

# **Interlocking inequalities, conflicts, and crises: COVID-19 and education in the Global South**

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This special issue of the *Journal of Education* takes the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point to interrogate and reflect critically on how crises and pandemics interlock with, and impact on, education in contexts of substantial existing inequities, particularly those in the Global South. We sought contributions that evaluate how pandemics and crises have impacted education choices, the manner in which education decisions have been taken, and how these exacerbate or disrupt existing inequalities. This special issue provides a critical space for reflection on how the pandemic and crises in general afford us an opportunity to rethink and reimagine the purposes and values of education. The pandemic, devastating as it is, is also a wakeup call to deliberate on alternative education imaginaries. Articles in this issue provide critically reflective and empirically grounded perspectives on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other interlocking pandemics and crises that affect education in the Global South.

This special issue opens with a critical editorial essay, Crises and disruptions: Educational reflections, (re)imaginings, and (re)vitalization, by Sayed, Cooper, and John that situates the concept of crisis in its historical, economic, and political contexts. This essay explores a

range of images and imaginings in education policy discourses, the media, and everyday life. It provides a robust critique of the dominant images from the deficit-oriented learning loss variety to a hard-sell of Edtech solutions and capitalist-inspired development and policy paradigms, before proposing an alternative vision based on (re)consideration of the purpose of education and whose interests it should serve. It seeks to make sense of how the pandemic has illuminated what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001) calls a sociology of absences and emergences since certain educational objects have been foregrounded by the pandemic and others have been silenced or marginalised, thus unveiling what has been suppressed and those who “have not been allowed to exist, to become pronounceable as a need or an aspiration” (p. 91).

Six of the other ten articles in this issue focus on three sectors of education, University, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and Schools, with two articles examining each of these sectors. A set of four articles on early childhood education and community engagement, as well as some imaginings and theorization of pedagogy and cognition, together with a book review constitute a final cluster that speaks to a sociology of emergences and absences that resonates with the opening essay in this special issue. The issue concludes with an overview of the field of education scholarship on COVID-19 in South Africa and points to several research gaps that need to be addressed.

## **University**

The two articles on the impact of the pandemic on the university sector provide perspectives from students and lecturers respectively. The article, African female university students’ experiences of online education at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, by Pillay, Khosa, Campbell, Nyika, and Sheik explores the experiences of remote online education among a small group of female African students at a South African university. Adopting a critical feminist paradigm, the case study on which this article is built investigated the role of students’ home environments on their online learning during COVID-19 and how gender and material inequalities intersected and shaped their learning experiences. The study found some evidence of student agency amid dominant experiences of marginalisation and discrimination.

Bekker and Carrim’s article, Online teaching and learning and epistemological access during COVID-19 pandemic conditions in two universities in South Africa, is based on a survey of lecturers at two South African universities. Their study explored lecturers’ views on how COVID-19 had affected their teaching and learning, with a particular focus on how epistemological access was impacted because the pandemic necessitated a switch to emergency remote online teaching and learning. Reporting that lecturers found that the switch had compromised their teaching, Bekker and Carrim discuss the implications for quality assurance if online modes of teaching and learning become the new normal as a modality for curriculum delivery at universities.

## **Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)**

The articles in this special issue that focus on TVET delve into the ways in which an already marginalised sector was forced to deal with forms of blended learning and accommodate the powerful interests of big business and employers. Joy Papier's article, *21st century competencies in TVET: Rhetoric and reality in the wake of a pandemic*, explores how the pandemic exacerbated the conditions of an already stressed TVET sector and exerted additional pressure on it. Prior to the pandemic, she argues, colleges and lecturers had been forewarned about modern technology shaping 21st century teaching, learning, and skills. Some progress had been made to initiate blended and remote learning in the sector, but colleges were not adequately prepared for the sudden onset of the pandemic; they were expected to substitute face-to-face classroom interactions with remote teaching and learning—a technological leap for which they had minimal preparation. Papier's research findings paint a picture of TVET lecturers under inordinately difficult conditions overwhelmed by anxiety and consternation, but with deep concern for students and their wellbeing.

A different view of TVET in times of crisis is provided by Lesley Powell in her article, *Planning for freedom: From human capital to human capabilities*. In it, she challenges the dominant skills paradigm, National Skills Planning Systems (NSPS), and the primarily human capital development framework that underpins its construction in South Africa. Powell argues that the skills debate is commonly understood as consisting of a skills mismatch that foregrounds the needs and interests of employers and big business—groups whose needs are apparently left unmet by a TVET sector that produces what she refers to as the “wrong kinds of skills.” This article builds on critiques of NSPS by offering a re-conceptualisation of skills planning that gives “weight to a broader range of capabilities and human motivations.” To this end, Powell uses the Capabilities Approach to propose an alternative perspective on skills by prioritising the interests and wellbeing of people and the public good. Such an approach recognises peoples' aspirations and identities, locating these in relation to partnerships, communities, social formations, and education and training institutions. This article proposes a seven-dimension model of an emancipatory skills planning system that will provide an alternative conception of skill, the economy, and society in general.

## **Schools**

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted schools, with teachers and learners unable to engage in meaningful teaching and learning. Two articles in this special issue consider the impact of this by focusing on pandemic policymaking while paying particular attention to the effect on teachers.

Mudaly and Mudaly's article, *Pandemic policy during unpredictable periods: Exposing fault lines of inequality*, pays particular attention to policymaking during the pandemic in South Africa in its exploration of the interrelationship between policy formation and its enactment

by teachers in schools. The data for this paper arose from the analysis of a policy document, an interview with a policymaker, and a survey sent to teachers, principals, and teachers' union representatives at schools. From a convenience sample of 73 participants, 30 questionnaires were completed and returned. These authors argue that policy realisation during the pandemic revealed sharp differences between rich and impoverished schools, with the former better prepared to realise the intention of policy since teachers' ability to implement education policies was shaped by the contextual realities of the school in which they worked. They argue for an approach to policymaking that is cognisant of the diverse realities of schools in South Africa and that provides teachers working in disadvantaged and marginalised school contexts with the necessary infrastructure to implement policy.

The issue of pandemic policy and its effect on teachers is also the focus of the article, *Teacher support, preparedness and resilience during times of crises and uncertainty: COVID-19 and education in the Global South*, by Sayed, Singh, Bulgrin, Henry, Williams, Metcalfe, Pesambili, and Mindano. Based on research commissioned by Education International in collaboration with the Open Society Foundation, this article considers the effects of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers and their well-being in eight African countries—Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mozambique, South Africa, and Uganda. It is based on a desktop review of policy documents, academic journals, news media, and reputable COVID-19 online statistical dashboards, as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with at least one government and one union official in each of the eight African states. The authors argue that the pandemic has revealed an absence of teacher involvement in policymaking and a neglect of their professional development and psychosocial needs in the failure of governments to support them in managing teaching and learning during the pandemic. The article calls for an approach to education policymaking that recognises teachers as active agents and that supports them in their work to build a resilient and responsive education system that could provide equitable and quality education for all.

These two articles in this special issue, in both addressing pandemic policy and teachers' needs, underscore the need to involve teachers actively in education policymaking in general and during times of crisis in particular. Teacher professional development and wellbeing are essential components of quality education. These articles are a wakeup call to governments to bear in mind, when they are making policy for and on behalf of teachers, the diverse and unequal schooling contexts in which these teachers find themselves.

## **Sociology of absences and emergences**

In the final section of this special issue there are four articles based on the notion of the sociology of absences and emergences in the Global South. This concept is used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001; see also Oliveira, 2017) to trace the silhouette of objects, perspectives, alliances, and interests whose existence is largely unimaginable, but that may be conceived of through initiating alternative social processes and connections. Through unmasking the social and political circumstances and forces that suppress counter-hegemonic

tendencies, the sociology of absences makes audible that which is silent. During the pandemic, dominant educational discourses were publicly broadcast by powerful forces through images and terms like learning loss, building back better, and technological futures, concepts expanded upon in this editorial. A sociology of absences names and attempts to describe the processes and concepts suppressed by these kinds of hegemonic ideas. At the same time, a sociology of absences needs to be wary of the paradoxes, context-specific considerations, and changing geo-political forces that the pandemic has highlighted.

In line with these complexities, Fataar and Norodien-Fataar's paper treads a line between the beliefs of technology pessimists and those of technology advocates and Soudien and Harvey's contribution does something similar in navigating the perspectives of bio-cognitive warriors and sceptics. In their article, *Towards an e-learning ecologies approach to pedagogy in a post-COVID world*, Fataar and Norodien-Fataar argue that students' knowledges and engagement can be enhanced through using reflexive pedagogy as a central component of digital technology. They analyse the two discourses that have dominated debates on teaching and technology during COVID-19; the first warns, sceptically, that technological modalities have exacerbated inequalities and the second promotes online learning as necessary and useful, a position predominantly advocated by university management. Fataar and Norodien-Fataar argue for adopting an emergent hybrid ecologies approach that highlights the importance of pedagogy in the use of digital technology and departs radically from current conceptualisations (or the lack thereof) of pedagogy implicit in the two main discourses described in their article. Hybrid ecologies promote students' critical epistemic engagement in perceiving them as knowledge makers rather than content absorbers, while simultaneously developing their capacity for understanding contextual knowledge.

Similarly, Soudien and Harvey theorise learning by critiquing dominant perspectives that either fail to adequately address the range of social differences students bring to the educational encounter, or that largely ignore the effects of biology and cognition on learning. Their bio-cognitive-social approach insists that cognition remain a primary focus in theorising teaching and learning, but that it should not be reduced to universalised ideas about brain processes that lack social complexity. In advocating for intersectionality as a concept able to integrate biological, cognitive, and social processes, Soudien and Harvey, in *The crisis of COVID-19 and opportunities for reimagining education*, develop an emergent classroom learning model that theorises social intersections. They argue that cognition as an intersectional phenomenon should not decontextualise or compromise how we understand the social processes relevant to learning, nor should it "downstream" the effects of race, class, and gender to outcomes beyond or after the pedagogical encounter.

These two articles take the interests, circumstances, and different kinds of marginalisation of students in one part of the Global South as their starting point, and, through the tenets of a sociology of absences and emergences, move these beyond conventional perspectives on what constitutes conservative or progressive politics to produce novel educational approaches to teaching and learning. Similarly, Thabethe and Reddy's article investigates how students from poor communities brought epistemic value to university spaces that were both online

and face-to-face but add that the students' unique knowledges remained largely absent. They describe a community-based learning course that took place during COVID-19 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), using a Community of Inquiry framework to analyse the epistemological experiences of third-year students enrolled in the course. The community-based learning approach looks at the connections between and among the university, community, and curriculum, and analyses the intersections of these in the production of culturally relevant knowledge. As Santos (2001) pointed out, a sociology of absences needs to make the links between segregated and suppressed forces and interests explicit, something that the UKZN course struggled to do since the students' epistemological experiences were not well integrated with the university and its curriculum, and this was exacerbated by online learning among students with poor connectivity, data shortages, and limited (or no) study space. The result was that students' knowledges remained predominantly absent and marginalised. Community-based learning can become an important methodology for a sociology of emergences, integrating knowledge production between universities and communities, but it requires educators who are sensitive to the sociocultural contexts of knowledge production and who value students' lived experiences as being crucial for learning.

Absences also feature in Ebrahim, Martin, and Excell's study of teachers and managers in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector during lockdown. They point out that coping with "learning loss" in schools and universities drowned out the needs of younger children in ECD. These authors use a phenomenological lens, together with a systems theory approach, to illuminate struggles, tensions, and resilience in the ECD sector. An online survey and semi-structured interviews showed that COVID-19 disruptions entrenched inequities in service provision and early learning opportunities. A million children were excluded from ECD programmes because of the pandemic and the authors' survey showed that 68% of participants working in disadvantaged centres reported not receiving an income and that 99% of these parents were compelled by circumstances to stop paying fees. Different parts of the sector fared differently, with ECD centres in vulnerable communities suffering from a lack of government support, while centres in more affluent communities were better able to absorb the shock created by the pandemic. When centres reopened after the hard lockdown, learning opportunities were limited in poor centres since they struggled to adapt their programmes to altered modes of delivery. While the basic education and university sectors have received a lot of attention, the needs of people associated with the ECD sector have been largely ignored.

The final piece in this special issue is a review by Michael Samuels of *Teaching in and beyond pandemic times* (Jansen & Farmer-Philips, 2021). This well-crafted review, titled Professionals in pandemic: Our reimagined new world, picks up the power of story for reading the "wor(l)d" of teachers during the pandemic. Samuels notes that "underpinning the sixty-five stories of the anthology is fear, anxiety, and possibility, as teachers are presented (or represented themselves) as active professional learners who embraced the uncertain times" and thereby present, through this edited anthology, a counter-narrative to a view that teachers were on "an extended holiday break" during the COVID-19 closures of schools.

While applauding this book and recommending it to the education community, believing that practicing teachers in particular, “will fall in love with [it]”, Samuels does question whether the social-media based methodology employed by Jansen and Farmer-Philips did not paradoxically allow “the technological divide of our unequal society” to exclude some voices and silence the stories of teachers who had “abandoned hope.” Thus, while this book addresses to some extent the absence of teachers’ voices during the pandemic, as lamented by Mudaly and Mudaly and by Sayed et al. in this special issue, its mode of recruiting teachers may also have followed the pattern that results in the absence of the most marginalised in the profession.

## **Emerging and future scholarship on education in the time of COVID-19**

As the editors of this special issue, we sought to solicit articles that engaged critically with crises and disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on education. As noted in this issue, there has been a dearth of scholarship and thinking about adult and community education, for example. In the opening editorial essay, we comment on the reasons for the marginality of this sector and the consequences of its continued absence.

To get a better sense of trends and gaps in the emerging COVID-education literature, we, the editors, undertook a basic review of articles published in a set of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) journals. We used the ASSAf collection of journals for a quick scan of COVID-education scholarship in the Global South, particularly in South Africa from March 2020, when the first lockdown was announced, to June 2021. In this review, keeping a broad definition to secure the widest possible range of articles, we searched for those that focused on COVID-19 and education.<sup>1</sup>

Our look across the ASSAf journals revealed several interesting patterns about the form and nature of scholarship during and about the pandemic. First, the search revealed that many of the articles that focused on the pandemic and education were compiled in special issues, thus indicating that the response of the academy was to generate these. Second, there was a distinct focus on school and university in many of the articles published in these journals. The scholarship during and on COVID-19 suggested a very narrow vision of education with a remarkable absence of attention being paid to sectors such as adult education and TVET, a dearth in the latter that we have tried to address in this special issue. Third, the concern was nationally focused, but many failed to locate the scholarship and debate across contexts. There was a remarkable absence of writing from an internationally or nationally comparative

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1 This review was restricted to primarily those journals that were part of the ASSAf review of education journals. The review is illustrative rather than conclusive in seeking to map general trends and point to the broad trajectory of scholarship. It is not intended as an exhaustive and detailed review of literature and the detailed content analysis of each article. The journals that were reviewed included *Education as Change*, *Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *Journal of Education*, *Journal of Education Studies*, *Perspectives in Education*, *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, *South African Journal of Education*, *African Education Review*, *Southern African Review of Education*, and *South African Journal of Higher Education*. From this process, we identified about 25 articles that focus on education and the COVID-19 pandemic.

point of view, particularly in the context of the regional Global South and especially in articles that see the pandemic as interlocking with other crises. Fourth, much of the scholarship reflects a narrow view of the COVID-19 pandemic, failing to see different crises as interlocking, intersectional, and inter-relational. There is a sense of exceptionalism regarding COVID-19 in the way in which scholarship about this latest crisis has been penned. Finally, scholarship about the crisis tends to focus narrowly, as this special issue argues, on learning loss and learning content, with a limited focus on a broader and more holistic conception of education and the contexts in which it is practised.

Our brief review of this scholarship suggests several important directions for future research in this area. First, there is a need for scholarship that takes a holistic, comparative, and interlocking approach to examining crises. Such scholarship will examine not only the crisis of COVID-19 in relation to other crises but will also see the adverse effect of the pandemic on education in relation to other social sectors such as social welfare; as scholars we need to connect across our narrow areas of expertise in order to deepen our knowledge of crises and their effects on education. Second, it is evident that this crisis is truly global in reach, effect, and consequence. Scholarship in South Africa needs to make more conscious and proactive efforts to learn from other countries in the region, as well as from the rest of the world. Third, there is a need for funding that enables scholarship about crises that is trans- and multi-disciplinary in nature. Finally, the crisis invites reflective, considered, and theoretically grounded research about what all these events imply for the future. This particular crisis is an opportunity to rethink orthodoxies, to provide, as Ladson-Billings (2021) has argued, a hard reset, and encourage a wider range of voices and scholarship in mapping the post-pandemic world. Yet as the crisis continues to unfold and become accepted, there seems to be a default to the previous pattern as is evident, for example, in the South African Department of Basic Education's curriculum recovery strategy.

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