Interlocking inequalities, conflicts, and crises:
COVID-19 and education

A special edition of the *Journal of Education* looked at how the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises have influenced education systems and choices in a context of existing inequalities in the Global South. **Adam Cooper**, a co-editor, reports.

Mere weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, HSRC experts warned of the negative effect it could have on South Africa's education system, an effect felt in other countries too, particularly those in the Global South. Recently, a special issue of the *Journal of Education* used the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point to interrogate and reflect critically on how crises and pandemics intersect with existing educational challenges.

Along with my co-editors, Prof Yusuf Sayed from the University of Sussex and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and Prof Vaughn John from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Education, we sought contributions that evaluated how the pandemic affected education choices, how educational decisions were taken, and how these worsened or disrupted existing inequalities.

The articles show how interlocking inequalities affect groups of people, and education sub-sectors. Early childhood development (ECD), for example, despite repeatedly being acknowledged as most important for learning outcomes, was neglected during the pandemic in comparison with basic education and the university sector. Coping with 'learning loss' in schools and universities drowned out the needs of younger children in ECD, according to an article by Hasina Ebrahim, Colwyn Martin and Lorayne Excell. An online survey and semi-structured interviews illuminated how COVID-19 disruptions entrenched inequities in service provision and early learning opportunities. A million children were excluded from ECD programmes because of the pandemic and 68% of ECD staff working in disadvantaged centres reported not receiving an income, while 99% of poor parents sending their children to ECDs were compelled, by circumstances, to stop paying fees.

Schools in the ECD sector had different outcomes based on their locations and parental incomes, illustrating how COVID-19 interacted with existing divisions. Centres in poor communities received minimal government support, while the shock created by the pandemic was more easily absorbed by centres in more affluent communities. Following the reopening of centres after the initial hard lockdown, centres in poor communities struggled to adjust their learning programmes to accommodate altered modes of delivery, wrote Ebrahim, Martin and Excell. Despite these immense struggles, the needs of people working in and attending the ECD sector were largely ignored, as the basic education and university sectors garnered the bulk of attention. The ECD case study shows how a set of inequalities, related to education sectors, race, class and location, intersected in the context of the pandemic to compound effects on marginalised people.

The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector had also been overlooked in the national discourse and it was again negated during the pandemic. The marginalised TVET sector was placed under further duress as unprepared lecturers and colleges were thrust into online learning, writes Joy Papier in another article. Before COVID-19, TVET staff and colleges were aware of changing demands related to technology, which was already re-shaping teaching, learning, and skills development. Colleges had been attempting to make progress towards blended and remote learning. However, the sudden onset of the pandemic meant that face-to-face learning was substituted, wholescale, with remote teaching and learning, something for which the struggling sector was not prepared, wrote Papier.

The research illuminated a sector where lecturers are deeply concerned with students' well-being, but are overwhelmed by conditions that create anxiety and confusion.

While basic education was certainly not left out of the national education focus during the pandemic, research showed that teachers were largely excluded from decisions and policymaking. This created a schism between policy formation and its implementation, with a range of outcomes from affluent to more impoverished schools, according to an article by Ronicka and Vimolan Mudaly. Training staff to implement social distancing, mask-wearing and sanitising, had radically different implications at former model C, township and rural schools, yet teachers were largely sidelined in the process of contributing insights to the production of policy. Research in this sector illustrates how the government needs to be more cognisant of the diverse and unequal schooling contexts in which teachers work when making policy for and on behalf of teachers. An article by Marcina Singh and colleagues describes how research in eight African countries, including South Africa, revealed an absence of teacher involvement in policymaking, as well as a neglect of their professional development and psychosocial needs during the pandemic.

Research in the university sector was preoccupied with the issue of 'to go' or 'not to go' online, according to an article by Aslam Fataar and Najwa Norodien-Fataar. This 'either/or' mentality reveals a problematic aspect of the logic underpinning crises in general: the term 'crisis' originated in the medical field, referring to a moment when a patient either recovers to full health or dies. The 'either/or' logic of crisis therefore presents a set of binary outcomes – 'online' versus 'face-to-face' or 'death' versus 'recovery' – hiding that a range of options and outcomes may be possible in times of crisis.

Research on universities during COVID-19 showed that the dominance of the 'online' versus 'face-to-face' debate drowned out challenges that occur, regardless of whether the country is faced by a health emergency, and which exist regardless of pedagogical modalities. The debate ignores how effective e-learning, like all forms of learning, requires students to actively participate in learning processes, the authors write.

A lack of learner agency in the university sector was illustrated in an article by Nompumelelo Thabethe and Sarasvathie Reddy. They explored how the knowledges, languages and insights that poor students hold and bring to educational spaces were again occluded from university spaces that merged online and face-to-face teaching. The production of culturally relevant knowledge that might emerge in the connections between and among the university, community, and curriculum rarely takes place because students continue to be perceived as empty vessels into which knowledge should be poured, they write. The dominance of the 'online' versus 'face-to-face' teaching debate also meant that other ways in which inequalities interlocked through the intersections of race, class, and gender were largely overlooked. For example, some female university students returned home and were reinserted into a different set of familial roles and responsibilities that they generally avoid as students in urban university settings, according to an article by Ansurie Pillay and colleagues.

The special issue moved across educational sub-sectors, highlighting how crises interlock with and exacerbate existing inequalities. Parts of the education landscape that are most critical to learning and that have the most debilitating effects on marginalised students, like ECD and TVET, were given support. This trend is indicative of educational politics more broadly. Research articles also showed how gender, rural-urban divides, and socioeconomic factors intersected during COVID-19, compounding the challenges of marginalised people and education sub-sectors. Importantly for teaching and learning, while much debate has taken place about the advantages and challenges of online teaching and learning, research showed ongoing educational problems are prevalent regardless of teaching mode. Ensuring that students engage in learning as active participants and that their culturally relevant knowledges are incorporated into educational processes rarely happens, whether classes are held online, face to face or in hybrid form.

A school learner walks through Siqalo informal settlement in Cape Town in June 2021.
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