

Chapter 12

Fragility Compounded: The State of the South African Educational System in the Aftermath of Covid-19



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Abstract In this chapter we undertake an assessment of how Covid-19 impacted the South African education system two years on. Our argument is that COVID-19 compounded the challenges of an inherently fragile education system. Important elements of this system were precipitously weakened as budget cuts were instituted and funds for infrastructural maintenance diverted towards emergency requirements. The chapter begins with a description of the major structural features of the South African education system that were there before the pandemic, highlighting the country's racialised and classed inequalities. It then describes how government, labour unions, parents and civil society, including non-governmental organisations, responded. The chapter then estimates the losses on contact time, dropouts, and learning. Extrapolating from annual achievement studies conducted in one province, we estimate that after two years of COVID-19-related losses, the national achievement scores were even lower than what we earlier estimated. Our analysis showed that the most fragile parts of the system, serving the poor, struggled to sustain basic levels of functionality. The privileged parts of the education system also experienced further learning losses. Ground previously gained due to targeted intervention was severely eroded. The contribution ends with an evaluation of the responses of the South African government using the ideas presented by the International Commission on the Futures of Education.

Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to undertake an assessment of how COVID-19 impacted the South African educational system. The chapter builds on an earlier study by Soudien et al. (2022), which documented the path of the pandemic after one year, its effects on teaching and learning, and the response of the educational system. The South African educational system aimed to bring children safely back

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to schools, stabilize the learning experience and mitigate the negative effects of the disruption on children.

The results of these efforts were mixed. Poorer children were estimated to have lost 65% of contact teaching time (Gustafsson, 2020). Learners in more privileged contexts were less affected (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). These insights, however, are not strong enough to provide empirical information about the impact of the decisions made by the government or particular efforts to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Our previous studies estimated potential learning losses through a speculative learning-loss model. We speculated that, on average, learning achievement would drop to the 2015 levels – that is, the educational system would regress by five years– as a result of school closures in 2020. In this chapter, we aim to use learner attainment data collected at the end of 2021 to deepen our original analysis.

We argue that the system is inherently fragile, and COVID-19 intensified this fragility. Elements of the system are precipitously weakened because of budget cuts and diverted funds towards emergency requirements for infrastructural maintenance. To make this argument, our paper begins with an overview of the major structural features of the South African educational system. Drawing from official government data and several large-scale studies, such as the TIMSS 2019 and annual systemic assessments conducted in one of the nine provinces, this overview highlights the compounding racial and class achievement inequalities in the education system. It shows the efforts that were taken to improve the system prior to the pandemic and the impacts of these improvements. Then, we describe the response of the national government and the attempts by the Department of Basic Education at both national and provincial levels to maintain minimum levels of functionality during the pandemic. This includes the response of the labour unions and the responses of parents and civil society, including non-governmental organisations. We review the known results of these responses and identify the most fragile parts of the system that struggled to sustain basic levels of functionality. These parts of the education system instead lost gains they had previously made in relation to key indicators such as attendance, enrolments, and learner performance data. The more privileged areas mobilized structures and systems to which they routinely had access and were able to not only maintain standards of education delivery but even to improve it (Gustafsson, 2020). Following this analysis of the losses and the gains of the system, the chapter moves to describe the system as it has settled into a post-COVID-19 form. This part of the paper reviews the formal policy changes, actions taken, and announcements made by the national and provincial departments of basic education. We consider what these indicate about the official response to pandemic and aim to answer the following questions about the policy decisions: Were they reactive, responsive, analytic, or forward-looking? Did they appreciate the depth of the difficulties communities experienced? Were policies and strategies designed generally implementable in classrooms? Did they promote innovation and improvement to the system? Did they reflect systemic capacity to address the specific features and experiences of the teaching and learning crisis? We conclude with a prognosis of what lies ahead for the post-COVID-19 educational system.

Major Structural Features of the South African Education System

The South African education system provides nearly universal access with a participation rate of 96.7%, representing approximately 14.7 and 15 million learners at school in 2020 and 2021, respectively (StatsSA, 2021, 2022; Government of South Africa, 2022). However, while most children attend school, inequality in their experiences persists. Much of this inequality derives from the country's apartheid history which resulted in unequal treatment of racially divided groups of children. Children who were classified as Black African were the most disadvantaged group while those classified White were inordinately privileged.

To address educational injustice due to the apartheid regime, the democratic government promulgated key legislation. One crucial act related to educational governance, for example, was the National Education Policy Act (NEPA, No. 27 of, 1996). This centralized educational planning at the level of the state but provided autonomy to the provincial departments. It is based on cooperative governance where the Minister of Education consults with provincial departments of education and relevant stakeholders and determines national policy for the following: planning, provision, financing, staffing, coordination, management, governance, monitoring, and evaluation. The provincial departments, in turn, are responsible for funding decisions and the implementation of national policies (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). However, the autonomy provided to provinces rests on the assumption that they have the necessary competences to fulfil their obligations (Carrim, 2013). The South African education system (like other sectors) has been lauded for its policies, but the implementation of these policies has been criticized (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). Another important element in the strategy of the reforms was a focus on the poor. Schools were classified into five income quintiles reflecting the socio-economic status of the communities in which they were set. Schools in the lowest three quintiles were funded at higher student per capita levels than those in the higher quintiles, and so school fees were minimized. These schools were thus termed 'no-fee' schools (Spaull, 2019).

Despite the significant attempts to redress past injustices, schools continue to reflect their apartheid legacies and fall into two categories: no-fee schools and fee-paying schools. No-fee schools are under-resourced and largely serve black African and coloured learners.¹ Fee-paying schools, that are now racially mixed, serve learners from more affluent households and are well-equipped to provide quality education, but which in the past served only white learners under conditions of privilege (Amnesty International, 2020). Spaull (2019) observed that 75% of all learners were in no-fee schools and 25% in fee-paying schools. As a result, the system has two tiers distinguished by race and class. These groups reflect "the kinds

¹ In South Africa the term 'Coloured' (a word of Afrikaans origin) denotes members of multiracial ethnic communities who may have ancestry from more than one of the various populations inhabiting the region, including African, European, and Asian.

and levels of inequality that are evident in the wider social system,” as mentioned in our previous work (Soudien et al., 2022: 307). Reforms introduced as part of the democratization of the country after 1994 aimed to structurally equalize resources and other provisions but struggled to eliminate, or even mitigate, existing inequities inherited by schools leading to unequal outcomes.

Poor quality of learning is the one of the most disturbing outcomes of the country’s structural inequality. Even prior to COVID-19, achievement gaps were linked to learners’ socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations. Reddy et al. (2020) showed that there was a difference of 75 points in 2019 TIMSS mathematics achievement of learners between no-fee and fee-paying schools in the pre-COVID period. Only a quarter of learners in no-fee schools were able to demonstrate the basic knowledge and skills for their grade compared to two thirds of learners from fee-paying schools. This disparity was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Strikingly, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) Annual Report (2021) indicated that there had been a marked increase in underperformance on the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examination in 2020. The number of underperforming schools increased from 1363 to 5367 from 2019 to 2020 on the National Senior Certificate examinations (Department of Basic Education Annual Report, 2021). The highest number of underperforming schools are in the provinces that have the highest number of schools that serve the previously disadvantaged groups, that is, the Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, and Limpopo provinces. While the DBE has not attributed this development to Covid-19, there can be little argument that it is linked.

COVID-19 and Responses of the South African Education System

The South African government declared COVID-19 a national pandemic in March of 2020 and proceeded to lockdown the country. A timeline of developments for the schooling sector are outlined below.

On March 14, 2020, all schools were closed. By April 2020, the DBE established a COVID-19 response programme with the support of civil society groups. This program included a multi-media learner support programme in conjunction with the national radio and television broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation. The program was called COVID-19 Learner Support, and curriculum support lessons were placed online for Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Grades 10, 11 and 12. Textbooks and teacher guides were provided, along with study guides and revision booklets for the senior phase (Grades 10–12). Multi-media learning material supported by APPS was also spread, and teachers received advice about how to manage learning. At one point, workbooks, and additional material for special needs groups and for those repeating their studies were provided. Advice for parents about learning and psychosocial resources was provided

on the DBE website (Department of Basic Education, 2021); Multimedia materials supported by APPS were made available on the DBE website.

From April 2020 to August 2020, the DBE consulted with teacher unions on issues that arose during lockdown. Two national consultations brought together approximately 100 educational experts to discuss plans and advice for lockdown. These meetings worked to establish a monitoring and evaluation programme to assess system readiness for the provision of personal protective equipment, water availability at every school, and capacity of each school to ensure learner safety.

In June 2020, the DBE (2020a) published its *School Recovery Plan in Response to COVID-19*. This included a three-year plan for the recovery of teaching and learning time. Attention was given to the length of the school day, the length of the school term, and a reduction of time allocated for examinations and assessment. There was also a focus on guidance for self-directed learning. The intention was to recover between 29 and 33 teaching days. This goal meant that the number of days recovered will be less than the number of days lost, and hence the system will need to trim and reorganize in all grades, for except Grade 12" (Department of Basic Education, 2020a). Risk-level Adjusted Subject Plans were developed in all the subjects in the Intermediate (Grades 4–6) and Senior Phases (Grades 7–9). Three risk levels were established: the High Road with no disruptions to learning, the Middle-Level with 30% teaching lost, and the Low Road with 60% teaching time lost (Department of Basic Education, 2021). The response planned to recover time lost for Grade 12 learners through a shortening of the period scheduled for examination preparation and an extension of the school day. Social justice and equity principles were foregrounded to ensure that all learners could access the planned programs, particularly the most vulnerable (Department of Basic Education, 2021).

Finally, schools reopened in phases by grade and through a rotational approach in August 2020. However, schools closed for a second time because of the second wave of COVID-19 from December 2020 to February 14, 2021. On February 15, schools reopened following the nationwide closure.

In March 2021, the DBE conducted a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on curriculum delivery, teaching performance, learner performance, and psychosocial wellbeing. Then, the DBE amended the Risk Adjusted Strategy in May of 2021. The amendment stated that school attendance should be determined by the direction of the COVID-19 pandemic in each municipality and the entire country (Republic of South Africa, 2021a). It also suspended all contact sport. About a month later, teachers and school support staff were prioritized in the distribution of vaccinations. On July 31, 2021, the DBE issued a statement permitting schools to resume normal activities, including extra-mural activity such as sports without spectators (Republic of South Africa, 2021b). By April 2022, schools operated with relative normalcy.

The impact of these developments is explored in the rest of our analysis. In the next section, we make three estimations: the actual time lost in face-to-face teaching and learning, the number of dropouts, and learning losses because of school closures. The last section provides a sense of the responses and strategic planning of the South African national and provincial departments of basic education, the labour unions, and parents and civil society, including non-governmental organisations.

Estimating Pandemic-Related Losses: School Contact Time, Drop-Outs, and Learning

Schools closed on March 14, 2020, and reopened in a staggered manner beginning on June 8, 2020. Learners attended school on a rotational basis to adhere to social distancing protocols, most often organized in terms of attendance on alternate days. Schools returned to normal teaching and learning activities in August 2021. An analysis by the DBE estimated that 54% of school contact time was lost in 2020 and 22% was lost in 2021. This translated to an average loss of 108 days in 2020 and 44 days in 2021 (Department of Basic Education, 2022). In total, schools lost an average of 152 school contact days. Compared to the average school closure length as reported by the OECD, South Africa fell among the countries at the higher end—like Colombia, Costa Rica, and Brazil. At the other end of the spectrum, the European countries lost less than 50 days of school contact time (OECD, 2022).

Understanding the effects of COVID-19 on drop-out rates in South Africa is complex. Before the pandemic, about one third of learners were over-age for their grade. The throughput rates for grades 10 to 12 were concerning, and there were high levels of learner absenteeism. It is thus difficult to pinpoint the effects of the pandemic. Initial indications by the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey suggested that there had been a significant number of students that had dropped out of the schooling system because of the pandemic (Mohohlwane et al., 2021). However, administrative reports in the DBE indicate that drop-out rates due to COVID-19 have not been as severe as the NIDS study suggested (Department of Basic Education, 2021).

In 2020, we sought to estimate the pandemic-related learning losses for that year (Soudien et al., 2022). With no administrative achievement data, we adopted a ‘suggestive extrapolation’ methodology. This was based on a Belgian study that used six years of standardized test and administrative data to calculate the learning loss effects (Maldonado & De Witte, 2020). The authors expressed the learning loss as a percentage of the standard deviation. Recognising the difference between Belgium and South Africa, we applied the Belgian data to the TIMSS 2019 mathematics scores to estimate the ‘best case scenario’ for TIMSS 2020 scores. We reported that the South African average TIMSS 2020 score would have regressed to the TIMSS 2015 levels at a minimum. In other words, the education system was expected to lose the progress made in the past five years.

In this chapter, we provide better estimates of the learning losses for the period two years after the onset of COVID-19 with the benefit of systemic studies conducted in parts of the country. In 2021, the Western Cape—one of nine South African provinces—conducted their annual literacy and numeracy systemic studies.² These population-based studies were conducted to provide feedback regarding

²The Western Cape systemic studies were not conducted in 2020 due to the pandemic but were resumed in 2021.

achievement in Grades 3, 6, and 9. The assessments used included trend items from previous assessments as well as new items.

Using only the trend items, van der Berg et al. (2022) measured the achievement changes for Grade 3, 6, and 9 learners in the Western Cape between 2019 and 2021. The table below shows the trend results before and after COVID-19. The top two rows show the average scores for language and mathematics in 2019 and 2021 with the third row indicating the decline in average score across this period. In both subjects in all grades, the average achievement scores decreased from 2019 to 2021. Through this quantification of pandemic related learning losses, we find that the achievement decline is higher for mathematics than for languages. The bottom rows relate to the percentage learners passing with an achievement score of 50% or higher. There were fewer students in 2021 than in 2019 who met the pass requirements (Table 12.1).

The achievement decline can be expressed as a percentage of the standard deviation. Among Grade 9 learners, the average mathematics decline of over six percentage points over the two years is equivalent to 32% of the standard deviation of the 2019 scores. The achievement decline is highest in no-fee schools, or Quintiles 1, 2 and 3, which serve learners from low-income households, and lowest in the most affluent (or Quintile 5) schools.

We also explored the following question: If the TIMSS 2019 achievement instrument was administered in October 2021 (termed ‘TIMSS 2021’), what would be the average learner achievement score?

Table 12.2. provides estimates for TIMSS 2021 using the South African learning loss measure values and the South African TIMSS 2019 data. This analysis estimated an average TIMSS 2021 mathematics score of 364 points, had South African Grade 9 learners completed the TIMSS 2019 achievement instrument in 2021. This is a substantial decrease from the average national TIMSS 2019 score of 389 points and is even lower than the TIMSS 2015 score. We could broadly extrapolate that the education system lost at least six years of progress—a remarkable, pandemic-related learning loss. The estimated average achievement for Quintile 1 schools is like the TIMSS 2015 scores, while the estimated achievement drops further for Quintile 5 schools.

Table 12.1 Average scores and passes and performance decline in systemic tests, 2019–2021

Average score	Language			Mathematics		
	Grade 3	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 3	Grade 6	Grade 9
2019	42.4	50.5	59.1	59.5	55.7	37.7
2021	38.7	45.0	56.2	50.7	47.3	31.5
Decline in average score	3.6	5.4	2.9	8.8	8.4	6.2
Percent of learners passed						
2019	44	56	69	58	64	26
2021	39	47	64	53	48	20
Decline in passes	5	9	5	5	6	6

Source: Van der Berg et al., 2022

Table 12.2 Estimated South African mathematics scores in ‘TIMSS 2021’

	TIMSS 2015 math score	TIMSS 2019 math score (SD)	Estimated TIMSS 2021 math score	Estimated learning loss: SD and TIMSS points
National	372	389 (SD 77)	364	0.32 SD = 25 TIMSS points
Q1 schools	330	357 (SD 62)	333	0.39 SD = 24 points
Q5 school	460	464 (SD 80)	449	0.19 SD = 15 points

COVID-19 and the Way Forward

An important source for understanding the official response of the South African government and the challenges it faced in education is the publication, the *Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030* (Department of Basic Education, 2020b). While the five-year plan was formulated before the pandemic, the key priorities for schooling have not changed. In fact, the government used the impact of the pandemic to focus on key development for national and provincial departments on the following: the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), an uninterrupted supply of water for all schools, stronger incorporation of teaching related to information about pandemics and viruses in the Life Orientation Curriculum and improving the supply and use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in schools (DBE, 2020b). These foci and other commitments provide a sense of the responses and strategic planning of the South African national and provincial departments of basic education. To guide this discussion and to evaluate the response of the South African government, our analysis uses the nine key ideas presented by the International Commission on the Futures of Education for navigating the aftermath of COVID-19. We focus primarily on education systems as a framework (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). These ideas include:

1. Strengthening education as a common good
2. The right to education
3. Valuing the teaching profession and teacher collaboration
4. Promoting student, youth and children’s participation and rights
5. Protecting the social spaces provided by schools.
6. Making free and open-source technologies available to teachers and students
7. Ensuring scientific literacy within the curriculum
8. Protecting domestic and international financing of public education
9. Advancing global solidarity to end current levels of inequality (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020)

It is important to note that all these ideas invoke action and offer countries around the world a framework for action. Next, we assess the national response of the South African government to the pandemic.

The first call presented by the Commission— strengthening education as a common good— requires an awareness that education not only includes children and young people but also adults and the publics. Community-engaged and community-led learning is a foundational part of education and must be incorporated into strategies that aim to address challenges within the system. The Commission also noted that the closure of public museums, libraries, and community centres during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vital role that these institutions play in public education (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). Two examples in the South African context offer an opportunity for comprehending the government’s strengthened commitment to education and how it acted.

One example is related to Early Childhood Development (ECD) and the other is related to learner drop-out. While the first was not strictly impacted by COVID-19, its importance grew because of the need demonstrated by the pandemic for the strengthening the education system. This involved a shift in responsibility for ECD from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the DBE. The DBE is now primarily responsible for ECD; however, it is noted that ECD is an integrated service that includes delivery from the Departments of Basic Education, Social Development, Health, and Cooperative Governance. Furthermore, Non-Government Organisation (NGO) networks, ECD Forums, Ward Councillors, and ECD Coordinators play critical roles in delivering ECD (Department of Basic Education, 2022). The many players in the administration of ECD demonstrate the largest problem for the system— the challenge of implementation. It is difficult to delegate responsibilities required for managing the system from the DBE to the provinces, and some provinces are better able to provide support than others. This uneven distribution leads to unequal effectiveness of national strategies. The Western Cape, for example, provides:

1. ECD infrastructure support and holds registration drives for ECD in communities.
2. Specialized learner support at ECD centers expand into Grade R.
3. One thousand days of services for maternal health and early childhood development (Western Cape Government [WCG], 2021). These initiatives suggest that the province can undertake additional initiatives to improve the quality of their ECD delivery that may not be possible for other provinces.

The second example relates to the drop-out problem. The *Zero Dropout Campaign* incorporated NGOs, parents, educators, and learners in their solutions. The latter groups of individuals were encouraged to assist in the process of mitigating the problems of dropping out. These included engaging with the provided materials around school dropout, talking about school dropout, sharing dropout prevention tips during everyday conversations and on social media, engaging in fun reading activities within the home, and registering to be part of their network of schools. There is little information, however, on how these engagements were and continue to be undertaken.

The Commission also emphasizes the right to education. There is an onus on countries to provide functional educational institutions and programmes with an

acceptable level of quality. There should also be an understanding that learning losses and retrogression are temporary and a reflection on the emergency responses and conditions to address these losses as soon as possible. Building on the strengthened public commitment to education, COVID-19 has shown that the right to education must be updated and broadened to be responsive to different contexts and changing societies. This should include digital learning and the provision of radio and television to support academic learning (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

South Africa's response to the right to education was shown at two levels. First, at the national level the improvement of the quality of education provided as well as the redress of learning losses were central concerns. Through processes of formal consultation, the DBE, and the Minister herself, Mrs. Angie Motshekga, convened at least twice with trade unions, educational NGOs, and other public stakeholders. At a more local level, South Africa's response included facilitated support for teachers in classrooms through the provision of teacher aides. The plan was for additional teaching assistants to be recruited through an intervention called the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI). Its intention was to provide 287,000 unemployed youth with opportunities within the education sector, and the BEEI is still working to reach this goal. Recruited youth will receive training in one of the following areas: Education Assistant— including curriculum, ICT/e-cadres or reading champions— or General School Assistant— for example, a child and youth care worker, a handyman, or a Sports and Enrichment Agent (Department of Basic Education, 2022). In addition, the Zenex Foundation, and its implementing partner, Funda Wandé, undertook a Teacher Assistant Programme in the Eastern Cape province from 2022 to 2024 to reduce learning backlogs in the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3) (Zenex Foundation, 2022b). The Zenex Foundation furthermore designed the *Foundation Phase Curriculum Recovery Project* that aimed to address learning backlogs by utilising a strategic approach that included a trimmed curriculum and the provision of teacher support, including teaching assistants, coaching, and training (Zenex Foundation, 2022a). About the curriculum, the national and provincial departments of education also provided the revised Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) which prioritized specific core skills to compensate for the reduced amount of contact time (Department of Basic Education, 2022). The ATPs were grade and subject specific for Grade 1 through 9 and covered years 2021–2023. However, the ATPs for some subjects, such as Natural Science and Mathematics, were criticized as inadequate as they failed to sufficiently consider the limited learning time as well as continued disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey, 2021). The DBE (2022) itself noted that the ongoing loss of teaching time indicated that further learning losses were unlikely to be halted, let alone reversed.

The South African government acknowledged the vital role that digital technology plays in education, as well as the vast digital divide that existed within the country. Several initiatives were undertaken to improve this area by both national and provincial departments, and a hybrid teaching model was adopted. For example, in partnership with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), the DBE developed the *Tswelopele Campaign* and the *WOZA Matrics 2021 Catch-up*

Programme to support students from Grades R to 9 and Grade 12, respectively. These campaigns provided both digital and non-digital learning resources through a variety of media platforms, such as television channels, YouTube channels, and digital and mobile chat platforms (Department of Basic Education, 2022). The Western Cape Department of Education is another example. They made available material and lessons via the ePortal to assist educators and students in the rapid shift to online learning (Western Cape Government, 2021). The DBE plans to build upon these programs (see Table 12.3) but several sources note that the digital divide in South Africa was extensive. Only one-tenth of South Africa households had fixed Internet within the home, with further differences across provinces and between urban and rural contexts. Access to the internet at home was highest in the Western Cape (26%) and lowest in Mpumalanga (2%) and Limpopo (2%). While 17% of households in urban areas had access to the Internet at home, only 1% of rural households had access (StatsSA, 2022). Teacher Unions also noted that online classes offered via TV and radio do not work for all learners (Sayed et al., 2021). Thus, the DBE stated that partnerships were integral to efficient implementation (Department of Basic Education, 2022). This response, however, was inadequate as it did not provide guidance towards implementation. Further investigation is required to develop evidence-based solutions that are appropriate for the South African context. The *Teachers and Parents Communication and Support Systems Action Research Project* by the Zenex Foundation is one such example. The project was conducted from July 2020 to June 2021 and aimed to test ideas for improving communication, such as cell phones, between Foundation Phase parents and teachers and to maximize support for learning in no-fee rural schools in the Eastern Cape province. The anticipated outcomes from this project were developed solutions that were effective in rural settings and considered available resources, time capacities and cultures. It focused on leveraging existing capacities and using proven solutions from rural settings (Zenex Foundation, 2022c).

Table 12.3 Planned initiatives by the Department of basic education

Level of initiative	Planned activities
Nation-wide initiatives	Strengthened broadband to accommodate all schools
	Finalized framework on online schooling
School-based initiatives	Laptops for every educator in the next five years
	Increased connectivity in schools
	Dedicated ICT support available to all schools
	School guidance on how to use norms and standards to procure ICT resources
	Online programs in south African sign language
	Built-in ICT requirements in all future infrastructure plans
Home-based initiatives	Remote digital learning programs in English first additional language (EFAL) as broadcast video lessons on the DBE Tswelopele channel
	Four radio stations secured for weekly EFAL 15- or 30-minute sessions

Source: Department of Basic Education, 2022

The third call from the Commission is to “value the professional expertise of teachers and create conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). The immense and critical role of teachers in all settings is unquestionable, but the additional challenges they face in South Africa place an even higher burden on their career and mental health. Padmanabhanunni et al. (2023) conducted a study that highlighted the transformed professional roles and responsibilities of South African teachers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which left them vulnerable to mental health challenges. The authors completed a survey with 355 primary and secondary school teachers in South Africa regarding fear, resilience, and burnout in relation to COVID-19. Results showed that South African teachers had higher levels of fear of COVID-19 than reported in other contexts such as Spain or India. The authors noted that it was probable that this was due to contextual challenges that hindered the implementation of safety protocols. For example, many schools had inadequate infrastructure leading to overcrowded classrooms, poor sanitation facilities, and insufficient cleaning materials. The study also found that the higher levels of fear were related to greater emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. One contributing factor to the higher levels of fear noted by the authors was the need for teachers and staff to quickly upskill online teaching and the use of technology (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023). Furthermore, the study identified resilience as an impact on all three dimensions of burnout, indicating its prominent protective role (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023). In agreement with this study and others that emphasized the role of teachers, the DBE (2022) acknowledged that teachers are the strength of the system and they be equipped with soft skills and curriculum support in collaboration with education partners and stakeholders. However, strategic planning in this area remained limited with a prominent focus placed on curriculum and providing additional teaching assistants. In direct contrast to the South African governments’ statements regarding educators, teacher union officials reported that teachers had not been sufficiently consulted with regarding the responses to COVID-19 and curriculum adjustments, and professional development training was not provided. Teacher unions reported that psychosocial support for teachers was limited and ineffective (Sayed et al., 2021).

The Commission’s fourth call was for “everyone with educational responsibilities, from government officials to teachers to parents, to prioritize the participation of students and young people broadly in order to co-construct with them the change they wish to see” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). The aim was to emphasize the mental health and wellbeing of students, youth, and children, as well their participation in designing policies and strategies that will guide educational spaces (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

There are limited professionals in the sector— such as social workers and psychologists— that support youth mental health, and thus the DBE aims to focus on building the capacity of Learner Support Agents (LSAs). The *Guide for Learner Support Agents and Schools on Providing Psychosocial Support to Learners* aimed to address this gap, and the Common Element Treatment Approach (CETA) provided training for additional skills to support these efforts. In addition, both the

DBE and UNICEF fund Childline's provided telephone counselling services across all provinces (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

Youth wellbeing was also emphasized in DBE planning, as illustrated in Table 12.4 below. As an example, the DBE introduced a Master Training program—the *Gender Responsive Pedagogy Toolkit for Early Childhood Education* (GRP4ECE)—to promote gender equality. Trainers attended workshops and were then expected to rollout the GRP4ECE. Trainers were responsible for ensuring that training was undertaken in all districts and schools and to empower ECD and Grade R educators to implement the GRP4ECE (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Although the participation of students, youths, and children was not emphasized, the DBE (2022) encouraged learners to join the Girls Education Movement and Boys Education Movement (GEM/BEM). These are interventions which are included under the DBE's Social Cohesion and Equity programs. Their purpose was also to encourage young people to take agency in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Intergovernmental Jamborees as well as exposure to career portals, social action groups, and job-shadowing were also listed as means through which learners could find opportunities to participate in socially responsible activities (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

The fifth call by the Commission is for the protection of the school as a space where children can be physically and intellectually supported and acquire social skills and social competencies. The DBE has fulfilled several of these functions, as outlined in Table 12.4 below. These include the NSNP which provides meals to schools in need. It also offers social cohesion and equity programs. However, because of its legacy of racial discrimination and other factors, the physical space and makeup of most South African schools is inadequate.

Schools require significant improvement to reach minimum physical infrastructure norms and standards. The DBE (2022) acknowledged that the pandemic exposed the scale and depth of the problems it had inherited from apartheid and the inadequacies of the attempted resolutions. Under the Sanitation Appropriate for Education (SAFE) Initiative launched in August 2018, the national and provincial education departments committed to replace pit latrines with appropriate sanitation facilities for schools across the country. The initiative identified 3898 schools using pit latrines. In the current period, there were 2753 schools where work was underway to provide schools with proper sanitation and ablution facilities. Another problem in the country is vandalism. During the COVID-19 lockdown, 1882 schools across the country were damaged through acts of burglary, looting, and in one case having been burnt to the ground. In response, the DBE worked with the Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC) and other line functions—such as Social Cohesion and Equity, School Safety, Governance, and Infrastructure—to engage with communities to protect their schools. In addition, a multi-sectoral violence prevention campaign was initiated by the Minister and Deputy Minister of the DBE to secure what it called 'high-impact results' (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

Both the sixth and seventh calls by the Commission have thus far received little attention within available South African documents. This is likely linked to their long-term nature as well as the DBE's emphasis on providing attention to more

Table 12.4 Planned educational enrichment services by the department of basic education for the 2022/23 financial year

Educational enrichment service	Program or initiative	Additional information (if provided)
Care and support in schools	National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)	Program intends to provide nutritious meals in targeted schools to improve learning and access to education DBE plans to monitor 135 schools including compliance to menu specific and close observation of the school breakfast pilot programmes in Eastern Cape (EC) and North West (NW) provinces
	National School Deworming Programme	Program intends to implement in NSNP schools
	HIV/AIDS Life skills education programme	Program aims to integrate HIV/AIDS and relevant life skills (including sexuality education) into the school curriculum as a prevention strategy as well as to provide care and support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Prevention of tuberculosis (TB) will be included to align with the <i>National Strategic Plan for HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and tuberculosis (TB) 2017–2022</i> Aims to contribute to the reduction of new HIV and TB infections in schools and education departments and decrease learner pregnancy in schools as well as mitigate the impact of HIV and TB
	Psycho-social support	Upskilling of LSAs and funding of Childline's telephone counselling service
Social inclusion and partnerships in education	School sport and enrichment including: South African school choral eisteddfod National Spelling bee Reading clubs National School Sport Programmes	Aims to promote physical activity, indigenous games, language, arts, and cultural expression
	School safety, social cohesion and sports and enrichment programmes	Aims to ensure that the learning environment is characterized by good quality education, while also being safe and free from insecurity, gender-based violence, and other forms of violence
	Social cohesion and equity programmes including gender equity	Aims to promote social inclusion, equality, national unity, cohesion, and nation building

Source: Department Basic Education, 2022

immediate concerns, such as the recovery of learning losses. The sixth call urges that school systems not only focus on the provision of ready-made materials and content but also that they explore open licensing and open access policies to reuse, repurpose, and adapt (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). There was little information regarding this in the available documents beyond the availability of online learning resources developed in line with the curriculum.

The seventh call by the Commission, that is, to “prioritize scientific literacy to ensure a curriculum with strong humanistic objectives that explores the relationship between fact and knowledge and is capable of leading students to understand and situate themselves in a complex world” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020), was not significantly expressed in the South African government’s response in the educational sphere. While an important feature of the government’s response to the pandemic was to foreground the importance of scientific knowledge of COVID-19 and to contribute to enhanced levels of public understanding of the impact of the disease on the quality of life, these lessons did not translate to classrooms (Sayed et al., 2021). The DBE (2022) did note that scientific literacy, along with critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration, should be one of several skills to improve public understanding of problems and foster job creation. However, it did not offer effective pathways, models, or examples of how to incorporate this into the curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

The Commission’s eighth call highlighted the mobilization of national governments, international organizations, civil society, and citizens around the protection of public education and its financing. It states that those responsible should be held accountable for the just and effective use of these resources (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). The DBE recognizes the need to retain and continue collaborations between national and provincial government, as well as partnerships with local and international donors. Its relationship with the NECT was strengthened and enhanced during the pandemic. These relationships are integral to the creation of evidence-based interventions in learning and instruction. The Early Grade Reading Improvement Programme, for example, was one such key initiative that aimed to reach South African children who lived in rural poverty without access to quality education and improve their reading and literacy skills (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

The ninth and final call asked governments to recommit to multilateralism and for all education actors to revitalize international cooperation and global solidarity. They emphasized the importance of empathy and appreciation of our common humanity at the core (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). This was not a priority for the South African government.

Conclusion

After reflection on the severity of the pandemic on the South African educational system, has the response of the South African government been satisfactory? What assessment and conclusions might we find when considering the nine Ideas of the Commission?

The South African government at the central level took steps to address the effects of the pandemic. It is important to note that this response acknowledged the vulnerability of the systems most disadvantaged parts. The DBE stated that “the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education systems globally, affecting the most vulnerable learners the hardest. It has increased inequalities and exacerbated a pre-existing education crisis” (Department of Basic Education, 2022). The government acknowledged the large inequalities that existed across schools and grades. They note that approximately 70% of contact time was lost in 2020 in historically disadvantaged schools whilst only 54% of contact time was lost when aggregating across all schools in 2020 (DBE, 2022). This final point emphasizes the inequality in the system that was only exacerbated by COVID-19 (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

Notable about the South African government’s response to the situation it saw and analysed was its emphasis on strengthening already existing initiatives. This was evident in relation to most of the Commission’s recommendations. With respect to the Commission’s first recommendation– to strengthen public commitment to education as a common good– it sought to put extra weight behind its teacher support initiatives that had been initiated a few years before the pandemic. It also accelerated its efforts to consolidate the coherence of the system by bringing ECD directly under the control of the DBE. To increase emphasis on learner mental health and well-being, which was the Commission’s fourth call, initiatives such as *Gender Responsive Pedagogy Toolkit for Early Childhood Education* (GRP4ECE) were implemented and expanded. It also retained its commitment to the provision of facilities and the NSNP.

The DBE’s most direct response to the pandemic was its curriculum trimming directive. This relates to the Commission’s important call for the right of education to be broadened. The DBE devised ATPs, which prioritized specific core skills. It also secured the support of Zenex, the important non-governmental agency, to bring a focus to the Foundation Phase. With the help of the NECT, the DBE developed the *Tswelopele Campaign* and the *Matrics 2021 Catch-Up Programme* which utilized digital and non-digital resources to assist students. These interventions demonstrated the understanding that learners and parents in no-fee schools needed support for the acquisition and use of expensive digital equipment. Most significant about these responses, however, was the acknowledgement of the irretrievable damage from COVID-19 and the learning losses that were unlikely to be halted, and even less likely to be reversed.

In evaluating the South African government’s response in terms of the Commission’s framework, we find an emphasis on mitigating the worst effects of the pandemic. The government seemed aware of the scale of the challenge it faced and had a good understanding of the vulnerability of the poor. As a result, it planned to address the digital divide and specifically to ensure that every educator had access to a laptop. It also made clear its intentions to improve levels of care and support for the disadvantaged with respect to school-feeding, life-skills provision, psychosocial support, extracurricular activities, and school safety. These were important and provide evidence of an educational administration that understood the contexts of

learning and teaching in South Africa and, specifically, that the learners and educators in these contexts needed considerable support.

Through our exploration, we find two key components of the government's response that deserve emphasis. The first is the focus on recovery. The system's most critical imperative was stabilization. While this is understandable given the importance of sustaining an improvement trajectory following South Africa's apartheid past, it was perhaps a lost opportunity. That opportunity was essentially the gap which COVID-19 revealed for all to see – that developing a good education system would require the intelligence and input of all South African citizens, learners, parents, teachers, and the broader public. The opportunity existed for the government to speak not only with the major non-governmental agencies but also with parents, teachers, and communities to develop a national effort to advance the interests of all children. It failed to take that opportunity. It failed to capitalize on the insights parents developed about the complexity of the learning challenges and the role they could play in imagining and creating a new and revitalized learning and teaching system.

Second, there was an absence of implementation plans for the extensive initiatives announced by government. There was little evidence available about how the DBE intended to realize its objectives. We believe that an important element in meeting these objectives would be intensive engagements with parents and communities. The DBE's plans had little indication of how it expected and intended its provincial departments of education to give substance to the plans. The provinces also provided little indication of how they would work with these plans. With this, we believe the country's most severe challenge is an abundance of strong ideas but weak execution. Its capacity for realizing its initiatives is poor. This leaves the under-capacitated sections of the system without support. While the advantaged sections will be able to adopt and work with the ideals and intentions of the system, the more disadvantaged will not. A further compounding factor is the relationship between the central and provincial governments. The national government often develops policies without considering the conditions on the ground, which results in tension between the governments. Provinces feel they are not consulted, and that the national government is unaware of the system's realities. This further emphasized the chasm between policy development and implementation. Thus, fragility of the system is compounded. The education system has few concrete or material pathways through which it will make a way forward for the weak and vulnerable.

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