their mother tongue to either English or Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching. Critically, as Tshuma points out, grade four represents 'a turning point in the school curriculum', not only because of this shift in instruction, but because the educational focus turns from *learning to read* to *reading to learn.* It is the point from which they begin to 'make sense of what they read through language' (Tshuma, 2020). The importance of this grade thus relates to its significance in the South Africa language in education policy (LiEP) and to the 'theories underpinning language development' (Tshuma, 2020).

In this transition phase, Tshuma observes that, in class, teachers use pedagogical trans-languaging or 'code switching' to manage the transition to English. Yet, grade four is one of the categories of learner that have lost 57 per cent of school days up to 7 August 2020 as a result of COVID-19 closures, compared to 25 per cent of grade seven and twelve learners (see Table 1). Poor language proficiency in the language of learning and teaching, Tshuma notes, is consequential to the subsequent school phases. The comprehension of core subjects, such as science and maths, require reading for meaning (Tshuma, 2020).

**Table 1. School days lost up to 7 August 2020 by Grade**

|  | (New calendar) Current school days up to 7 Aug | (Old calendar) Pre-COVID scheduled school days up to 7 Aug | Days lost up to 7 Aug | School days lost as a percentage of pre-COVID scheduled school days up to 7 Aug 2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades 7 &12 | 92 | 122 | 30 | 25% |
| ECD + Grades 1,2,3,6,10,11 | 72 | 122 | 50 | 41% |
| Gr 4,5,8,9 | 53 | 122 | 69 | 57% |

Source: Van der Berg and Spaull (2020), presented in Tshuma (2020).

In contrast, language disruption is not experienced by English language speakers (or Afrikaans speakers in the context of Afrikaans medium schools), but by learners for whom neither English nor Afrikaans are their primary language (Tshuma, 2020). Against a history of racial inequality, the risk to language development forms part of the broader set of disadvantages faced by the majority of South Africans and accentuated by COVID-19. Tshuma's research suggests that black South Africans (who are simultaneously English language learners) are typically both 'under-digitalised and have fewer educational opportunities beyond the classroom' (2020), a point echoed by Michael Gastrow (2020).

Yet, despite these hurdles, Tshuma argues that COVID-19 must be seen more as an *opportunity,* and less as a disruption. The remainder of the school year for grade four must be focused on core skills, such as phonics, spelling and reading for meaning (Tshuma, 2020). She advocates employing 'community literacy workers', not dissimilar to the community health workers, deployed by the Department of Health to improve access to primary healthcare services in poorer communities.

Community literacy workers could be recruited, trained and placed within communities with the mandate to provide priority functions such as literacy and language development (Tshuma, 2020). This endeavour, as with the reimagining of education more broadly, will require collective effort and support for the role of communities themselves.

### *Education provision as a collective endeavour*

An emergent theme at the roundtable discussion on the challenges facing basic education was the urgency of providing education in 'new and innovative ways' (Govender, 2020). At the heart of this is reconceptualising what society considers to be 'education'. An important theme was the need for an expanded notion of education that goes beyond the formal education of the classroom and national curriculum, to a more socio-cultural understanding of education, incorporating the role of communities as educators (Gastrow, 2020; Tshuma, 2020) and the importance of grassroots and indigenous knowledge (Govender, 2020).

Govender noted that the school as a social institution is not the only source or vehicle for educating children: Now, more than ever, 'education provision is the business of all key social actors' (Govender, 2020). From this perspective, presenters and participants at the roundtable proposed a role for parents/guardians, community leaders, community-based organisations, and the business sector, as well as increased inter-departmental collaboration across government, involving basic education, social development and health (Govender, 2020; Gastrow, 2020).

The higher education sector, also, has been relatively successful in transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. This sector may be able to provide important support and guidance for basic education practitioners and policymakers. They could also be part of outreach initiatives for student teachers to be placed in and work with communities (Tshuma, 2020). Partnerships between government and civil society are also critical. Community-based organisations are well placed as on-the ground structures to further this endeavour, in tune with the needs of local communities, schools and learners. However, they will require both resources and support from government to have a meaningful impact (Govender, 2020).

### *Multi-site learning*

The notion of multi-site learning is especially important for ensuring access to education. COVID-19 has made learning outside of the classroom a necessity. But it has also forced South Africa to re-think the ways in which teaching is conducted in more imaginative ways (Govender, 2020). In line with the notion of education as an endeavour that extends beyond the classroom, presenters and participants reflected on the ways that COVID-19 has foregrounded the possibility (arguably, necessity) of providing for educational alternatives. Taking this forward will require the innovation of teachers, policymakers and communities to build robust and implementable mechanisms that speak to the present conditions and needs of learners and are able to respond to unforeseen disasters. One roundtable participant raised the possibility of rotating learners, for example: By providing alternative sites and spaces for learning outside of the school, only 25 per cent of learners need be present in the classroom at any one time, while others rotate to alternative locations or learning mediums. Accessible teaching resources can also be developed to support parents, guardians and communities to facilitate childhood education outside of the classroom.

If we reflect on the broader context of South Africa, then, at the centre of this, is the diversity of learners' needs – from challenges with basic school infrastructure to the broader social challenges in the communities in which schools operate. Significant obstacles face many schools in infrastructure and capability development. Yet, during the pandemic, roundtable participants noted that some schools, even in remote, rural locations, have been able to utilise social media tools (such as Whatsapp, Facebook, or other forums) to communicate with learners. Use of these tools, once again, necessitates an important role for parents, guardians and the broader community in the education of children. In the South African environment, a responsive education system, able to withstand emergency contexts, while meeting the pedagogical and developmental needs of learners, requires exploration beyond the bounds of traditional approaches and forums. It also presents, nonetheless, the tremendous challenge of making alternatives equally accessible.

### *Bridging the digital divide*

During the coronavirus pandemic, inequalities in the South African education system have been mirrored by the nation's digital divide. While all schools and learners have had to adapt to the suspension of contact teaching, the capacity and resources to transition to online learning have varied dramatically. As Michael Gastrow (2020) argued in his roundtable presentation, COVID-19 has acted as a 'catalyst' for technological change that was already taking place through the process of digitalisation. Therefore, although the education sector has been presented with some new challenges as a result of the pandemic, it has also been forced to confront the need to develop digital skills and capacity much sooner than was anticipated (Gastrow 2020). Critically, he notes that data access and digitalisation are themselves issues of social justice, redress and economic growth (Gastrow,2020).

As with the opportunity to reimagine the bounds of education, COVID-19 has also demonstrated the tremendous amount to be gained through the harnessing of technology. Recent data from the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA, 2020) indicates rapidly increasing penetration of smartphone usage amongst the population. Yet, the country is simultaneously plagued by high data costs, particularly in comparison to the rest of Africa (Bottomley, 2020). Gastrow (2020) notes that it is the poor that are most affected by this, through the higher per-megabyte cost of purchasing data in smaller bundles compared to via contracts accessible to the middle class. Education itself is thus linked to the pressing challenge of 'data justice' (Gastrow, 2020).

Yet, the continuation of schooling – during COVID-19 and beyond – will have to include digital solutions. If harnessed correctly and with the support of the right policies, Gastrow argues it can be used to narrow the digital divide itself. It is an approach that needs to be aligned with the reduction of underlying structural inequality and goals of social and economic redress more broadly (Gastrow, 2020). Young people are well placed to take advantage of technological innovation and are confident, Gastrow suggests, in their ability to use digital technologies. Yet he notes that they are also worried about future disruptions to work opportunities posed by technological change and artificial intelligence, in particular (Gastrow, 2020). As the fourth industrial revolution progresses, young people's exposure to technology will become paramount in ensuring employability (*Mail and Guardian*, 2018). This is a stark reminder of the potentially uneven impact of the fourth industrial revolution in the absence of the right policies, and necessitates incorporation of technology in the classroom.

The need to harness technologies and to provide the skills for their maximisation relates to both learners and teachers. Efforts in this regard toward innovation in education are already on the government agenda through initiatives such as rolling out provision of tablets in Gauteng schools (*Business Tech*, 2019), educational components of Operation Phakisa, as highlighted by one of the roundtable participants, designed to assist in the implementation of the National Development Plan[iii], and the DBE's pilot project to teach coding skills in schools (Gastrow, 2020). Teacher education itself will be critical, for both pre- and in-service teachers, both to develop ICT skills and to address the complex and diverse needs of learners (Govender, 2020; Tshuma, 2020).

Simultaneously, however, roundtable participants and presenters remarked that the education sector must also make use of existing mediums, such as television and radio, that are readily accessible to the majority of learners. Here, modes of blended learning will be critical, so that learners can pursue their schooling using a combination of radio, online and classroom-based learning. It also avoids the rigid separation of online and contact teaching that risks exacerbating the current duality of South Africa's education system.

**Conclusion: A synthesis of recommendations**

A prominent lesson to be learnt from the impact of COVID-19 is the importance of innovation as we move into the future. The basic education sector, as with many parts of the state and economy, were unprepared for the pandemic and will require strategic plans and collaborative efforts to re-imagine education going forward. An important part of this may well be the establishment of a COVID-19 education 'workstream' to manage the return to school and the maintenance of educational quality, involving government, teacher unions and parent representatives (Govender, 2020), as well as robust, anticipatory planning mechanisms for education provision in the context of emergencies (Tshuma, 2020).

Some of the solutions to the challenges in basic education entail adaptations to existing arrangements, such as a concerted focus on language to reconcile the interruption of language transition in 2020, and the preparation of teachers to support affected learners. Efforts to narrow the gap between English speakers and English language learners resonates with the imperative of socio-economic redress in South Africa, reflective of the system's broader duality.

The way forward will also require a strategic plan to prepare for the return and development of under-digitalised learners. School management teams and teachers (both pre- and in-service) need capacity development specifically focusing on online teaching, learning and assessment. The social distancing required by COVID-19 regulations and the onset of the fourth industrial revolution raise the opportunity for technological advancements in education (Gastrow, 2020) and thus the imperative of developing the skills amongst teachers and learners to utilise such technology. Simultaneously, however, there will need to be investment in both low- and high-end technologies to support content delivery in both digitalised and under-digitalised communities.

At the root of all endeavours to re-think the provision of basic education in South Africa are the collective interests of society – of teachers, learners, families and communities – and the imperative of learning lessons from the coronavirus pandemic to re-think education through innovation. This roundtable discussion highlighted that COVID-19, despite its social and economic toll, provides us with opportunities for new creativity; to capitalise on the moment of change induced by the pandemic, and to re-envision the provision of education in South Africa in ways that challenge structural inequality.

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[i] See, for example, Duma. N. 24 July 2020. 'DA heading to court to challenge govt's decision to temporarily close schools', *EWN,* https://ewn.co.za/2020/07/24/da-heading-to-court-to-challenge-govt-s-decision-to-temporarily-close-schools, accessed 7 September 2020;  Pikoli, Z. 28 June 2020, 'Who's right? Court battle over children's rights to education and basic nutrition', *The Daily Maverick,*

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[ii] From 24 August, public schools were able to re-open with the phased admittance of each grade. Prior to this date, the earlier return of grade seven and twelve learners was prioritised. (See *Business Tech*. 28 .08.2020. 'Confusion around the closing of South Africa's schools', https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/420163/confusion-around-the-closing-of-south-africas-schools/, accessed: 25 September 2020). The academic school year has been altered to accommodate COVID-19, with teaching and assessment to be completed by 15 December 2020 (*Business Tech*. 1 August 2020. 'Here's the new school calendar – and when you can expect the 2020 matric results', https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/421762/heres-the-new-school-calendar-and-when-you-can-expect-matric-results/, accessed 25 September 2020.

[iii] See 'Operation Phakisa', Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. https://www.operationphakisa.gov.za/Pages/Home.aspx, accessed 3 September 2020.