

The paradox of the reopening of schools under the lockdown – An exposure of the continued inequalities within the South African educational sector: A theological decolonial view

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The arrival of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in South Africa was responded to by a lockdown, which barred people from moving out of their homes unless for serious and stipulated reasons by government. Amongst other things, one of the most remarkable repercussions of the lockdown was the closing of the educational system. The call to reopen the public schools by the Minister of Basic Education after almost 2 months brought contestations from different sects of life, for instance, labour unions, parents and School Governing Body (SGB) representatives. Mistrust and suspicions developed amongst parents, SGB's unions and the Department of Basic Education as a result. This has seen certain political parties and unions lodging court cases against the reopening decision. This was likely to be a protracted battle as the issue is between life and education. The aim of this research is to discover if these contestations are for the good of the school children or if there is another underlying issue.

Contribution: This article unveils the different contestations which are important for the South Africans regarding the shaping of the future through educational weapon. The contestations help open our eyes and make awareness as to where our democracy has done well and where it is still lacking.

Keywords: inequality; teachers; comorbidities; basic education; COVID-19; coronavirus disease 2019; reopening; trade unions.

Introduction

In a newspaper report entitled, 'Unions believe chaos avoidable', the following statements were made (Mahlangu, Rmothwala & Sobuwa 2020):

The government went ahead with the reopening of schools to more grades yesterday despite being warned that more than half of surveyed teachers nationwide were not yet ready to teach. (p. 1)

The latest state of readiness survey done on behalf of five teachers' unions, including two of the biggest, South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and National Professional Teachers Organization of SA (NAPTOSA), found that more than 50% of teachers are not ready to start teaching on the basis of the new curriculum whose guidelines allow for social distancing. According to SADTU, the findings of the survey conducted on 5293 school principals were availed to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) recently, yet the minister went ahead with the reopening (Mahlangu et al. 2020:6). This is one indication that the Minister of Basic Education is not consulting with the teachers and principals – who is representing these important stakeholders in such decisions then?

There is a clear indication from this that the issue of the reopening of schools is a seriously contested area by some parents, unions, SGB members and other relevant stakeholders. This has put strain on the majority of teachers who are not sure whether going back to teach in the class is a good choice with regard to the risks that are involved with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) radio station, Munghana Lonene, on 12 June 2020 indicated in its programme *Tiko axi etleri* that whilst the schools reopened the previous week, many had closed again, because some teachers and children had tested positive for COVID-19. Since the Ministry of Basic Education began to announce its intentions to reopen schools, there had been a lot of contestations about the issue. In another report, all grade 7 pupils of Drommedaris Primary School in Boksburg were told to stay home just 2 days after the

reopening based on two teachers testing positive for COVID-19 (Mahamba 2020:2). The same report stated that the Education Member of Executive Council (MEC), Panyaza Lesufi, announced that 39 confirmed COVID-19 positive cases affected 38 different schools around Gauteng province. This article aims to explore some of the reasons for the contestations around the announcements of the reopening of the schools by the Department of Basic Education during the lockdown forced by COVID-19. It will test the authenticity of the arguments used by the department to open the basic learning institutions despite the rising numbers of infected people, particularly teachers and children. It is the intention of this article to interrogate the contestations for and against the Department of Basic Education to have schools reopen. The audacity, truthfulness as well as helpfulness of the arguments will be studied in light of the reality of facing COVID-19 as a deadly sickness, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. The research is from a public practical theological point of view, and its one target will not only be to check the veracity of reasons for the reopening of public schools of basic education in South Africa, but also to expose that our basic education system in particular did not drift much away from the inequalities of the past. This will imply that the democratic government for more than 25 years has not made remarkable progress with regard to equating education amongst all South Africans. Education as one of the basic means to transform the country should be seen at the forefront of the battle to fight for the previously disadvantaged, the oppressed and marginalised people. James Cone always indicated from the story of Exodus that we are taught of God who stood for the oppressed. An awareness of the public practical theology of liberation will be made for South Africans to know that the reasons of reopening of public basic education are more than what is said by the minister and various stakeholders. It is for public interest to have this knowledge in thinking of the way forward.

Therefore, this article aims to prioritise determining the real reasons for the reopening of the schools. This is of course because of the fact that some of the given reasons can be contested when looking at the threat of the pandemic as well as the context in which we find ourselves.

Problem statement

In her presentation in a virtual workshop, termed Academic and Student Affairs Committee of Council which forms the central argument of this research, one panellist asked an astounding question: 'who are the beneficiaries of COVID-19, who are happy now that this virus is doing what it is doing?' Without trying to answer this question, I would like to suggest that behind the reopening of the schools at the peak of the pandemic looms the implication that there should be a beneficiary somewhere. *The Daily Maverick* reporters, Payne (2020), argued that the education system of this country should serve all, with a specific focus on the most vulnerable ones in our society, who are disproportionately affected by racial and poverty lines. This expectation has not been

attended to since the inception of a democratic government; hence, the continued inequality is the most concerning issue for this research. The biggest question is that when we say schools must reopen, which schools are we referring to? Secondly, is it still equal education when some schools open and others do not? This resonates well with George Orwell's famous 'Animal farm' in which he said '[a]ll animals are equal, but some are more equal than others' (Orwell 1945).

It cannot be correct to insist that the education system is practising equality if all these things are happening under the watchful eye of all of us. If schools are equal, then it cannot be acceptable that some with toilets and water will reopen, whilst others without these basics cannot. This implies that some educators will go back to work, whilst others will not, yet they are running an equal education system.

Tamar Kahn's (2020b) report included the following statement:

The minister has faced vocal public opposition from unions over plans to re-open schools, as many provincial education departments have yet to convince teachers that they will be returning to a safe working environment. (n.p.)

To add to this statement, not only were the unions concerned about the reopening of the schools, but also school governing bodies and many parents indicated their concerns through different media platforms. The report by Mavuso (2020:1) entitled 'Not ready, reopening is rule. Teacher bodies have reservations' sums up the concerns around the decision to reopen schools based on the claim that 95% of schools pass the test. As much as Minister Angie Motshekga claimed that 95% of schools were already provided with Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) for COVID-19, it was difficult to imagine what had happened to the 1672 schools that were vandalised during the lockdown. This underscored the arguments of the country's five-teacher unions which expressed their concerns around the reopening, namely, SADTUDU, NAPTOSA, South African Quran Union, National Teachers Union and Professional Educators Union (Mavuso 2020:1).

If the decision to reopen the schools was made with the best of intentions, why then was it followed by an outcry from the various sectors involved? The seriousness of this challenge has been demonstrated by Koko (2020:1) who states that the 27 000-member union, Education Union of South Africa (EUSA), attempted and lost its court bid to stop the reopening of the schools (Koko 2020:1). The dissatisfaction of unions, parents and SGBs with the reopening of the schools has to do with the inequality which the below decision is trying to justify (Kahn 2020a):

The plan, approved by cabinet and the national command council on COVID-19 backs away from a proposal put to teacher unions and other interest groups last week, which suggested schools in areas with high transmission of the disease remain shut, and face-to-face teaching resumes for only grade 12 learners. That plan, a copy of which has been seen by Business Day, proposed that schools in SA's metros – where

transmission of the disease is highest – remain closed, effectively shuttering a fifth of SA's 25 475 schools. However, the Council of Education Ministers, which includes education MECs and heads of department, agreed on Monday that all provinces and regions should move at the same pace, said the minister. (n.p.)

The main problem here is that if we are still held up in this kind of inequality, we are still ensuring that the future of this country will remain unequal, and this is the problem this article intends to grapple with from public practical theological viewpoint.

Relevance and intentions of the study

The South African public and the society at large need to know what is happening with the future of this country, which is entrusted within the education of our children. It also should be known that focused attention as well as efforts to transform the South African society has been invested in education and other sectors. If we fail to get it right with the education system of this country, the changes that were the dreams of the freedom charter will remain unfulfilled forever. It has been proven that education has been a tool through which the inequalities were entrenched; hence, it is the same tool through which the past can be reversed and done away with. More than anything else, any study that aims to attend to the education system of South Africa bears much relevance for the transformational and decolonisation agendas that have been waiting for the democratic state to address. The equity gaps in higher education during COVID-19 were felt not only in South Africa, but also amongst the black and Latino Americans (Fain 2020).

Short background

The following quotation typifies with the state of our educational system since the hopeful inception of democracy (Carelse 2018):

The democratic government of 1994 faced many organizational challenges when it took over the amalgamation of the different educational departments which operated under the apartheid state. These included providing equal and non-discriminatory education to all the country's citizens. It was assumed that the inequalities in the system were uniform and to the same degree in all areas of society. However, in several studies undertaken in the first years of the 21st century, it became clear that rural communities were most severely affected by the injustices of the previous regime, compared to their urban counterparts. (p. 1)

On 15 March 2020, the president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, in consultation with his cabinet, made an urgent call to lockdown the country because of the arrival of COVID-19 which had already troubled parts of the world. The first case was found from one KwaZulu-Natal person who had visited Italy. This very scary lockdown closed all businesses, schools, firms and companies except essential services for approximately 3 weeks. For the sake of this

article, the focus is on the implications of the reopening of the schools on an unequal level, as stated in the problem statement above. The engagements from different unsatisfied sectors of the country towards the educational ministry for different understandable reasons seem to have been defeated since the reopening of the schools.

News24 (2020) argues:

According to the province's premier David Makhura and the Gauteng Coronavirus Command Council, as of Thursday 54 schools had been affected by 56 cases reported in districts across the province. This had increased from 43 schools affected by 45 COVID-19 cases on Tuesday. (p. 1)

This was news after just a week of reopening the schools in the country. It remains to be seen as to who will be proved right between the department and those who were against the reopening of the very schools that they were forced to close after a week. In the second week of the reopening of the schools, voices that demanded the closure of the schools amidst fears of parents, teachers and children were already being heard across the country. The report entitled 'Motshekga urged to close schools as infections rise' explains the different feelings of people as a result of the escalating number of infections including teachers and children. One of the activists was quoted as saying (Tlhabye 2020):

The completion of 2020 academic year should not be at the expense of the lives of our educators and learners. How long are we going to wait before we realize that the reopening of schools was a mistake? (p. 4)

There have been very serious controversies around the reasons for and against the reopening of schools and that lead this research to touch on some of those controversies in the next section. The church cannot afford to fold up its arms when the education of the country is challenged; hence, through its practical theology, the church's voice must be vocal. Cone (1975) was of the opinion that any theology that does not address people within their immediate situations is irrelevant and may cease to exist.

The controversial nature of the reopening of schools

When justifying the reopening of the schools, the Minister of Basic Education mentioned that the longer the schools stay closed, the higher the risk of children not wanting to come back to schools. She gave an example of the 2010 strike by teachers after which some teenagers did not come back (eNCA 2020a; Timeslive 2010). Minister Motshekga went on to argue that as children want to play:

If you go to the townships now, go to Soweto for instance, kids being kids, as early as 9 am they are playing in the streets, so if we are worried about distancing, kids are kids and have to play. (p. 1)

It is very concerning that the examples given are that of a black child from a black township. This is very typical of

the apartheid times where many unacceptable behaviours were exemplified through a black child and a black township. Baloyi (2020) in his article entitled 'Black self-hatred ...' addresses issues that have relevance to this perception. If our own black leaders despise other black children like this, it is going to take us many years to end black on black violence. There should be a specific undisclosed reason as to why the minister chose to make an example of these poor children who play in the streets. Perhaps, the children are trying to warm up in the sun after enduring the icy shacks for the duration of the night. Perhaps the streets are the only place they have for themselves as their homes are overcrowded or have any other black poverty-related problems. This is also a generalisation that deserves to be discredited at all costs. We know of many black people in townships where a one-roomed shack is a bedroom and kitchen for a family of more than four people, and this cannot be a good example to give. It can be argued that some of those children in the streets are there through no choice of their own.

Another reason she mentioned is that:

For the past four months kids have been growing up without structure, schools give them structure. They wake up in the morning, wash, get taught for two to three hours, are fed up and go home with lots of homework, that is good for children. (p. 1)

The dictionary meaning of structure includes 'formation', 'shape', 'organised', etc. It is contested as to what we use to bring structure for a black child. For decolonisation and Africanising knowledge systems, if formal school is the only way or a substitute for the traditional home practices, such as taboos and other practices, to build the life and structure of an African child, then as Africans we have become lost in our own land.

The dearth of African leadership

The African epistemologies and philosophies that are undermined and ignored by western education have been ensuring the structure of an African child long before colonisation. Moral decay is happening whilst formal schooling is in operation, whilst that which builds a true and morally structured African child is still pushed to the periphery. These are the kinds of perceptions and views that cannot be helpful towards decolonising our education system as reminded by the #feesmustfall campaign. A large number of protesters who were against schools reopening were scared of the decisions being made by the DBE because the President was heard indicating that the National Corona Council was likely to consider the World Health Organization's (WHO) advice that schools should not reopen when the community continues to be affected by the virus (Ndaba 2020a:2). Unfortunately, the advice from WHO was available even before the schools were reopened, implying that it was just a matter of not taking heed of the advice when the schools were reopened in the first instance.

This is a true picture of the dearth of African leadership which is busy despising and discouraging African values of life in favour of western epistemologies that were orchestrated by colonialism and racial inequalities.

After a meeting with the education council formed by provincial MECs, the minister and her deputy made a sudden U-turn to stop all grades except grades R, 6 and 11 from returning to schools, which was also shocking, particularly after all the emphasis and motivation were made to prioritise the return of all children to the schools by the same minister. This announcement was made on Thursday, 02 July 2020 (Msindisi 2020). Some of the reasons behind this new turn were also listed by the reporter as:

- Implementation of annual teaching plans in the context of the proposed timetabling models and curriculum fundamentals to focus on each grade for the available time in the academic year.
- Registrations and support to pupils with comorbidities, a turnaround time for dealing with comorbidities.

It should be noted that since the announcements of the reopening of schools, some parents had started preparing their children, regardless of the grade in which pupils were, although it cannot be ruled out that some parents were still against the idea, as we read in the media reports. But the sudden change also potentially brought many questions and confusion for parents, children and teachers. Those children who were already back at school could easily have been confused as they were attending with the hope that their younger brothers and sisters would soon follow. This could also potentially have added to the anxiety of feeling betrayed, of being used as a testing ground in this very risky situation whilst others are stopped from following. These kind of quick changes fuelled as fears, uncertainties, anxieties, a sense of betrayal and other psychological challenges. Perhaps the point is that the groups of parents, teachers and children were not at the same level of understanding as the department was trying to treat them. It is a pity that all this was happening during a time when reports openly predicted the upcoming high numbers of infections as well as deaths in the near future. Coming from a theological background, during COVID-19 I cannot ignore what my Bible teaches in Proverbs 22:3: 'The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty'.

This is the report that Mabena (2020) made after several confessional arguments by the minister:

Original plans which were gazetted that were grades R, 1, 2, 3, 6, 10 and 11 would be back at their desks today. This has now been reduced to just grades 6 and 11, with some grade R classes whose schools are fully prepared for their return. (p. 3)

This confirms the inconsistencies of the decisions which are caused by a lack of proper consultation beforehand. This directly talks about the question of African consultative leadership that we expect from the current government. It also exposes how the minister is making decisions without

being informed by information from the grassroots level. This is dangerous for a democratic nation which is just over 25 years away from the dictatorship of racism and apartheid.

There seems to be some amount of truth in what Van Driel (2020:1) articulates in saying that the battle of reopening the schools conceals some real struggle between the ruling class and their alliances, particularly their economic and scientific allies. To make this argument clearer, we cannot expect a fair judgement on the reopening of the schools unless we determine that there are some of the cabinet minister's children in these rural areas and townships. If research can be conducted on this aspect, then the true picture can be drawn of what kind of problems the country is facing with regard to the reopening of schools. Just as Kiyosaki (2012:79) said that those with gold make the decisions, which is relevant to the situation where our well-to-do schools are the ones experiencing more inequality than poorer schools. The truth is that racial identity and property are inter-related and at their cornerstone, power is an underlying factor.

Despite her acknowledging that the impact of the pandemic of COVID-19 on the school year will be felt for the next 2 years, the minister still appeals to all communities not to cause unnecessary panic (Maromo & Mahlati 2020:1). 'This is particularly problematic as government threatened parents about children's right to schooling'. It is suspicious as to why the right to education is more important than the right to life in the context of COVID-19. The argument is that if the right to education was more important, why did the government close the schools during lockdown, just to reopen them whilst the peak of the infections was looming according to scientists? The very same scientists who played an advisory role leading up to the lockdown are the ones who are being undermined today whilst predicting the upcoming peaking disaster of the virus. It is very suspicious that at the same time the government is threatening teachers and school children to be back at school, and it is simultaneously preparing 24 000 graves in anticipation of the great departing of people at Honingnestkrans, north of Pretoria (Mahlokwane 2020:1). No one is sure who will be the first pile in those graves, but teachers and children must be back in their threatening spaces. I would like to sum up this section by fully supporting Prof. Sono's statement in Munghana Lonene when he says, *Loko Corona yi fika kutani va ku eheh, se nkarhi wa hina wo dya wu fikile*. The literal translation of this is that most politicians and influential people in the government when seeing the arrival of COVID-19 simply said that this is our time to eat. Currently, more than 90 tenders are already under investigations whilst the speaker of the president and other officials were put on leave for the related investigations.

Relevant logistical issues

The Citizen reported (24 June 2020:1) on a newly opened hospital full of beds donated by Volkswagen in Port Elizabeth in preparation for the upcoming COVID-19 thunder where the health minister was involved, and yet at the same time

the same minister sending the children back to school. The reporter showed a lack of awareness on page 3 of the same newspaper with his report entitled 'Minister's dire warning' as Dr Mkhize predicts that 60% – 70% of the population may contract the virus (Reporter 2020:3). Another issue of serious concern is that no one can deny that it is the very same teachers whose workload has doubled, who were denied normal annual increments for their salaries in 2020, and yet, the unions did not defend them. This is just going to destroy teaching as a career as its voice has been undermined. If the schools were ready to reopen, another serious question to ask is, 'why did the boastful DBE add to the workloads of the teachers by expecting them to keep the COVID-19 regulations without any professional training, let alone the issue of increasing their salaries for the increased job descriptions?' It should primarily not be the teacher's job to ensure that children are scanned and distanced in classes, but the government should provide such services through specialised trained people.

In Prager's report, the education spokesperson, Mhlanga, confirmed on 05 July 2020 that '[t]here are schools still waiting for water supply, without which they can't take more learners'. If this confession is coming on 05 July, then one can only deduce that almost a month went by, whilst other learners were left behind, a sign of the ever-widening gap of inequality exists between those who have and those who do not. The importance of education is equal to the importance of the very same country in the near future. In other words, the inequalities that we see in our education system today are the inequalities we are breeding for tomorrow's leadership in this country. Some children are being advantaged more than others.

Sobuwa (2020:6) indicated in her report that 20 000 teachers were reported to be both above 60 years of age and have comorbidities which bar them from coming back to the workspace. It remains uncertain how such a gap could be closed, whilst Minister Angy Motshekga (in Maqhina 2020) indicated that they are not going to hire more teachers. She denied this whilst responding to the question by her fellow Parliamentarian Nomsa Marchesi from the DA and she was quoted as saying (Maqhina 2020):

There will be a few cases where schools will require additional classroom space to accommodate learners. On the whole, there will be no need to appoint additional educators in large numbers to accommodate social distancing. (p. 1)

It would be anticipated already that by losing some of their colleagues from the workplace without being prepared is a trauma on its own. Furthermore, anticipating that they should rearrange themselves to fill the gaps of those who have left, without additional staff, is a stretch which is psychologically disturbing. Every unplanned change in the working environment can cause significant anxiety. The fact that there was an allegation of some teachers faking their health profiles with the aid of medical doctors in Limpopo is a sign that some teachers have serious problems with the reopening of the schools (Molefe 2020b). It was mentioned

that the Limpopo Coronavirus Command Council had already received more than 700 applications from teachers who claimed to have comorbidities that should prevent them from returning to work. This vulnerability of the workers which should be a concern for the department and government should investigate ways to assist these vulnerable teachers. It is the author's belief that forcing people with these vulnerabilities to work is counterproductive as they will be unhappy. Minister Motshekga had already indicated that high levels of psychological and emotional stress and restlessness amongst school communities about the perceived spike or peak of outbreak of infections were evident (Ndaba 2020b). Fortunately enough, her tone of threatening 'no work no pay' has dissipated since she was now quoted as saying, '[w]e will soon announce the decisions and the directives of the Cabinet on whether schools should remain open or closed'. This is a sign that consultation is taking place and using threats against teachers was not a good approach at all.

Another argument for reopening schools from the minister (Meyer 2020) says:

[There have been] 2740 teachers, of the total number of about 440 000 teachers, who were infected by the virus. This is equivalent to less than one percent (1%) of the entire teacher population in our country. In the same period, 1260 learners were infected by the virus. This implies that zero point zero one percent (0.01%) of our learners, were infected by the virus. (p. 1)

According to Grobler and Nqgakamba (2020), the KZN Department of Education openly opposed the grade R's return to school which was against the minister's initial decision. Only after this province firmly took that decision did the national department later come to its senses and indicate that the decision affected all provinces. According to Govender, if the tolerance of the school reopening is based on the percentages of infected people, then what percentage is acceptable to the department before they acknowledge that lives are lost? It is suspicious that there is a particular number of either infections or deaths expected before people declare this as a serious disaster. It cannot be about numbers because one life is still important to its household, which is why the cabinet ministers are holding meetings virtually instead of going back to parliament. Matlala (2020:3) reported that three provinces had already defied the minister's call by deciding against her recalling the grades R back to school. Sokutu (2020:3) also sang the same tune in his report: '[p]rovinces ignore government ruling on resumption'. These provinces include Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KZN. It is telling that coupled with this kind of denial from the provinces to succumb to her decision, plus the rising number of infected teachers and children, the minister of education was found to be changing and reversing some of her decisions for some of the school grades. The level of inequality between those whose schools were 'fully prepared' and those who were not is also evident. Not much is said about the reasons as to why those who lack continue lacking whilst others enjoy the benefit of having enough. These events and reports are just a

picture of what one reporter calls 'Angie's catch-22 Covid poser'. This is testified by the heat coming from the public's responses to the decisions about the reopening of the schools whilst the virus was peaking. Sokutu's (2020:3) report insists that whilst children's absence from schools because of the COVID-19 lockdown signals the loss of an academic year, activist groups such as #SaveOurChildren and Parents Against the Opening of Schools are piling on the pressure for their children to stay at home. One Vanessa le Roux was quoted by Sokutu (2020) as saying:

We can't have a position where we risk our lives, those of our teachers and children for the school year to be saved. This is a political decision to reopen the schools at the onset of winter is cruel, callous and barbaric. (p. 3)

It is very scary that when the reopening of schools and arguments against it are taking place, there was the ominous preparation of mass graves in Gauteng (Smit 2020). Instead of worrying about saving lives whilst graves are being planned, the Department of Education was concerned itself with the return of children to schools.

The question that has not received an answer is how does one positive COVID-19 case result in a national lockdown, but when the number of infected people was rapidly growing towards a million, the decision is taken to reopen the schools? In the same vein, if it was for the benefits of our children to reopen the schools, then it should have also been for the benefit of the entire country that parliament reopened fully in Cape Town. This is where most of us get lost, because it seems that it is not the lives of people that matter, but the economy of the upper class which was affected so badly during the lockdown.

The author of this article grew up in a rural area where pig farming was one of the ways of life. When a pig gives birth and no one gives it food as soon as possible, it turns around and eats all its piglets. It is the government that is primarily expected to protect its citizens, including children, but it seems in this context the opposite has occurred. It is hopeful that the children in poor public schools will also be members of the same parliament one day, hence they need to be nurtured and not destroyed by COVID-19, whilst members of parliament are only having virtual meetings to decide on their fate. The real question is how do we justify caring for human life and curbing the pandemic, particularly with China and New Zealand having managed to do so by keeping their children at home (Van Driel 2020:7).

Education has been one of the basic vehicles through which all forms of inequality and racism were inflicted on South Africa and many other countries. The information shows that not much has been done since 1994 to reverse racism and inequality from the educational spheres of this country. Geach (2020:1) listed some of the so-called model-c schools in which racial discrimination had been, and is still, a problem. Whilst the matric class from Bishops Diocesan in

Rondenbosch staged a protest to end racism, other schools like Pinelands High, Westford High, Herschel Girls School and many others are stuck with racial problems according to the report (Geach 2020:1).

It is assumed that a U-turn about the reopening of the schools is a possibility for the ministry because of the contestations and pressure which intensified after the escalation of infected teachers and children. The one South African movement, headed by Mmusi Maimane, is not backing off in paying for court appearances against the Minister of Basic Education. This force is also joined by a group of principals who are said to have written a letter to President Ramaphosa in reaction to the phased reopening of schools amidst the growth of COVID-19 infections. NAPTOSA in KZN argues that the schools were not supposed to have reopened in the first place because there are 300 schools in KZN without water, which is a basic necessity for COVID-19 control.

The report from Metsing (2020:1) indicates that different unions, parents and SGBs were concerned that teachers and learners were being infected because of the rush return to school during the lockdown. According to the report, SADTU spokesperson Nomusa Cembi was quoted as saying (eNCA 2020b):

We are worried that teachers and learners are being infected, we are concerned that the virus is still spreading in schools and we are also concerned about schools in the provinces where there are shortages of water and other things. (n.p.)

It is one thing to be worried for or concerned about, but it is another for these unions to take the bold step in protecting the majority of the children as well as their paying teacher-members. It is questionable as to why unions only worry and nothing is done whilst growing numbers of COVID-19 positive cases are also engulfing the school teachers and children. Cosas general secretary also joined the concerned group by indicating that schools were rushed. The Eastern Cape had 196 schools closed after reopening because of the virus, and it is reported that more than 200 schools have since been forced to close again after reopening after teachers and learners tested positive (Metsing 2020:1).

South African Broadcasting Corporation Munghana Lonene Radio station in its programme entitled 'Tiko axi etleri' on 29 June 2020 interviewed representatives of two of teachers' unions, NAPTOSA and SADTU, about the issue of the schools in the context of COVID-19. Emmanuel, who represented NAPTOSA, indicated that their standpoint is that schools must carry on and learning should take place, although their concern is the rising number of infected teachers and children. SADTU representatives indicated that they are concerned about the rising number of infections and would be meeting on Friday to decide the way forward (SABC & Lonene 2020). Some revelations are that the husband of Khusela Diko, the presidency's spokesperson, was awarded the tender of about R125-million to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) (Rampedi 2020). According to

Nyathi's (2020) report, the suggestion is that the money was paid to the family company, but what they were defending for is that there was no irregularity in the awarding of the said tender. This is just against what the law of the country expects, which is that those involved in the government should not do the business with the government. If this is true, then why would such people not fight for schools to remain opened so that their business can deliver?

Unpaid extra work for educators without specific training and skills development

Psychological stress on overworked teachers and learners is evidenced by the fear and anxiety which is exacerbated by the escalating number of teachers and children who are testing positive. Challenges faced with the basic education system with the reopening are already becoming visible by a number of teachers with comorbidities.

This is combined with the fact that because the government did not hire any people to assist in monitoring PPE measures at schools, the teachers' work has doubled. The eNCA (2020b) quoted Angie Motshekga as saying, '[t]eachers should induct, orientate and counsel the learners who have already arrived at schools with the new COVID-19 environment'. It should be noted that these teachers left their schools as ordinary teachers 3 months ago, but upon their return they are expected to add counselling into their skillset, as if during the lockdown they were trained with a second skill. It is not clear as to when the teachers acquired this counselling skill or how they should do a job that they are not trained to do. Of course, this is going to compromise the value of counselling work which is a career which some people went to university to get trained for. It can be understood that teaching is an important profession, but it is another story to expect teachers to be doing the job which is a career for other people who are not teachers.

This is already going to work against the teacher's health because they are going to be overworked whilst the older staff members will not be returning to schools, adding further pressure. In the article 'No work no pay,' Koko (2020:1) argues that teachers claim that they are being forced to choose their jobs over their safety. Although this can be contextualised at the school in Vereeniging where the principal is alleged to have concealed that four of his teachers were positive with COVID-19, this can also be said of many other teachers who are not enjoying their return to work, but are being forced because of not wanting to lose their jobs. The issue of schools reopening for 1 or 2 days, and then closing again when a staff member or child is found to be positive, is also very traumatic to staff and children. The continuity of the very same education that the department wants is disturbed. It is one of the reasons that children and parents from schools like St Hudson and George Randall in the Buffalo City Metro were

informed to keep the children's study material at home 'just in case' (Phandle 2020).

No one can doubt that the current state of affairs indicates that the pressure is mounting on the DBE to close down schools, with the voice of one of the biggest trade unions (SADTU) in support of closure. According to Ndaba and Hans (2020:6), the cry comes as Gauteng, the province with the largest population in the country, has already recorded more than 100 000 cases of infections. To add more pressure, there is already a notion that children are being used as pawns in a political game. The very inequality that is exposed by COVID-19 in the educational arena is a reason that the DBE does not want to close the schools because the preparations that were made for model-c schools will double the inequality gap, which the ministry is ashamed to face at the end of the year (Molefe 2020a:3).

There must be very serious undisclosed reasons for the forceful reopening of public schools than what we see indicated in the minister's reports. Why are the majority of teachers unions not acting on their truthful stand, except for EUSA which had the guts to go to court? Why does it seem that the SGBs are going back and forth with regard to the safety of children in the schools? Why is the public not seeing the widening gap of inequality in this whole practice?

It is very difficult to expect quality education for our children from very discouraged and demotivated educators who waste more time in dealing with COVID-19-related issues than dealing with the business they are hired and trained for.

Final synopsis and suggestions

Shilubane (2018:161) is in agreement that practical theology carries in itself diverse methodologies and other approaches in dealing with human experience. There is human experience that needs to be addressed in this whole situation.

From a theological point of view, when Jesus Christ is called to be salt and light of the world (Mt 5:13–14), he was giving an instruction that calls Christians to be life changers in their immediate situations, including involvement in search for equal education system in South Africa. In doing this, all forms of corruption will be denounced.

The speedy revival of corruption by most influential people from the governing party with regard to tenders awarded to supply PPE and other related staff does not make it easy for the citizens of this country to avoid seeing those ugly tendencies as the reason for a push for the reopening of schools. The fact that the president, instead of leading from the front, waited for unions, parents and other sectors to forcefully intervene in the closing of schools, brings doubts on the leadership. About seven schools in Hazyview faced the anger of the parents who came to close them whilst the government and DBE were failing to lead from the front. There is a clear indication that the reopening of the schools

benefits only the private schools in South Africa, whilst the majority of the population are being deprived in the public schools. This is evidenced by the fact that in the report the private schools seem to be more concerned about the closure and opt for opening. Why would the president fail to respond to the calls and advice of WHO until people begin threatening closure? For the reason that education is an extension of parental socialisation, it is logical to argue that education cannot be left solely at the hands of the educational system; the author sees the importance of involving the voices of parents and all other relevant stakeholders when such decisions affecting the future of this country are made. That is why for Mncube (2010:233) and Shilubane (2018:161) the role of parents is integral in the schooling of their children.

If life is more important than education, that must be practical. It was unwise to close schools when less than 50 people were infected with the virus, only to reopen when the numbers are skyrocketing to the millions. Otherwise, the DBE was supposed to have a different reason for their first closure of the schools. This puts them into a corner of a very serious logical contradiction. The issue of the running or prioritising the economy needs a separate research, rather than to be put alongside COVID-19 because there should be enough budget for national disasters like this to care for the nation until the virus is minimised. Even countries which are poorer than South Africa are prioritising life over the economy.

It is important that irrelevant agendas should not influence decisions that affect human life; this is orchestrated from that angle. The arrogance of the ministry of education, even when people are dying, is an indication of the political unwillingness to listen to the electorate which will be persuaded to bring their vote just in few months from now. This is irregular politics. It is important to remind ourselves that COVID-19 is not only a South African challenge but also a global challenge. Other developing countries like South Africa are also engaged to fight this pandemic; hence, South Africa cannot pretend to deal with this in isolation, disregarding even the WHO's advice. It is the poorest of the poor who are trembled upon when the rules and advices are compromised or undermined. This is where practical theology must become the voice of the voiceless. Cone's (1975) book entitled *God of the oppressed* already indicated that God stood on the side of the poor and the oppressed. It is the duty of theology to ask that God addresses the oppressed and marginalised within their particular context. This means that the pastoral services will also be contextualised to heal the wounded nation whilst it also becomes a prophetic voice against those who have power to do away with the continued inequalities in the basic educational system. The well-to-do are aware that even if they are infected, there is enough in their pockets to deal with the pandemic, but the poor will simply die without help; hence, they deserve more protection than those who are doing well. On 23 July 2020 at 08:00, President Ramaphosa finally announced a 4-week closure of 'public schools' whilst grade 12 learners were given a 1-week break. He further spent most of his speech indicating all the corruption and self-enrichment of people at the advantage of COVID-19. The opportunistic life was exposed by that speech.

The author is in agreement with political analyst Macupe (2021) when he indicated that the motivation of quick and indifferent opening of the school grades had nothing to do with COVID-19, but rather with the looting of the resources which are available for the coronavirus disease 2019. It is very sad that these opportunistic advantages undermine even the advice of WHO. This is through the corrupt awarding of tenders for PPE, food parcels and other relevant packages. The other painful part is that teachers working with grade 12 are treated differently from teachers for grades 1–11 during this worldwide challenge. President Ramaphosa further exposed the weakness of his government as he indicated that they waited for '60 organisations' to first meet and discuss the closure of schools with DBE, whilst the awareness had already been made by scientists and WHO. The reason of this delay left many questions unanswered.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 lockdown, amongst other things, exposed the inequality which has continued to this day. The struggle of the education ministry to reopen public schools against the majority of the people of the country is not because the ministry wants the children of the poor to benefit from the process, but the reasons given are not very convincing. It remains a serious suspicion that the tenders and delivery of PPEs are amongst the main reasons of reopening schools. That is why it is no coincidence that after the reopening of schools, more than 90 tenders are under investigations. It is very clear that the beneficiaries of the best education of this country will remain in the hands of the well-to-do and politically connected people of South Africa. The poor will struggle to get a better education, which will mean that the future leaders of this country are those who benefited from this injustice. This is the direct opposite of the promises of the freedom charter and is a sign that the elite few will continue to drive the economy of this country as long as these inequalities are not redressed.

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