

**Title: Rethinking assessment for a post-Covid-19 education dispensation in South Africa:
Challenges and opportunities**

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Abstract

The onset of Covid-19 the world over has impacted educational processes in a way never seen before or imagined. Education systems across the globe have responded to the Covid-19 induced disruptions in the manners mediated by their contexts. These responses were dictated by how each country's health system elected to meet the pandemic onslaught head on. In the South African context, the country was put under a lockdown which meant that work and school lives were disrupted in an attempt to offset the onset of the pandemic. Fast-forward, after enduring two years characterized by the unfortunate loss of lives, disrupted schooling and attendant learning losses, the South African education system has embarked on a post-Covid-19 reorganization which entails a review of the current education curriculum and its assessment regime. Although currently the direction of the curriculum change trajectory is still unknown publicly, the proposed changes in the country's assessment regime have been specified and they entail the following: 1) the elevation of assessment for learning to offset the centuries of domination of a testing culture that both colonial and apartheid eras have bequeathed to democratic South Africa; 2) the creation of space for the use of information and communications technology in enhancing assessments as learned from education delivery during Covid-19, including item banking; and 3) the introduction of the General Education and Training Certificate (GEC) as a way of streamlining education in the pre-high-stakes levels of education delivery. The paper will discuss all these three innovations in assessment reform as opportunities for South Africa in resetting its education system for a post Covid-19 era. Of importance will be a discussion of the opportunities and challenges that each innovation presents, given the historically socially unjust contexts and inequalities obtaining in education under a democratic South Africa.

Keywords: Post-Covid-19, assessment for learning, GEC certificate, assessment and testing, information and communication technology.

Introduction

The arrival of Covid-19 pandemic the world over has both impacted and disrupted education in a way never seen before. Education systems across the globe have responded to the pandemic induced disruptions in the manners mediated by their contexts. Such responses were dictated to by how each country's health system elected to meet the pandemic onslaught head on. South Africa (SA), like other countries of the world, chose a path suited to its national context in responding to the onset of Covid-19. The country was put under a series of lockdown measures during the years 2020 and 2021 aimed at curtailing the spread of the coronavirus and breaking the chain of its transmission among the populace. The unintended consequences of these lockdown measures were the disruptions of the normal and accustomed ways of living of the citizenry in the context of escalating rate of infection and the loss of lives. On the educational front, the onset of Covid-19 necessitated education authorities to adopt measures guided by the country's health ministry aimed at breaking the chain of transmission of Covid-19 and saving the lives of the country's schooling community.

The aim of this paper is to address the direction the proposed post-Covid-19 educational changes in the country may take, focussing on suggested changes to the national assessment framework. The SA's education department's February 2022 Lekgotla (Strategic Planning meeting) decided that there shall be no return to the pre-Covid-19 curriculum unchanged. Added to this is the argument for the country to cease the opportunity to use the learnings derived from the country's coronavirus responses to deal with the unfinished business of education transformation under a democratic dispensation. Allied to this, is an attempt at dealing with the inherited centuries old domination of a test or testing culture for evaluating learning outcomes. It is these historical experiences that remained undisrupted when SA achieved political freedom in 1994 which saw the persistence of unequal and social unjust assessment regime.

Sources used for authoring this paper were parsimonious selected from literature on SA's educational responses to the coronavirus, and they comprised in the main published peer-reviewed journals, books, grey literature and education policy documents. The paper is divided into the following sections: a general introduction; an overview of the country's education system; the country's educational experiences under the Covid-19 pandemic; the envisaged post-Covid-19 assessment innovations; and a conclusion on the opportunities and challenges for the proposed innovations. The paper grapples with the issue of whether the proposed changes will lead to fundamental change from the dominance of a testing culture to an assessment culture that punts the strengthening both teaching and learning.

A Brief Overview of the South African Education System

The post-apartheid South African governance education structure comprises of a centralised national education department, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), whose major function and responsibility is to produce policies that direct the country's entire education machinery. The level below the national education office is made up of the nine provincial education departments (PEDs). The schools found within each PED belong to and are a provincial responsibility. Thus, the PEDs in the respective provinces are responsible for resourcing their schools and ensuring that education policies promulgated at national level are given implementation impetus in the schools. Each PED is further subdivided into district offices, which may also be sub-divided into sub-district offices or

circuits. Curriculum implementation (teaching and learning) in schools occur through the district offices. Table 1 below indicates the various levels of the schooling system and attendant assessment regime.

Table 1: The South African School/Education and Assessment Systems

<i>General Education and Training Band (GET)</i>			<i>Further Education and Training</i>
Foundation Phase	Intermediate Phase	Senior Phase	
Lower Primary	Higher Primary	Lower Secondary	Higher Secondary
Grades R to 3	Grades 4 to 6	Grades 7 to 9	Grades 10 to 12
School-Based Assessment	School-Based Assessments plus Examinations		

While a whole School-Based Assessment (SBA) is used for learner progression in the Foundation Phase, learner progression from the Intermediate Phase the Further Education and Trading level is determined through an SBA and examinations. Currently the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations are the only exit or terminal examinations conducted at the end of Grade 12, after thirteen years only of schooling. They provide for accessing either post-school education (e.g entry to university) or to the world of work.

The current inequitable and test/testing oriented assessment regime were inherited by democratic SA from the country historical (colonial and apartheid) past. inherited The socially unjust character found in the present day South African education dates back to the country’s apartheid era historical antecedents [5]. With the country nearing the third decade of political emancipation under a democratic rule, and despite the admirable progress made in changing the inherited racially segregated education system, the persistence of injustice and inequality within the South African education continue to show in the form of poor learning outcomes [15] [11] [6] [7]. It is in the context of this context of bifurcated, inequitable and low quality education entrapment that South Africa went through the Covid-19 pandemic experience.

The South African Educational Experiences under the Covid-19 Pandemic

The post-apartheid challenges to the successive governments of the African National Congress (ANC) ruling party since the 1994 political changes could be summed as the triple challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment [1]. These challenges have precipitate a perpetual state of social restlessness and/or protestation by the poor and marginalised sectors of the population [21] [13]. On the education front, the enacted education policies failed to gain implementation traction, resulting in a gulf between policy pronouncements and policy practice/implementation. Thus, despite the enormous strides made in eradication the colonial and apartheid baggage, the country’s education system is considered to be fragile [7] [19] owing to: (1) the weight of history – historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid; (2) the mistakes committed by successive governments of the ruling party in the course of transitioning the country to a democracy; and (3) the widespread corruption in government echelons that regrettably resulted in poor service delivery to the populace. It is under a confluence of these and other social ills that SA educational transformation unfolded, punctuated with low learner performance in local, regional and international measures of educational performance. So, when Covid-19 befell SA, it exacerbated the already multiple crises situation in the country.

SA was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic wave from early 2020. On the morning of Thursday 05th March 2020, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases announced the country's first case of COVID-19 of an patient who had tested positive on returning from a holiday trip in Italy. While taking cue from the World Health Organisation, the South African government instituted a country-wide hard lockdown for 21 days from midnight of Thursday 26 March 2020 – a step rationally taken at the advice of local team of medical specialists under the egis of the Ministry of Health. This marked the first Covid-19 induced disruption of work, social and schooling lives of millions of the citizenry. A state of emergency was declared, accompanied by social, work and schooling lives stoppages that confined the citizens to minimal and restricted movements out of their homes. This hard lockdown measures were followed by variations of graded lockdown levels based on the government's Covid-19 five levels alert system. This Covid-19 alert levels ranged from the 'Alert Level 1' indicating low Covid-19 risk through to 'Alert Level 5' indicating high Covid-19 risk. Each level indicated the mandatory actions required of the citizens and penalties for any transgressions. Changes to these 'Alert levels' from 2020 to 2021 were periodically announced or broadcasted to the nation by the state president in an attempt to containing the spread of Covid-19. Nevertheless, many lives and livelihoods were lost as a result, with schooling severely disrupted as well.

The disruptions to schooling precipitated , among others, (a) learners and their teachers staying at home and not going to schools; (b) teaching time lost as a result of no classroom contact between learners and their teachers; and (c) curtailed coverage of the prescribed curriculums for the various grades and attendant learning losses [4] [19] [17]. During the pandemic, the government also devised ways of compensating for lost classroom teaching and learning through utilising various media platforms (e.g. radio, television, internet) for transmitting educational lessons to learners with parents edged to supervise the home learning processes. On the whole, the Covid-19 experience laid bare and pronounced the incompleteness of the post-apartheid education transformation project and the persistence of social injustice and inequalities in education in democratic South Africa [8] [11] [12] [16]. With the thread of Covid-19 significantly reduced, though not completely eradicated, the education authorities have begun conversations on the course of action for the country's education system post the pandemic.

The Envisaged Post-Covid-19 Innovations for South African Education

At its February 2022 Lekgotla (or Strategic Planning meeting), the SA education department came out with a proposal to re-configure its post-Covid-19 education system. Although the details of this 'new normal' are still in a work-in-progress state, their discourse and rhetoric revolve around dealing with unaccomplished education transformation ideals, incorporating of the lessons learned from the country's Covid-19 experiences and also seeking answers to the stubborn national triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality. The following innovations have been proposed: (a) Implementation of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in schools to guide teaching and learning; (b) Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support teaching, learning and assessment; and (c) Introduction of the General Education Certificate (GEC) within the GET band.

The Elevation of Assessment for Learning

Although assessment for learning (AfL) has been prevailing in the post-apartheid national assessment framework, it has never reached the height of importance like it is envisaged after Covid-19. The elevation of AfL to offset the centuries domination of a testing culture that the post-apartheid South Africa inherited from its historical pas

During the Covid-19, while the writing of the end-of-year NSC examinations proceeded unhindered during 2020 and 2021 with the exit FET curriculum uncut, learners in the GET band were subjected to a reduced curriculum content and the challenge of unreliable teacher-made assessments for teaching, learning and progression purposes. Besides this unfortunate state of affairs which became worsened by the Covid-19 experience, teachers have over the years been found to exhibit unsatisfactory assessment knowledge or competence [9]. Further, the many years of the dominance of a testing/grading culture for both high-stakes and non-high-staked assessments had kept teachers in schools away from adopting teaching/learning integrated assessment practices. While AfL is mentioned in the education policy documents, it was never practiced to the fullest as espoused by its proponents [20] [14]. Classroom assessment practices in SA schools reflected the allocation of marks or grades to learners without indicating how learner performance can be improved [2].

However, the different assessment for learning experimental studies (and their findings) conducted by different researchers within South African ([10] [18] [3]) have attracted the attention of some education policy makers. These studies and their findings have rekindling a need to revisit and review the efficacy of the country's education system post-Covid-19. As a result, there is impetus towards more experimentation with AfL professional development strategies and approaches for scaling up. Here the emphasis is on how to use AfL integrated into the learning and teaching processes which is antithetical to the historically overbearing testing and grading culture. Whether this hopeful and enthusiastic experimentation will bear the desired fruits, the jury is still out there.

Usage of Information and Communications Technologies in Education

The use of Information and Communication Technology/Technologies (ICTs) in education has been on the radar of SA's education transformation agenda under democratic rule. Using ICTs for bolstering learning outcomes and learner competitiveness has continually featured of discourses on the espoused education system and its intended outcomes. The use of ICTs in education is about enabling the country's education system to deliver quality education which is locally relevant and regionally/internationally competitive. Remote and digital learning and teaching modalities applied during Covid-19 have spurred impetus towards the use of technology to improve teaching and learning. An example here has been the development of an e-assessment tool for teachers [9]. This is a computerised (or web-based) assessment tool developed for teachers to use in conducting their low-stakes classroom assessments. This tool is a repository of bank of English Home Language and curriculum aligned assessment items, readily available term-based (interim) tests, diagnostic items and language/reading remedial resources for teachers. Utilising this tool, teachers would be able to develop/assemble their customised test or select and use readily available ones. Learners would be able to take these tests from anywhere in the country. The teacher would then mark the tests and then generate reports which they would use/analyse to obtain information on their learners strengths and weaknesses.

The Proposed General Education Certificate

The proposed introduction of the General Education Certificate (GEC) by the education department marks an attempt at introducing a qualification at the end of GET band, after ten years of compulsory education (from Grade R through 9). This qualification will serve the main purpose of streamlining learners' post-GET schooling into the following three pathways: (a) An *academic route* leading to the completion of NCS, leading to further study at a university or an equivalent institution; (b) A *vocational route* through the National Certificate: Vocational Qualifications leading to a vocational specialisation offered at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges; and (c) An *access to occupational specific qualifications* consisting of knowledge, skills and workplace experience and learning, in schools or in other institutions. At the core of the GEC qualification is pathing learners into the above learning streams as they proceed towards their FET education and training. Further, learners who successfully complete this qualification will be able to demonstrate competencies linked to the 21st century skills.

The GEC assessment will be made up of: Standardised external assessment in selected subjects; SBA; and Aptitude (or abilities) assessments linked to skills, knowledge, values and attitudes. As the education department is punting a need to move away from a testing/grading dominated assessment culture, it remains to be seen whether the GEC will either further entrench the already ingrained testing culture or counter its dominance.

Opportunities and Challenges to Implementation

The planned educational changes include a further amendment of the country's national assessment system to disrupt the historical continuity of the dominance of a testing culture, counterbalancing it with assessment that is geared towards enhancing teaching and learning in the classroom. On the other hand, the introduction of a GEC qualification has the potential of exacerbating the testing culture if implemented along the mould of the NSC exit qualification.

The opportunities and challenges for the adoption of the aforementioned innovations are discussed from a policy (as text) and (policy as a) practice perspectives:

- The position of AfL in the education (assessment) policy is not geared towards a lifted positioning of this form of assessment. There is a need for policy adjustment to speak to the elevation/promotion of AfL application/practice in classrooms. Currently, AfL is associated with informal (unrecorded) assessments done by teachers in schools. Informal assessments do not carry high value and prestige as compared to formal (recorded) assessments which mandatorily get submitted to districts by schools.
- Nationalised vs context-focussed implementation: AfL implementation to scale has never been experimented with in SA:
- The use of ICTs to enhance teaching and learning is still lagging behind: Challenges of digital divide; no national publish infrastructure to support access and usage of ICT
- Policy as an enabler or dis-enabler of GEC implementation:
- The GEC is still in a pilot phase and its final form is still a contested matter e.g. Issuing of a report card and a certificate vs a report card and a certificate on demand.
- No pronouncement have emerged from the country's certification body yet.
- The current policy (as text) environment does not cater for the implementation of GEC.
- Policy to promulgate GEC is still in a draft state, yet politicians (politics) have gone ahead to make pronouncements of this qualification.
- The move to get GEC administered online even when the country's infrastructure is not ready.
- Preparation of the schooling community stakeholders for the changes that are to come (e.g. school principals, teachers, School Governing Bodies (SGBs)).

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