

graphs show the increased proportion of learners with very low achievement scores. The existing data show a larger proportion of learners in no-fee schools obtaining scores below the 300-point cut-off, compared to learners in fee-paying schools.

Our findings underscore the fact that disasters amplify existing structural inequalities in society and worsen inequalities through an unequal recovery process.

### Going forward

Parental and family support is important during this period. Parents and family must consciously and deliberately support children in completing a few hours of school work every day. An [HSRC study](#) on early educational environments found that close to one-third of parents reported that they read books to their children and played with them using the alphabet, number toys and word games.

Half of them reported that they wrote numbers, watched educational TV and sang songs with their children. The patterns are different for learners in fee and no-fee schools — but home-educational activities are happening and parents must be supported and encouraged to continue with them.

It is also important to start preparing for the recovery period when schools reopen. The curriculum must be simplified, targeting areas where learning loss will be most consequential for the [following years](#). In the recovery phase, schools should arrange for additional lessons using the expertise of ex-teachers and university students from the community. While the short-term goal is to modify the curriculum, in the longer term the conceptual gaps have to be filled to ensure that children are not left behind in their schooling.

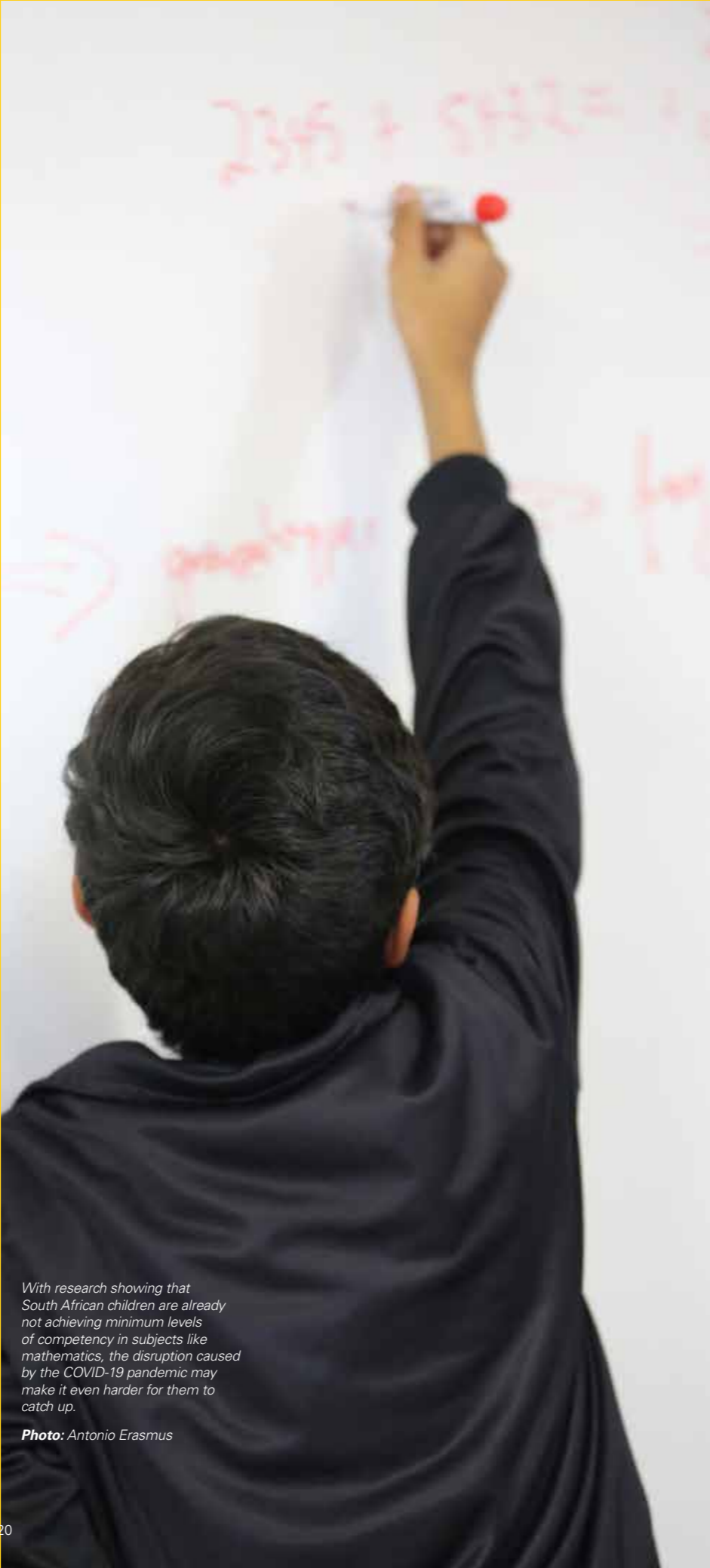
The sad and uncomfortable truth is that for South Africa — with low and unequal achievement scores — the longer that social distancing is in place, the bigger the learning losses for learners, especially the most disadvantaged, thereby deepening inequalities.

**Authors:** Dr Vijay Reddy, a distinguished research specialist, Prof Crain Soudien, CEO, and Dr Lolita Winnaar, a senior research specialist at the HSRC

[vreddy@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:vreddy@hsrc.ac.za)

[csoudien@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:csoudien@hsrc.ac.za)

[lwinnaar@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:lwinnaar@hsrc.ac.za)



*With research showing that South African children are already not achieving minimum levels of competency in subjects like mathematics, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may make it even harder for them to catch up.*

**Photo:** Antonio Erasmus



*“Do elbow greeting”*

# Anxiety about schools reopening:

## Enhancing the voice of teachers, parents and learners through photovoice

The state of disaster announced on 15 March saw South African schools close more than a week before the country went into a hard lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. Schools reopened for some grades in June with the intent to phase in other grades in July and August. With a technique called photovoice, South Africans shared their concerns with HSRC researchers through photographs and social media messages. *By Candice Groenewald, Thobeka Ntini and Mafanato Maluleka.*

**D**uring the COVID-19 lockdown, the HSRC embarked on a study to understand how children, teenagers and adults experienced the nationwide lockdown in South Africa and how their lives were impacted by the pandemic.

The researchers used a technique called photovoice, where participants were asked to document their experiences of the lockdown using photos, voice notes and text messages via WhatsApp. In this way, the researchers were able to capture the participants' personal stories and experiences while maintaining physical distancing to protect all parties from getting infected.

The researchers asked teachers, parents and learners how they felt about the reopening of schools. Noticeably, most participants, regardless of age, expressed increased anxiety related to children returning to schools, where they could “get infected” and spread the virus. Specific concerns included

overcrowded classrooms, young children's perceived inability to maintain social distancing, and the availability of adequate sanitation products at schools.

**A female teacher from a public school said:**

“My fears and concerns [are] around the issue of sanitisation and the safety in terms of wearing masks ... especially the protection for us as educators [...] Right now, we don't have extra classrooms ... where will these learners be accommodated with the 1:20 [teacher to learner ratio] that would be mandatory? In [some] classes we have 35 learners for the same grade and others have over 40 learners. We do not have sufficient classrooms. How are they going to split those learners? Where are they going to learn? [...] My worry [is] whether they would have enough resources [such as] masks and the sanitisers and how we would practise social distancing?”

Many parents echoed this, citing concern around overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure, hygiene and the ability or willingness of children to maintain a physical distance from each other:

“What worries me the most ... is how are they going to handle the situation in class? Especially in [certain schools] where children are 40 in one class; it is havoc and it would spread the virus easily.”

“Poor personal hygiene. Children won’t follow social-distancing regulations. Rural schools won’t cope with COVID-19 due to lack of infrastructure and sanitisation.”

Despite the coronavirus causing no symptoms or mild disease in most children, some parents expressed fears about the unknown or danger of COVID-19, especially where children had underlying conditions: “I’d never send my child to school facing such a deadly disease.”

“No, I won’t send my child to school. My daughter is asthmatic and no matter how I teach her at home about social distancing, she will want to hug her friends at school. My son is in crèche and I won’t send him back so soon either.”

“As a parent, I am in between; I [would] like to send my child but I’m also scared because I am not sure what is going to happen at school.”

From their responses it was clear that learners shared similar concerns, but also worried about falling behind in their work and wanted to return:

“I am a bit happy that schools might be reopening, but I think it will be a lot more difficult to enforce the coronavirus regulations while we are at school.” — learner (15 yrs)

“I am excited but at the same time scared; because if one learner has coronavirus and doesn’t show symptoms, she may infect all of us in the class” — learner (17 yrs)

“The things that worry me about going back to school are: children will not be able to comply with the regulations [...] For instance; a child

will borrow a pen from another classmate and no-one will know if that child has the coronavirus or not.” — learner (13 yrs)

“What worries me is that in our school there are many students and I don’t think social distancing and the ‘no touching rule’ can be met due to the numbers at our school” — learner (17 yrs)

“I am looking forward to catching up with my school work and ensuring that I am on the right track” — learner (15 yrs)

“I want to learn [...] because we are left behind with school work and we will not know certain things at school.” — learner (7 yrs)

#### Way forward?

The implementation of this study was facilitated through social media, which provides an excellent platform for people of all ages to communicate with each other safely during this pandemic.

The importance of this work lies in its ability to encourage South Africans to tell and showcase their stories of how their lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pictures are particularly captivating and revealing, because they display the participants’ experiences and perceptions with minimal interference from the researchers (besides posing research questions). In this way, we can enhance the ‘participant voice’ and share children’s, teenagers’ and adults’ stories of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives.

The study is ongoing and we hope to learn more about the implications that national regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have on the lives of everyday South Africans.

**Authors:** Dr Candice Groenewald, a senior research specialist, Thobeka Ntini, a PhD intern and project manager, and Mafanato Maluleka, a fieldwork manager in the HSRC’s Human and Social Capabilities (HSC) division

[cgroenewald@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:cgroenewald@hsrc.ac.za)

Research team members: Dr Zaynab Essack, Natasha Van der Pol and Prof Alastair van Heerden, also in HSC.

#### Children know about protection

The following responses were shared by child participants when asked to show things that they would do to ensure that they did not get the coronavirus:



“My sister and I wear masks when we exit the house.”



“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”



“I will wear a mask.”



## RETHINKING GROWTH-UNEMPLOYMENT PUZZLES IN THE COVID-19 RECESSION:

### CONTEXTUALISING SA’S MACROECONOMIC POLICY OPTIONS

The total value of goods and services produced inside South Africa’s borders fell steeply in the last two quarters of 2019, resulting in a sharp rise in unemployment. The government’s latest macroeconomic reforms to lift the country out of the 2019 economic downturn and create sustainable jobs are unlikely to deliver immediate benefits. Interventions promised in the recovery plan will take time to cascade through complex economic sectors, agencies and diverse markets before the jobless at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid experience any life improvements. Meanwhile the global COVID-19 pandemic is pulling leading economies into a slump worse than the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Peter Jacobs, Pelontle Lekomanyane and Karabo Nyezi contextualise South Africa’s jobs-growth crises.