

Evidence and education policy making in South Africa during Covid-19: Promises, researchers and policymakers in an age of unpredictability

Yusuf Sayed

University of Sussex and Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Marcina Singh

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Abstract

The effects of Covid-19 have impacted every aspect of social life in the Global North and Global South. The nature of the pandemic has exacerbated social inequalities and plunged fragile economies and the impoverished into disarray. The response to the pandemic globally has been premised primarily on advice from the science fraternity with little or no input from humanities or social science experts. The merging of science and government has led to some questionable policies, particularly in the education context. It is these contestations and contradictions that this article discusses, focusing on the complex interplay between research and policy making, and the notion of policy overreach. Further, it explores worrisome education trends that the pandemic has set in motion whilst pointing to gaps and omissions in the current education debate. It concludes by mapping an embryonic progressive education agenda in response to the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, education inequality, education policy making, SDG 4, curriculum, education privatisation, education quality, affective dimension of learning

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Introduction

The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the modern world is unprecedented. Whilst the pandemic has impacted all, it has thrown into sharp relief the fault lines of the world's inequalities. Experiences of the rich and the impoverished have always been significantly different. However, Covid-19 has added to the existing struggle and suffering of the poor by shocking their fragile ecosystems into meltdown. It has also simultaneously up-ended utilitarian social, political and economic market privileging dogmas that, a year ago, would have seemed unpalatable to the most ardent neoliberal.

The pandemic is not just a health crisis; it is a crisis of inequality and neoliberalism, a crisis of disaster capitalism and decades of austerity programmes and sustained attacks on fragile public systems and services provided by the state. The pandemic has forced governments to speedily develop economic and social policies that can guide citizens to the 'new reality' in order to minimise the spread and effects of current and possibly future threats, particularly in the social sectors of education and health. The urgency of the response required and the bewildering array of competing imperatives governments must reconcile in managing the egregious effects of the pandemic, call for critical scrutiny of the education policy choices made and the options that experts and pundits have put on the table.

This article reviews relevant public academic debates and literature to unpack the discursive policy imaginary of education policymakers and policy experts as they seek to navigate, calibrate and justify particular education responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, this article seeks to understand how education policies are conditioned by the uncertainty and unpredictability that accompany periods of global social upheaval and the attending information asymmetries.

Using critical policy analysis (CPA), the article critically reviews education policies and choices, both globally and nationally, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic with a particular focus on South Africa. CPA provides a useful lens to unpack the choices and consequences of education policies and 'the complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society' (Apple 2018: 1). Specifically, CPA enables a critical conversation of how existing global and national social inequalities are exacerbated in and through education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This article seeks to animate a discussion surrounding future progressive education agendas in times of crisis and uncertainty, as is the case at present.

Framed as a critical policy exploration of the effects of Covid-19 on education policy making and choices, this article begins with a discussion of the impact of the pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that seek to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable development and mitigate inequality. This first section pays particular attention to the education goal, SDG 4, exploring how the pandemic is likely to stymie its laudable ambition of the provision of equitable and quality learning for all. Global policy analysis of the SDGs in the context of the Covid-19 crisis brings into sharp relief the intersection of science and evidence for informing policy making

during crisis, globally and nationally. In problematising the manner in which science and evidence have been used – or misused – to inform education policy making in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the second and third sections of this article examine education policy choices in South Africa, and associated consequences. A discursive unravelling of the policy narrative from the global to the national level is incomplete without illuminating vital education policy gaps and silences, laying the groundwork for an embryonic progressive future education agenda in the concluding section of this article.

The SDG agenda in the context of the pandemic: Compounding inequalities

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged five years after the global commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals agreed by all countries at the United General Assembly in September 2015. These 17 SDGs – including the eradication of extreme poverty (Goal 1), zero hunger (Goal 2), equitable and quality education (Goal 4) and reduced inequality (Goal 10) – seek to create a prosperous, peaceful and sustainable planet. However, the realisation of these goals, and in particular the education goal, is complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic for several reasons.

Without a doubt, achievement of the SDGs is challenged by Covid-19. Pandemics of health, like the degradation of the environment, are global in cause, consequences and effects, but the responses have not necessarily been so. Commitment to partnerships as key to achieving the SDGs seems, in some cases, to have been eschewed in favour of national interest resulting in narrow nationalist approaches to education policy making – particularly in some countries in the Global North. The withdrawal of the USA from the World Health Organization (WHO) is one such example. The USA is the WHO's biggest donor, contributing approximately \$900 million for 2018/19 through voluntary and assessed contributions (WHO 2020a). This USA withdrawal undermines global efforts to eradicate existing viruses and diseases and could undermine the world's ability to respond to other public health threats as well (Branswell 2020). Although the WHO still plays an important role in managing the pandemic globally by advising countries, including South Africa, there is tension between the global focus of multilateral agencies such as the WHO and the nationalist approach of some governments such as the USA. While Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the WHO, heralded this a 'time for all of us to be united in our common struggle against a common threat' (WHO 2020b: para. 13), this idea of a 'common global response' is under siege by some. If the SDGs are to be achieved, then sustaining progressive forms of multilateralism and coordinated global responses in a post-pandemic context is imperative.

Efforts to realise the ambitious agenda of the SDGs are made difficult in the midst of poverty, increasing inequality and economic disparity. The most recent assessment of SDG progress notes increasing inequality among and within countries; higher extreme poverty in rural areas than urban areas; rapid and increasing levels of environmental degradation and global warming; rise in global hunger; and increasing deprivation, violent conflicts and vulnerabilities to natural disasters (United Nations Statistics 2019). Persistent global inequalities predate the pandemic. The

simple reality is that even prior to the pandemic, ‘more than 820 million people regularly go to bed hungry of whom about 135 million suffer from acute hunger largely due to man-made conflicts, climate change and economic downturns’ (United Nations 2020: para. 1). Inequality and conflict have been features of many countries in the Global South such as Libya and Yemen, for example. In this already debilitating context, the current pandemic intensifies and accelerates effects of poverty and inequality. With this pandemic, achieving the SDG ambitions of equality and prosperity is a heightened challenge; the lives and livelihoods of the impoverished face ruin and the fragility of the global economy accelerates inequalities.

A further major concern for global education efforts to achieve the SDGs, and the education SDG 4 in particular, is that both domestic education resources and international aid may be redirected from education to respond to the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that even before the pandemic, international aid to education was stagnating (UNESCO 2017), a trend that is likely to be intensified as governments focus on national economic growth priorities. The Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that ‘aid to education has been stagnant since 2010, and the aid that is given often does not go to the countries most in need, worsening the prospects for achieving global education goals’ (UNESCO 2017: 1).

In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic, by accelerating inequalities and fraying the bonds of multilateralism, obstructs the SDGs. Further, it brings into question existing global priorities and commitments for tackling inequities given that many countries have redirected international aid for domestic needs. The Global North, for example, which is committed to providing 0.7% GNI for aid, is likely to redirect this for narrow national goals, as evident in the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK.

The pandemic halts the attainment of the global development agenda through a potential retreat into narrow national concerns and a reprioritisation of international and domestic resources. The adverse impact of the pandemic on the global development agenda can be mitigated by ensuring that global efforts during and post pandemic are coordinated. An important starting point is to argue for debt relief for countries in the Global South as well as additional funds, as advocated for by the president of Rwanda (Uwiringiyimana 2020). The pandemic as a global health crisis must *not* also become a crisis of global efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality.

Science, evidence and education policy making: Assuming policy linearity and the danger of policy overreach

The previous section argued that the pandemic is a global concern requiring a global response. However, the effects of the pandemic are likely to be different between the affluent Global North and impoverished Global South. Countries in the Global South are more likely to be the ‘hardest hit by the virus [and] will also face a debt crisis’ (World Bank 2020a: para. 4). Furthermore, the World Bank has noted that ‘most countries are expected to face recessions in 2020 . . . and every

region is subject to substantial growth downgrades' with East and South Asia, the Pacific, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa being the hardest hit (World Bank 2020b: para. 5). Sanchez-Paramo (2020) asserts that the pandemic will hit poor countries the hardest because of existing social and economic problems, pushing upwards of 49 million people into poverty, and to whom she refers as the 'new poor.' This potentially undermines the progress that has already been made toward the SDGs. In this context, the response to the pandemic must factor in and sustain the existing global commitment towards the SDGs under worsening economic, social and political conditions. This section explores the relationship between science, evidence and policy making to better understand how governments globally, and in South Africa specifically, have responded to the pandemic and the attendant consequences for education policy. The South African government's policy response to the pandemic has been heavily influenced by advice from medical science and public health professionals, including the World Health Organization (WHO).

Scientists have featured prominently in the ways in which countries have responded to the pandemic, including in South Africa. Media briefings on Covid-19 in the UK, for example, typically present government ministers and the prime minister flanked by one or more science advisors who are members of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) committee. South Africa has similarly involved scientists and scientific advice as the basis for policy formulation, policy choices and policy decision making. President Ramaphosa, in his 23 April 2020 speech, distinctly noted that the policy approach of the government was 'guided by the advice from scientists' (South African Government 2020b: para. 38) repeating in May, that 'scientists are the ones who continue to lead our efforts in all of this' (News24Wire 2020b: para.3).

The preeminence accorded to science and the invocation to 'follow the science and scientific advice' has brought the ideas of science and evidence to the fore even in education, ostensibly reflecting an evidence-informed approach to policy making. This embedding of science in policy making in South Africa has been primarily in the form of the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) for Covid-19, comprising many members of the science fraternity: approximately 51 doctors, clinicians, public health academics, pathologists and other health care professionals (Department of Health 2020). However, as Paterson (2020) astutely notes, there are very few individuals on the committee with expertise about the broader societal impact of the virus. In response, the South African government has incorporated the work of social scientists into its deliberations of response to the pandemic.

There are several important observations about the linkage between science, evidence and policy making in general, and education in particular, in relation to the pandemic and how it has been dealt with globally and in South Africa. Whilst there is a global trend amongst governments to call upon the science fraternity to advise policymakers during times of crisis, as is happening in the current pandemic (Jasanoff 1998), scientists do not have all the solutions; as with social science, the orientation of their research varies, often leading to different and sometimes contradictory views (de Vos 2020). In a review of the epidemiology wars in the context of the crisis, Fuller (2020: para. 3) adroitly sums the debate between scientists by noting different and competing

scientific traditions in epidemiology that have been critical in decisions concerning virus trajectory and government response:

Answering these questions [questions about the epidemiology of the virus trajectory and spread] requires reconciling two competing philosophies in the science of Covid-19. . . . To some extent, public health epidemiology and clinical epidemiology are distinct traditions in health care, competing philosophies of scientific knowledge. In one camp are infectious disease epidemiologists who work closely with institutions of public health. [In another camp] are several clinical epidemiologists, who typically provide guidance for clinical practice – regarding, for example, the effectiveness of medical interventions – rather than public health.

And nowhere is the lack of evidentiary consensus and misuse of science more apparent than in the debate surrounding the (mis)use of hydroxychloroquine as a vaccine. It is telling that the application of this treatment promoted the cancellation of a trial and retraction of an article by the *Lancet*, a prestigious medical journal.

In South Africa, scientific evidence mixed with policy is most apparent in the case of Professor Gray, Chair of South African Medical Council, who publicly rebuked the government for its stance on the lockdown (Karrim & Evans 2020; News24Wire 2020a). Whilst much of the debate focused on issues of academic freedom in relation to Professor Gray's intervention (see Singh et al. 2020), less attention has been paid to critical exploration of where scientific research ends and the craft of policy making begins. In this specific case, Professor Gray overreached her role as scientist providing advice and, instead, chose to act as policymaker.

This illustrates the risk of placing uncritical faith in science as the sole basis of policy making in the time of a fast moving, dynamic and transmuting pandemic. There is insufficient rigorous data and information available at any one point in time in this pandemic on which to establish an informed and deliberative research consensus that is free of the risk of becoming outdated in a short span of time. As Grundman (2020: para. 3) observes: 'Being led by science evokes a linear model of policy making which is more a myth than reality. In reality, politicians use claims about scientific knowledge in order to justify a course of action.'

A particular intervention by researchers and their use of evidence in education policy is a statement by the South African Paediatric Association (SAPA) and academics van der Berg and Spaull (2020) broadcasting support and advocacy for school opening. The SAPA statement notes 'the relatively scant and weak quality of available evidence, particularly from resource-poor settings' and yet argues for schooling opening (2020: 3). Despite this dearth of evidence, the association claims it is 'necessary to make decisions about the return to school balancing the risks and benefits of any actions' (ibid.: 3). It is disconcerting that an eminent group of medical scholars can make sweeping 'prescriptions' about the opening of schools whilst noting that even though 'many measures [water sanitation, waste management, social distancing, etc.] are not available, SAPA's view is that educational activities should nevertheless commence as safely as is possible, while the government expediently attends to addressing any deficiencies' (Daily Maverick 2020: para. 25). The reality is that the 'deficiencies' in education in South Africa are deep and reflect structural

inequalities between the rich and the impoverished, as noted earlier.

These two examples of researchers advocating for school opening highlight several aspects of policy worth noting. First, it suggests a policy overreach that is premised on a direct link between science and education policy in the South African context, or globally, and notwithstanding the complexities and inequalities of the South African educational context. In other words, decision making based solely on science cannot be the basis of informed (evidence-based) decision making, especially if the science on which the evidence is based is contested, partial, incomplete and framed ideologically and politically by the very research community that generates it. The myth of a causal link is, as Weiss (1979) point outs, just that – a myth. Furthermore, there is a narrow conception that research advice is translated into direct policy choices of governments. In fact, Weiss (1979: 426) observes that although a mutual interest exists between social scientists and government, ‘it is important to understand what “using research” actually means.’ For example, just because research on Covid-19 suggests children are less affected by the virus, this does not mean that it is suitable or safe to reopen schools.

Second, the overreach of evidence in educational policy making assumes a particular ontology of the social world and school that is conceived of in numerical terms and in which potentially harmful experiential impact on the lives of the teachers, pupils and administrators who inhabit such institutional spaces is largely discounted. In the context of the pandemic, this has been manifest in the idea of *herd immunity*, which WHO spokesman Mike Ryan noted as problematic – ‘Humans are not herds’ (Forrest 2020: para. 4) – cautioning against a numbers approach for policy in which human lives, living and livelihood are not unequivocally at the centre of policy decision making (Damon 2020). Thus, a prescription about opening or closing schools is more than a matter of rate of infection or whether children are prone to the virus or carriers of it; it must have as its first, if not primary consideration, the human dimensions and consequences of policy, which organisations such as the SAPA ignore and discount. Policy choice cannot be viewed simply monocularly, it must be magnified binocularly – through the multidimensional prism embedded in the complexity of human experience.

Third, such examples reveal how the policy expert (an informed provider of advice) has strayed into the territory of the policymaker (a decisionmaker and implementer of advice, not all necessarily informed). In Bauman’s (1987) terms, it is important to be clear about *intellectuals as interpreters* and *intellectuals as legislators*. Policymakers in democratic societies are elected officials. Conflating roles runs a risk of misunderstanding the different knowledge bases and rationalities of researchers and policy experts on one hand, and government policymakers on the other. This is crucial to note because ‘research and policy actors are moved by divergent sets of values, norms and ideas about what is socially desirable or undesirable, effective or ineffective, when dealing with the articulation of research and policy’ (Solinis & Baya-Laffite 2011: 105). There is a particular risk of policy overreach in that researchers see their approach as providing the only basis for making decisions. This is not the case. Policy choice operates on the calculus in which science is just one important factor. In fact, Grundman (2020: para. 2) goes so far as to

claim, ‘scientific knowledge is often irrelevant to policy making.’ Whilst the case may be overstated here, Grundman’s caution echoes Rizvi and Lingard (2010), arguing that policy is about the authoritative allocation of values. Policy decisions are not purely technical and technocratic choices but matters of political choice:

What makes this an incredibly muddy debate is that every side views itself as being the proper practitioner of science-enlightened defence or critique – whether in pushing for the extension of some aspects of lockdown, or its relaxation. In weaponizing science, economics or mathematics, the assumptions are smuggled in and asserted as fact, when more often than not they are merely an opinion of this or that expert. But the question of what ends we seek is not answered by economics or science; it is a moral and political debate. (Shoki 2020: para. 6)

In a sense, this debate about listening to policy advice in making education choices suggests avoiding the risk of ‘high-minded, elite technocratic rationality’ that assumes that good research will magically resolve intense political debates about choice (Shoki 2020: para. 7). Governing by technocratic rationality is no better than governing through a flawed democratic system of elected representatives.

Unpacking common education policy choices as a response to the pandemic in South Africa

Policy making in education, requiring deliberative dialogue on education policy choices, should involve more than just the voices and perspectives of the research community (whether natural/medical scientist or social scientist). It is vital to consider citizens’ needs, particularly those in high-risk and impoverished communities (Bank 2020). That way it is possible to develop an education policy approach framed within a broadened notion of evidence-informed education policy making. In this section, we unpack two education responses to the pandemic that we argue offer a narrow vision of education, advocate for a solution that increases inequality, and increase the privatisation of public education provision.

Understanding the purpose of schooling and education: Where has the pedagogy and relationality of learning gone?

A remarkable feature of the debate about the impact of Covid-19 and education responses is the strong focus on educational content. Rearranging school timetabling, extending the school year and increasing teaching hours for each learning area focus education policy attention on the loss of learning content, measured by the amount of time children are expected to spend on learning. Underpinning this understanding of education in times of crises is the notion of learning as curriculum coverage. In other words, school closure as a response to the pandemic is understood as the loss of learning content due to insufficient time for covering the content specified in the curriculum. A narrow focus on the curriculum and content of learning (cognitive learning) is the current concern globally, with much talk about the ‘learning crisis’ and ‘learning poverty’ (Saavedra 2020). In South Africa, Reddy et al. (2020) have entered this debate by modelling learning loss arising from school closure (Figure 1). Figure 1 is a hypothetical model that considers

learning loss using a kernel density plot, modelling learning differences between fee paying and no-fee schools. Their argument, unsurprisingly, is that school closures will have far-reaching learning effects on different socioeconomic groups. This study suggests that inequities in learning measured by scores in mathematics using the full Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) data will be exacerbated.

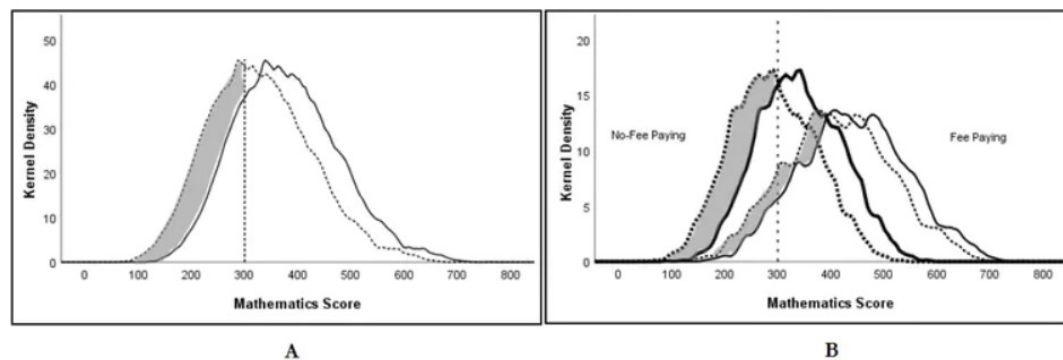


Figure 1: Learning averages between fee paying and no-fee schools (Reddy et al. 2020)

The notion of *loss of learning time* assumes that only content learning happens in school. This obsession with curriculum coverage suggests a narrow understanding of the purpose of schooling. While the concern with learning content is understandable, a narrow focus on the loss of learning and a learning gap approach limits the vision and purposes of education given that learning is much more than the learning of content. It is equally about socialisation, developing relationships and learning social and civic skills for navigating life in a democratic post-schooling context. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020: 97) echo this view, arguing that education and, more specifically, schooling should focus not only on the child as a vessel who needs to learn content but as a child to be developed holistically.

Sayed et al. (2018) argue that schooling is not only about learning subject content knowledge, but also about learning affective skills that develop critical thinking and knowledgeable citizens. Thus, the South African government's request that teachers keep learners engaged in learning content reveals an unnecessarily parochial understanding of schooling. Because this content-focused curriculum approach privileges the coverage of content and cognitive learning, pedagogy and the affective dimension of schools are rendered invisible and delegitimised. This content-focused approach ignores the ideas of education as socially relational, and learning as a socially constitutive activity occurring relationally between learners and teachers, and amongst learners themselves. Content-focused curriculum, on which much online learning relies, tends to instrumentalise education and learning, reducing the expansive notion of education quality to content mastery. The pandemic should provoke deliberative dialogues on the aims of education. A centre for international teacher education study investigating teaching in South Africa argues that the quality of learning experiences, including the affective dimensions of learning, have the greatest impact in learners' lives (Sayed et al. 2018).

Whilst much heat has been generated about school closure and school opening, the key issue that

has not received attention is the logic behind the phasing-in approach. It is noteworthy that there has been constant disruption in the phasing-in approach. At the time of writing, there is much discussion about the cancellation of the 2020 school year in South Africa. This throws in doubt the policy advice and advocacy for the opening of schools. Most countries, including South Africa and Somalia, have opened school for those at the terminal end of the different schooling phases. In a media statement on 1 June, 2020, the South African Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, discussed the operational plans for learners to return to school, initially prioritising the opening of school for Grades 7 and 12 (South African Government 2020a). Similarly in Somalia, schools will reopen for a short while in June before the end of the school year in July for the purposes of examination, suggesting an obsession with high stakes examinations consistent with a narrow obsession of curriculum coverage for learning.

Online learning: A solution seeking a problem to solve

A common global education response to the pandemic has been the move towards online education to offset the repercussions of school closures. Many advocates of '21st century skills' – online learning and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) – in South Africa motivate for online learning as the solution for the learning lost (see Marwala 2020).

Advocacy of online learning masks the serious digital divide between and within countries. Research undertaken by the UNESCO Teacher Task Force (2020: para. 3) notes that in sub-Saharan Africa, '89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access.' Further, 'while mobile phones can enable learners' access to information, connect with their teachers and with one another, about 56 million learners live in locations not served by mobile networks, almost half in sub-Saharan Africa' (ibid: para. 4). These variations in access exacerbate inequities in learning in which 'richer households are better placed to sustain learning through online learning strategies, although with a lot of effort and challenges for teachers and parents' (Reddy et al. 2020: para. 7).

Inequities in access to online learning platforms and software are compounded by differences in cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Rich parents generally have the knowledge, competence, resources and skills to support online and home learning. Online learning also requires active mediation of learning, which is disproportionately unequal between rich and impoverished households. A study by the Human Sciences Research Council on early educational environments found that only a third of parents read books to their children or played with alphabets, numbers and word games and that there were stark differences reported between parents of learners in fee schools and no-fee schools (Isdale et al. 2015). The digital divide exacerbates already existing learning gaps in South Africa where 'online learning, tests and exams will only be enjoyed by the privileged few' (Bashman 2020: para. 10).

The creeping privatisation of public education: Home schooling and public-private partnerships

The lockdown that has seen schools closed in South Africa for at least three months has, in large

measure, shifted responsibility to parents for ensuring that their children remain engaged in academic learning. This has had three consequences.

First, the number of online education providers has surged to unprecedented levels. Online schools seem to be a suitable solution for parents who are working from home to engage their children in meaningful and structured learning. Li and Lalani (2019: para. 3) argue that even before the pandemic ‘there was already high growth and adoption in education technology, with global edtech investments reaching US\$18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education projected to reach \$350 billion by 2025.’ Although online learning has been increasing in the last 10 years, the pandemic has catapulted its growth and may very well completely disrupt traditional learning methods and what we understand as ‘schooling.’ However, only those learners who have access to technological infrastructure, typically dependent on financial resources, reap full benefits of these futuristic pedagogies.

Second, the number of parents choosing to home school their children has increased considerably. According to the Statistics South Africa (2011) census, between 1997 and 2011 the number of learners who were being home schooled increased from 2,000 to 57,000; this mode of education is rapidly becoming a viable option for parents. In South Africa, it is predominantly the middle class, mainly the white middle class, who are abandoning the public space of education by choosing to home school. Home schooling predates the pandemic, stemming from a reaction of many white Christian Right parents in the 1900s against the school curriculum changes then. As home schooling becomes more commonplace, with many keeping their children at home for safety concerns, it is likely that a number of learners will not return to public schools, ultimately deinstitutionalising schools.

The decision to close schools and keep school children at home has worsened inequalities for working mothers (Werber 2020). A study by the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Zurich on inequalities consequent of the pandemic relating to education and gender found that, as a result of the pandemic, women suffered the biggest setbacks because they generally do the bulk of the childcare including the home schooling (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020). In South Africa, just over 2.7 million children are enrolled in early childhood development (ECD) programmes (Ilifa Labantwana et al. 2020). However, the closure of almost 30,000 of these early childhood development centres, which employ around 175,000 adults serving many children, adversely impacts the poor, and women in particular (Cruywagen 2020). Not only are such centres vital sources of employment for women, but they support women’s participation in the labour market because ‘the ECD workforce is largely female and Black African’ (Ilifa Labantwana et al. 2020: 8). In the absence of child care support, many women are forced to stay at home rather than work, undermining progress towards gender equality in the country’s workforce. Further, ECD programmes perform an educational function supporting young children in developing the necessary literacy, numeracy and social skills.

Third, the pandemic has also resulted in an increase of public private partnerships (PPPs). The way in which a catastrophic crisis, whilst potentially offering the space for a progressive education

agenda, ends up reducing the idea and practice of public education is best illustrated in the USA after Hurricane Katrina demolished most of New Orleans in 2005. New Orleans initially took control of public schools, later turning them over to nonprofit charter schools and ending the union contract (Harris 2020). As government fiscal costs increase post pandemic, the fiscal space for state commitment to public education will be reduced and, by default, the privatisation of education becomes the ‘new normal.’

By way of conclusion: Identifying the gaps and mapping a tentative future education agenda

The two sections above have mapped how the pandemic impacts the global education SDG agenda, how a particular notion of evidence-informed policy making has been invoked and, consequently, how the kind of education choices being made not only exacerbate inequities but set in motion worrisome future education trends. This article concludes by identifying key gaps in these debates and providing a prospective future education agenda to turn the current crisis into a positive public good.

Neglecting teachers and the psychosocial

Public and policy discourse tends to frame teachers and teaching in deficient ways, with teachers presented as the education problem. This is revealed in the current discourse of teachers in the pandemic. Teachers are presented as unhealthy and with multiple comorbidities. At the same time, they are asked to service learners in the absence of adequate support systems, including teacher professional development. During lockdown, teachers were expected to shift to online learning without consideration of whether teachers had either the facilities (laptops, data and bandwidth) or pedagogical knowledge to facilitate learning online. Now that schools are reopening, teachers are required to teach using social distancing measures (SDMs). It is assumed that teachers will seamlessly adjust their teaching in accordance with new protocols. The experience of teachers is summarised in this analogy by Jacklin (2020: para. 13):

The dilemma in which teachers are placed can be compared to that of a surgeon who, having previously been asked to do heart surgery with no equipment other than a rusty pocket knife, is now asked to do this in the dark.

It is important, as Jacklin reminds us, that teachers and their representatives be integral to the making of policy choices. This is the case particularly for impoverished rural and township schools, where ‘the fabric of schooling is worn to a breaking point’ and further exacerbated by the pandemic (Jacklin 2020: para. 15). The Minister has called for schools to practice social distancing measures, but it is challenging for teachers to facilitate in classrooms lacking adequate infrastructure. Poor sanitation, a dearth of desks and limited classrooms all militate against quality teaching that incorporates SDMs.

A focus on learning as content ignores the psychosocial needs of learners and the idea of schooling as more than just an institution for learning the basics (literacy and numeracy). More than 13

million learners have been directly affected by pandemic school closures. The lockdown has had both physical and psychological effects on learners, especially the poor. UNICEF (2020a) reports that when schools closed, crucial social services such as school meals were no longer available to vulnerable children. The closure of schools has affected the nutrition of approximately 350 million learners worldwide (UNICEF 2020b).

The lockdown has also contributed to an increase in abuse and neglect, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation of children and terrible anxiety (UNICEF 2020a). For many learners, schools are a safe haven that protects them from exposure to abuse. Impoverished learners, not the wealthy, have borne, and continue to bear, the brunt of this closure.

Rethinking education dogmas and orthodoxies

The current ostensibly science-led, evidence-based education approach sees a return to the old as possibly the best way forward to establish a new normal with multimodal, blended and online approaches sprinkled in. This Covid-19 pandemic presents the opportunity to rethink orthodoxies and long-held education dogmas in diverse ways and opens possibilities for reconfiguring society and education in new ways. For example, who would have imagined that hardened neoliberals obsessed with GDP-to-debt ratio and growth-at-all-cost would permit untrammelled public spending, including providing work security? The way that schools in New Orleans adapted after Hurricane Katrina makes this point: the state of New Orleans ‘took over almost all the city’s public schools’ and ‘attendance zones, which assign students to the schools they attend based on where they live, were eliminated so that families had a chance to choose any schools they wished’ (Harris 2020: para. 7). However, this has not been the case post crisis, as noted below.

The manner in which a society adapts during and after a crisis is critical; it can help inaugurate positive changes and developments. India provides an example of how Covid-19 may effect change. There, the pandemic disrupted the significant Grade 10 and 12 board exams that have been integral to their education since colonial times:

All important matters relating to school such as prescribing the curriculum, fixing the academic calendar, use of textbooks and most importantly, conducting examinations to assess students’ learning went out of the humble local school master’s control to an elaborate bureaucratic apparatus. (Nawani 2020: para. 3)

The exams were not primarily about learning, but rather about control. Simply because we have been ‘doing education’ a certain way for a long time does not mean it is suitable for now.

Creeping surveillance, authoritarianism, and demonisation: The rise of the nationalist surveillance state

The current pandemic has stirred discussions of key questions, including the interface between hard science and social sciences. At the same time, attention needs to be paid to the negative trends set in motion with this pandemic such as the growing trend towards centralisation, with decision making in South Africa being centralised in the National Coordinating and Command Council. Centralised oversight needs to be balanced with public deliberation and engagement in dealing

with crises.

Crucially, media and policy discourses have been silent on how the pandemic has revealed the Janus-like nature of disaster capitalism. On the one hand, certain groups are demonised and othered as responsible for the spread of the pandemic. Historically, scapegoating has long been orchestrated towards minorities: Jews blamed for the outbreak of the Black Death in Europe (McNeil Jr. 2020), Haitians blamed for AIDS in the USA (Yong 2016), Irish immigrants blamed for the spread of cholera in the USA (Mihm 2020). In India, state discourse and right-wing fascism have crafted an Islamophobic narrative in which Muslims are responsible for the spread of the virus. As Slater and Masih (2020: para. 4) in the *Washington Post* report, ‘the search for scapegoats during the Coronavirus pandemic has focused squarely on the country’s sizable Muslim minority, a community of 200 million that felt under threat even before the advent of Covid-19.’ The physical violence perpetrated towards Muslims in India has also taken place through social media. Hashtag #CoronaJihad, trending on social media sites, has been circulated by officials from the country’s ruling party. China and Chinese people have also been vilified as the point of origin of the virus.

The ethno-nationalism that has surfaced in this pandemic belies the fact that, in many countries, the impoverished and vulnerable minorities have been most adversely affected. For example, in the UK, the black and minority ethnic (BAME) community has been the most adversely impacted. A public health report released by the UK government notes that those from the BAME community are more likely to suffer infection and die from Covid-19 (Public Health England 2020). Yet members of this very same BAME community work diligently on the frontline of the UK’s health care system. Ironically, on the first day of celebration for NHS Day in the UK, newspapers all carried images of NHS staff with barely a single image of a person of colour.

Second, allied to the process of othering has been a strong chauvinistic nationalism pervading the discourse surrounding the virus. Individual states have turned obsessively self-interested in terms of national needs such as vaccines, ventilators and protective personal equipment (PPE). A global pandemic has provoked a return to narrow versions of nationalism, including ‘vaccine nationalism.’ The pandemic has unleashed a policy response that is a retreat from the idea of collective public global good and threatens the achievement of the SDGs. Multilateralism as a way of dealing with global problems is increasingly brittle in this pandemic but not broken and resists, when possible, the narrow nationalism of some countries in the Global North.

An embryonic progressive education agenda

This article concludes by sketching a progressive agenda for the pandemic with social justice at its core. It is evident that what needs protection in the pandemic is an expanded view of quality education. Sayed and Moriarty (2020) argue that quality education equally privileges the affective dimension of learning as much as the cognitive. This affective dimension includes learning that tackles racism, xenophobia and prejudice of the kind that the pandemic has stoked, often deliberately inflamed by political leaders. It will also emphasise psychosocial learning, supporting both learners and teachers. In this way, it will contribute to overcoming the chauvinistic

nationalism and national identities that have come to characterise this pandemic. Importantly, quality education requires a teaching and learning environment free from fear and anxiety, a condition that cannot be guaranteed in the current context in many countries.

Such a model of education must be aligned with a progressive political agenda that tackles the most egregious effects of disaster capitalism and neoliberalism. Countries that have coped well with the pandemic socially, politically and economically have been those that are anything but neoliberal. Their success has come from their sustained investments in public education and public health and by promoting egalitarian and inclusive forms of economic growth, as the cases of Cuba and Vietnam make clear:

[They throw] the deadly incompetence of neoliberal Western governments, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, into harsh relief. . . . These governments, particularly those of its Anglo-American heartland, are caught in a scissor crisis: there is a widening gap between the mounting challenge and limited capacities – public health, governmental and political – whittled down by four decades of neoliberalism. (Desai 2020: paras 3–4)

Core to this belief of an expanded education vision and progressive political order is a strong commitment to a common public good, active citizenry, global collectivism and solidaristic sharing. The solution to the current global pandemic – a crisis of globalisation – is global. This means opposing the narrow insular approach to education and the social order in which education is reduced to instrumental ends. In particular, education policy needs to counter the growing privatisation and ‘uberisation’ of education in which the idea of a common public education is deinstitutionalised and delegitimised. For this to happen, there should be political will, collective mass action, mutual trust and a state that is responsive to the needs of the majority, particularly the marginalised and the poor. In this regard, Badat’s (2020: para. 8) critique of the 4IR notes: ‘The decisions that we make as a country, the policies and strategies we adopt are all in the realm of political and social choices. Choices that citizens and societies must make in any democracy worthy of its name.’ To this could be added policy choices that do not read science narrowly but elicit democratic and public debate – because how evidence informs policy choices made during the pandemic shapes the present as well as the future.

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Notes on the authors

Yusuf Sayed is Professor of International Education and Development Policy at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, and the South African Research Chair at the Centre for International Teacher Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa.

Marcina Singh is a research associate at the Centre for International Teacher Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa.

Addresses for correspondence

y.sayed@sussex.ac.uk

sayed.cite@gmail.com