

## CHAPTER 5.2: EDUCATION SECTOR

*Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims ... in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good. The harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally; they are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.*

United Nations Policy Brief, 15 April 2020

### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic brought colossal shifts in education policy decisions globally. This chapter, which draws primarily on secondary data, examines measures adopted by the education ministries to contain the spread of the virus and continue the academic programme during the pandemic. Amid competing voices from many stakeholders, the ministries had to make unprecedented, complex policy decisions, including the closure of schools and the move to online learning. But such decisions brought existing educational inequity and inequality into sharp focus. For example, the digital divide meant poorer learners had little access to online learning. Also, the neoliberal idea of ‘homeschooling’ was imposed on parents, many of whom lack educational capital themselves. When a phased reopening of schools was announced, measures were taken to contain the spread of the virus, curriculum content was decreased, and different timetable options were made available. The reopening was not without challenges: more middle-class than working-class learners returned to school, and financial constraints in some schools and institutions of higher learning made complying with Covid-19 protocols impossible. That said, the education sector achieved significant successes in implementing mitigation measures during the pandemic. The risk-adjusted, phased return of students; intensive collaboration with stakeholders to inform policy decisions; and the provision of data and devices for online learning were crucial. Further recommendations include improving school infrastructure, especially around water, sanitation, and ICT, and strengthening online learning platforms. At a deeper level, the assumption that middle-class families and students are representative of all South Africans needs to be challenged; it results in interventions that are feasible only for a privileged minority.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ECD	early childhood development
ETDP SETA	Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority
FEDSAS	Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
ICT	information and communications technology
ISASA	Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa
NIDS-CRAM	National Income Dynamics Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile [survey]
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPE	personal protective equipment
PSET	post-school education and training
SACPO	South African College Principals Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAf	Universities South Africa
WHO	World Health Organization

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## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide ‘mass school and university closures have been among the most shocking signs of Covid-19’s power to drive a global shutdown’ (Psacharopoulos et al., 2020). The year 2020 saw unprecedented disruptions in education, even when compared to previous disruptions from natural disasters, armed conflict, or other epidemics (Winthrop, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020; South Africa initiated its Emergency Operations Centre on the same day. The country’s first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on 5 March, and it declared a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020. The different organs of state took drastic measures to curb the spread of the virus. Schools closed on 18 March (DBE, 2020d), all post-school education and training (PSET) institutions went into early recess, and academic activity was suspended (DHET, 2020g). But South Africa, like most other countries, was completely unprepared for what was to come (Keevy, 2020).

While cost of the pandemic in terms of human lives has been catastrophic, the havoc it is wreaking on education may be felt for many years to come (WBG, 2020). For example:

- The pandemic has severely tested the already stressed *funding for education*. This is a particular concern, as ‘despite occasional claims to the contrary, the best evidence suggests that the quality of education is also responsive to financial resources’ (Evans et al., 2020).
- The *months of tuition* lost may never be recouped. Furthermore, lengthy breaks in learning affect the quality of education – when learners and students are away from classes, they begin to forget what they have learnt. It had been anticipated that over 80 days of learning would be lost in 2020, and learners’ *a priori* knowledge would decrease and might have to be recapped when schools reopened. The full effects of these interruptions may only become clearer many years into the future.
- It has *exacerbated inequalities in education*. In low-income countries, the rate at which children complete school is twice as high among wealthier (79%) than poorer families (39%). About 35% of primary schools lack basic infrastructure for handwashing. About 500 million students cannot access remote learning (UN, 2015). These inherent inequalities create deep divides in the levels of learning available. During the pandemic, some wealthy students could keep learning, unhindered, while others could not learn at all. ‘Without continued investment in education, the gap between the haves and have-nots will widen further as wealthy families purchase educational opportunities for their children that leave other students behind’ (Bernard et al., 2020). Learners in poorly performing schools in South Africa already fall far below international norms; the pandemic exacerbated this problem and deepened inequality (Van der Berg & Spaul, 2020).

Catch-up programmes should consider all these factors when planning for 2021 and beyond. The next section discusses the effect of Covid-19 on children and young people. The sections that follow report on the response of the South African education sector to the unfolding Covid-19 crisis. Note that this

chapter focuses on the first and second waves of the pandemic. Education during the further progression of the pandemic will be discussed in the second edition of the Country Report.

## THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN

Across the world, 'Covid-19 is disrupting children's education, learning and wellbeing in substantial ways. The effects of the pandemic on children vary widely according to region and other demographic characteristics including disability, minority status, indicators of poverty and gender' (Gordon & Burgess, 2020:22). This is also true for South Africa (Bangani, 2020; Van der Berg & Spaul, 2020).

The effects on children and young people will undeniably be felt in many ways. The United Nations (UN, 2020:4–5) distinguishes three channels through which these effects may manifest:

1. *Infection*: Children seem relatively less susceptible to the virus than do adults, possibly because they have fewer comorbidities. In South Africa over a third of the population is under the age of 18. Laboratory-confirmed Covid-19 statistics show that from March to September 2020, children comprised only 8% of all cases and 3,2% of admissions to sentinel hospitals; the cumulative incidence of Covid-19 was six times lower among children than adults. A higher incidence of infection and hospital admissions was seen among girls ages 15–18, possibly because of a disproportionate burden of care work or some unknown biological factor (NICD, 2020). However, although infections in schools appear to be low, they are not unknown – over a hundred students in one school in the Eastern Cape tested positive for the virus (UNICEF, 2020). Still, 'it is clear that the "regular" South African mortality risk in 2020 is far higher than the Covid-19 mortality risk for all age ranges' (Van der Berg & Spaul, 2020).
2. *Socio-economic effects of the virus and related measures*: According to the United Nations (UN, 2020:4) 'while children are not the face of this pandemic, its broader impacts on children risk being catastrophic and amongst the most lasting consequences for societies as a whole'. The African Child Policy Forum (Tesemma, 2020:30) concluded that although 'children are not as widely infected by Covid-19, they are disproportionately affected by the socio-economic impact'. 'Children are at risk not only of infection, but also of losing or being separated from family members and caregivers' (Fore, 2020:1). Children also face worsening poverty, an inability to access education, and social isolation from their peers. When schools shut down, education came to a halt for financially deprived learners. Girls bore the brunt of care work and domestic labour at home, and children were more vulnerable to multiple forms of symbolic and substantive violence and crime. Some were also deprived of meals. Many learners were further 'peripheralised materially, spatially, linguistically and culturally' (Black et al., 2020:42).
3. *Longer-term efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) to ensure the realisation of the rights of all children: This relates especially to SDG4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Restricted access to schooling and finance for education during the pandemic undermines the global prospects for the development of children. In South Africa, existing fiscal constraints have been exacerbated

during the pandemic, severely affecting children and young people. Also, 'extreme inequality means vulnerable and disadvantaged children will still bear the brunt of this educational disruption ... now and in the coming years. Those from impoverished backgrounds have inevitably fallen behind' (Bangani, 2020). Parsitau and Jepkemei (2020, in Bangani, 2020) note that 'for rural children of parents with low literacy levels and limited education resources, this risk of learning loss is heightened. Not only are these parents frustrated at having to homeschool without adequate preparation, but they also cannot reinforce their children's learning. Intermittent online learning is not effective for students already behind, and radio learning cannot replace classroom learning as it is intended to supplement the knowledge that children already have.' This holds true for all parents with low literacy levels and limited financial and educational resources. The lack of continuity of learning has a significantly negative impact on learners, as discussed later.

On 5 July, the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga (2020), announced that since the return of grade 7 and 12 learners on 8 June 2020 (i.e., about a month earlier), only 2740 of the country's 440 000 teachers (<1%) had been infected by the virus, as had 1260 (0,01%) learners.

## REACTION OF THE EDUCATION SECTOR BEFORE 15 MARCH 2020

Despite South Africa's prompt reaction to the WHO announcement in January, no documents could be obtained that indicate any reaction from the departments of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Basic Education (DBE) to the potential effects of the virus on the education sector. It appears that because the virus had not yet infected South Africans, there had been no substantive preparation for a possible calamity before the state of disaster was announced in March 2020.

For this chapter, a questionnaire was sent to educationists, principals, and teachers to assess measures taken to combat the pandemic. Three different questionnaires were created on Google Forms. The first was emailed to education officials and union heads, the second to principals and school personnel, and the third to university representatives. The response rate was low – only 24 responses were received. In the discussion below, responses to the questionnaires are shown in italics.

When educationists were asked about their initial reactions, as representatives of public education, to the WHO announcement, many responses were aligned with the following: '*initially the virus seemed far removed from [South Africa]*'. The consensus was that '*I wasn't sure of how serious it was, as it is a virus we knew little or nothing about*'; therefore, people tended to believe that '*the problem will not affect us*'. Generally, respondents felt that in the absence of plans for combating the virus, the DBE had no option but to shut down schools. Principals and teachers said the first initiative taken by schools was to educate learners about handwashing and sanitising, but these '*plans only started in late March*'.

When questioned about the reaction of the departments of education to the WHO announcement, one member of a teacher union noted that '*the response seemed slow and muted at first. Then we were invited to government briefings but plans still seemed at the very embryonic stage*.' The opinions of principals and teachers about the DBE's response were divided. Some stated that '*Yes, there were*

*published plans given*, while others stated that *'No, not in February but later the [DBE] did put plans into place. There was no monitoring of schools to see how the schools are operating.'* These contrasting responses may be related to communication problems between the departments and individual institutions. One school head of department stated that:

When schools reopened, much confusion existed as to how schools will be managed. The [DBE] sent circulars to schools providing options for timetabling to address safe distancing. ... Schools with smaller numbers of units per grade would not have had a challenge in implementation. However, high schools with larger numbers of units, especially grade 12, had a challenge. Priority was given to matriculants – rightfully so – as opposed to other grades. Learners in the lower grades (8 and 9) attended school for fewer days a month. Most learning for these learners took place at home under parental guidance, with no support from the school. Learners taught themselves. For many learners, concepts were not understood, and poor assignment results bear testimony to this. The hygiene aspect was addressed by the [DBE] by providing the necessary PPE [personal protective equipment] to schools.

The respondents were asked: Did you or the Department anticipate that it would affect South Africans and if you or the Department did, did you or the Department believe that we should begin our plans for preventative measures immediately? One respondent summed up the general view:

The Government had greater insight into the pandemic [than the DBE]. The severe lockdown ... helped curb the spread and limit the number of fatalities. The [DBE] reacted to the pandemic, but it was too late. Educators teaching in rural areas did not have the tools to assist their learners. The [DBE] did not have any plans in place for any catastrophe, let alone a crisis of this magnitude. Although the necessary [PPE is] currently provided to schools, the [DBE] has yet to address the lack of digital resources in many schools. Should the country go into lockdown again, the privileged schools with digital infrastructure would effortlessly use online classes while learners and educators in rural schools would simply have to wait for them to reopen.

In terms of the enforcement of lockdown procedures, the respondents stated that *'the [DBE] expected Principals and [School Management Teams] to enforce protocols, and the curriculum at all schools. Monitoring was also done by Principals and [School Management Teams]. Circuit Managers visited schools when problems arose and addressed issues. In the main, schools had to resolve their own problems.'* Another respondent stated *'Principals, with School Management Teams ... were expected to take precautions and actions required for schools to operate during the Covid pandemic. Our school worked as a team ensuring all regulations are carried out.'*

At a briefing on 9 March 2020, the Minister of Basic Education cautioned everyone involved in the schooling sector. Noting that the DBE had received enquiries about how they intended to deal with Covid-19 in schools, she emphasised the following socio-behavioural interventions:

We have redirected all the enquiries to the Department of Health, that is leading the interventions regarding the management of cases. We take this opportunity to remind South Africans about the basic hygiene practices that involve the (1) washing of hands; (2) covering of your mouth

when you cough; (3) avoid coming into contact with people who are sick; (4) avoid touching your eyes, ears, and nose; and (5) seek medical help if you are sick. ... We have sent a Circular to all our schools to provide guidelines on ... general hygiene standards. The Department of Health, however, will communicate should any announcements be made specifically on the Coronavirus. The safety of our learners and teachers remains a priority in the sector.

At this point it was apparent that the DBE had no coordinated plan for mitigating the spread of the virus in schools. The circular (DBE, 2020b), the only document sent to schools before 15 March 2020, provided Covid-19 guidance for childcare facilities and schools. It showed how these institutions should monitor and plan for absenteeism, establish procedures for learners and staff who are sick at school, and create communication plans for use with the school community. It also provided guidelines on what school communities should do if learners planned to travel, or had recently travelled, to areas with community spread of Covid-19 or had been exposed to a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19. It set out the procedure to be followed if institutions needed to be closed if the virus had spread within their community. It is clear from Figure 5.2.1 (panel a) and media reports on the pandemic that school closure as a measure to stem the spread of the virus was being implemented rapidly in the northern hemisphere. It is therefore difficult to understand why the DBE's response was mainly about infection and absenteeism. There is no evidence of serious consideration having been given to teaching and learning remotely at that stage, despite the real possibility of school closure. Box 5.2.1 reflects the DBE's point of view, from an interview with the Director-General of the department.

*Box 5.2.1: Point of view: The DBE's approach to the pandemic*

In an interview for this chapter, Mr Hubert Mathanzima Mweli, the Director-General of the DBE, noted:

Like all sectors, the DBE took the lead from the President and the [National Coronavirus Command Council] when the pandemic was announced to have reached South Africa, and a hard lockdown declared in March 2020. The Department remained cautious in its approach and adopted:

- (a) The Covid-19 risk-adjusted strategy, and
- (b) A phased-in approach to the reopening of schools.

The announcement of the lockdown meant a loss of crucial teaching and assessment time for the delivery of quality education. The closure of schools then compelled the Basic Education Sector and all its partners to seek ways of supporting teaching and learning while learners were at home.

**Support for learners during the lockdown**

- (a) Before the lockdown, at the directive of the Heads of Department Committee (HEDCOM), the DBE had established Task Teams to lead a coordinated response by developing plans that would ensure learners receive support while under the lockdown. These Task Teams worked with their counterparts in [provincial education departments] as well as with other key stakeholders to put a plan in place and to monitor its implementation.
- (b) Considering the role that Technology would play in remotely supporting learning, a number of [information and communications technology] support packages were developed, [including]:
  - o Online digital platforms
  - o DBE and provincial websites
  - o Websites of the DBE key partners, such as [the National Education Collaboration Trust], Vodacom, MTN, Siyavula, and many more
  - o Broadcasting through the national, regional as well as community-based radio stations
  - o Television channels dedicated for educational content.

(c) The response also included the distribution of printed materials, namely workbooks as well as work sheets to learners.

The sector had to continuously revise the plans as things changed and the science evolved. These were enforced through the implementation, support and monitoring of the Directions, [standard operating protocols] and the adopted Safety Measures and Protocols.

## COVID-19 AND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

The early childhood development (ECD) sector was forced to close its doors on 18 March 2020, like the rest of the education sector. However, the reopening of ECD centres has been fraught with uncertainty. Despite receiving judicial support for the centres to be opened, by the end of July 2020, very few had begun to work as normal. Wills et al. (2020:1) describe the situation as follows:

The short- and medium-term survival of the ECD sector is in a highly precarious position as it moves into the last quarter of 2020, with a real threat of permanent closures and large declines in ECD enrolment in the coming year. This threat reaches beyond ECD operators to the lives of millions of children, millions of households and millions of adults who rely on these ECD services. Four months after the closure of ECD programmes, the sector is likely operating at less than a quarter of its pre-lockdown levels. It is not clear how many of the typically privately run ECD programmes across the nation will survive without a well-targeted financial stimulus.

and

In answering these questions, we draw on the second wave of the new telephonic National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM). These findings are corroborated against suppside experiences collected from ECD providers through the First and Second Surveys Assessing the Impact of COVID on ECD1 (Bridge et al. 2020a, Bridge, et al. 2020b). The analysis of ECD and lockdown impacts using these data sources are situated within a socio-economic framework that views the ECD system in terms of three interconnected societal layers: (1) ECD providers themselves, (2) children using their services, and (3) parents and caregivers of these children. Pre-crisis and current ECD attendance at programmes are conceptualised in relation to this framework to explore the multi-faceted, socio-economic implications of COVID-related impacts on the sector.

Van den Berg and Spaull (2020:23) concluded after examining extensive evidence that keeping children out of ECD centres and crèches is not in their best interests. The authors further concluded that children should be allowed to return to ECD institutions immediately.

## WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS REOPEN?

The decision to close and reopen schools was vigorously contested. For example, the closure of schools on 18 March 2020 was not supported by some academics (e.g., Van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). It was also not supported by the South African Paediatric Association (Sayed & Singh, 2020), despite it being clear that poorer schools were not sufficiently equipped and did not have the necessary infrastructure

to implement measures to contain the spread of the virus. In this regard, analysts such as Sayed and Singh (2020) voiced concern about government's dependence on scientific experts to inform policy-related decisions, with limited input from experts in the humanities. The decision to close and reopen schools largely ignored the social reality of diverse schools and learners.

A framework for the opening of schools issued by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Food Programme and UNHCR (2020) notes that there had been insufficient evidence at the time about disease transmission when schools are closed. However, 'the adverse effects of school closures on children's safety, wellbeing and learning are well documented' (p.1). It argued for reopening schools:

Disruptions to ... time in the classroom can have a severe impact on a child's ability to learn. The longer marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. Children from the poorest households are already almost five times more likely to be out of primary school than those from the richest. Being out of school also increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence, and other threats. Further, prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, and mental health and psychosocial support, and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines. These negative impacts will be significantly higher for marginalized children, such as those living in countries affected by conflict and other protracted crises, migrants, the forcibly displaced, minorities, children living with disabilities, and children in institutions. School reopenings must be safe and consistent with each country's overall Covid-19 health response, with all reasonable measures taken to protect students, staff, teachers, and their families (p.2).

Van der Berg's (2020) motivation for reopening schools is based on the wider costs of school closure:

- Even before the lockdown, 2.5 million children suffered starvation. School feeding programmes are an important means of addressing food insecurity among children in schools. When malnourished children lose access to school meals, more lives could be lost.
- Lockdowns, school closures and natural disasters increase the risk of substance abuse, depression, fear, loneliness, domestic violence, and child abuse. Financial worries add stress to many households, raising levels of emotional exhaustion, depression, and anxiety.
- Recent surveys suggest that children are at higher risk of lasting psychological distress, including depression. For instance, after a month of school closures in Hubei (China), a quarter of children ages 8–12 showed symptoms of depression.
- Teachers would be unable to complete the curriculum, leaving many gaps in children's education. International research shows that such learning losses could have lasting implications, even affecting lifetime earnings. Poorer learners and schools would be least able to catch up again.

The DBE's Annual Performance Plan (2020a:20) states that 'the overall goal of the various actors in the basic education sector must remain to improve the quality of learning outcomes and reduce educational inequalities. We should not lose sight of this. South Africa has been on an upward trajectory in terms of the skills acquired by learners for around two decades. ... The momentum of this improvement cannot be lost as a result of the pandemic.' Schools had to remain open to help ensure

that learners did not lose the progress they had made. The document continues to say that ‘in fact, we can think of illiteracy among our primary school learners almost in the way we have learnt to think about the coronavirus. It is a scourge which must be eliminated, by identifying “hotspots” where children are not learning as they should and intervening to ensure that people’s futures are not compromised.’ The DBE recognised that the pandemic would have a lasting but as yet unquantifiable impact on the education system. It identified Covid-19 as a key risk to the completion of the curriculum and assessments and to governing the sector to ensure quality, inclusive, safe and healthy basic education. It held that this risk could be mitigated through effective planning, management, better infrastructure, and other programmes to support effective learning and teaching.

The motivation for reopening schools, then, was influenced by various factors, including clinical evidence of the lower likelihood of children contracting the virus, the need to reduce the disadvantages and social and cultural challenges encountered by children who were not at school, and learning and health challenges based on the construction of schools as safe spaces that offer nutrition, health services and an environment that is conducive to education.

*Box 5.2.2: Point of view: The DBE on the decision to close schools*

According to the Director-General of the DBE, the closure of schools had been a health decision and not an educational one. The president had announced the closure of all schools nationally because of the health crisis, on the advice of the Minister of Health and the National Coronavirus Command Council. That decision had been based on the spread of the virus and the associated morbidity and mortality, and the capacity of the health system to cope with the increased demand for services.

*Source: Interview with the Director-General of the DBE, Mr Hubert Mathanzima Mweli*

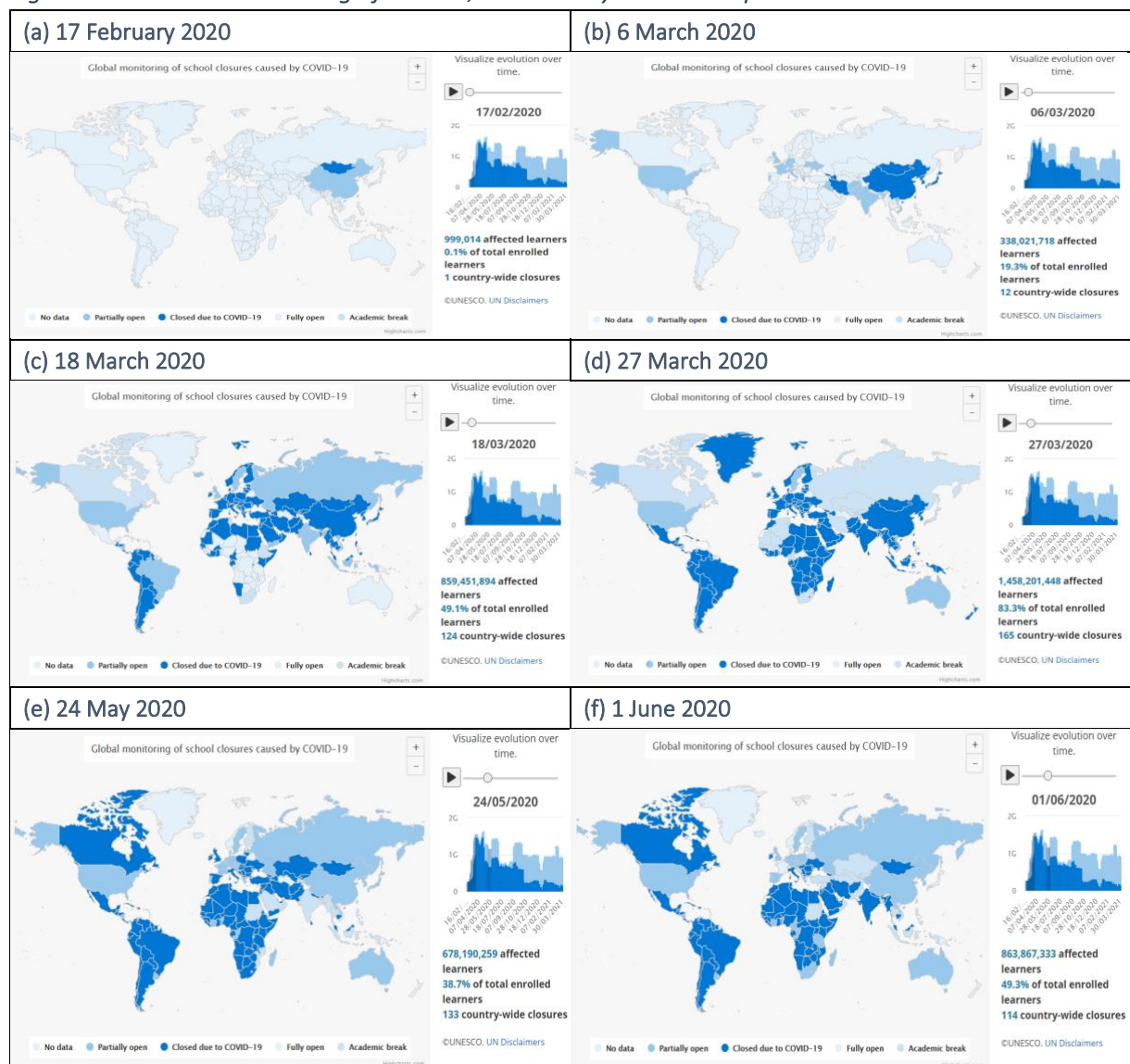
## GLOBAL MONITORING OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

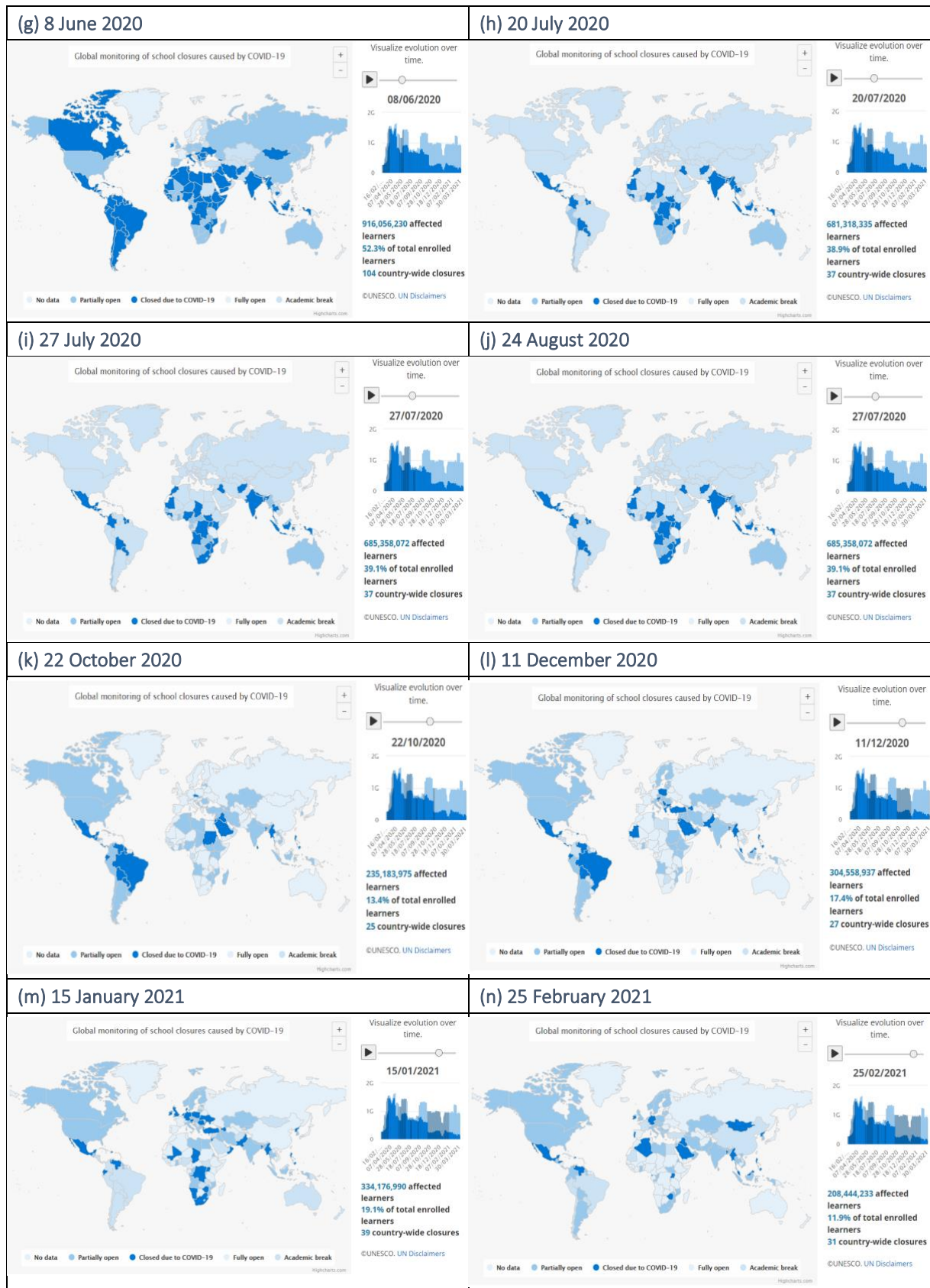
UNESCO (2020) monitored school closures worldwide (Figure 5.2.1) from February 2020.

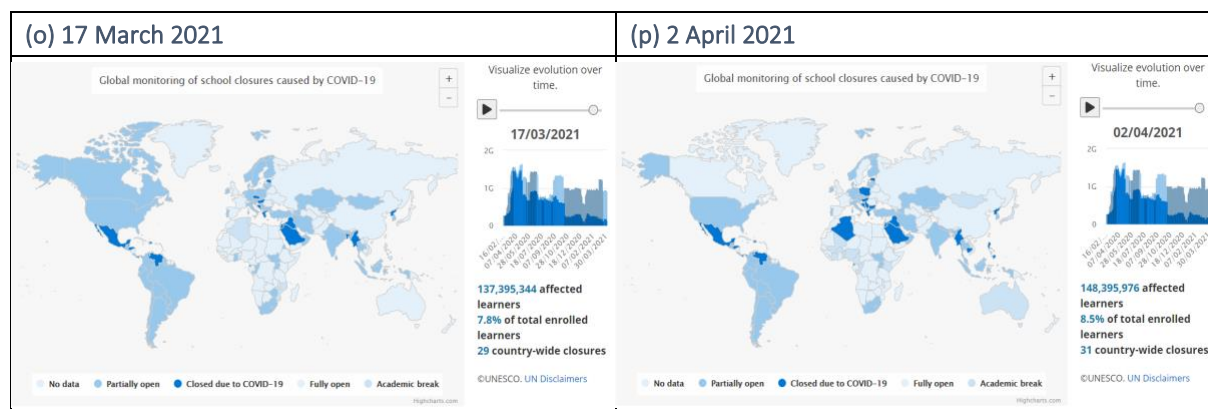
- By *17 February 2020* (panel a), only China and Mongolia had responded to Covid-19; schools in China were partially open while those in Mongolia were completely closed.
- By *6 March* (panel b), countries in Asia and Europe, and the United States, were increasingly taking measures to reduce the spread of the pandemic. Schools in China were completely closed.
- By *18 March* (panel c), the declaration of the national state of disaster in South Africa precipitated the closure of schools and institutions in the PSET sector.
- A *week later*, almost every country in the world did likewise. Some countries, including South Africa, reconfigured the academic break to coincide with school closures (panel d).
- By *24 May* (panel e), some countries began to partially open their schools; most African schools remained closed.
- Although local schools were scheduled to reopen on *1 June* (panel f), they had to close because of logistical challenges around compliance with Covid-19 measures and the unavailability of PPE.
- By *8 June* (panel g), schools in South Africa were opened partially, according to grades, the availability of PPE, and the local rate of infection.

- By *20 July* (panel h), South African schools closed again.
- An early vacation was declared as from *27 July* (panel i).
- South Africa was among the very few countries to fully open schools by *24 August* (panel j).
- By *22 October* (panel k), partial closures of schools in some African countries had increased, but South African schools remained open; on *24 October*, they closed for the academic break.
- By *11 December 2020* (panel l), schools remained partially open as the country approached the summer break.
- By *15 January 2021* (panel m), South African schools remained closed due to Covid-19.
- By *25 February 2021* (panel n), South African schools were only partially open; this was still the case by *17 March 2021* (panel o) and *2 April 2021* (panel p).

Figure 5.2.1: Global monitoring of schools, 17 February 2020 to 2 April 2021







Source: UNESCO (2021)

## MEASURES TO COMBAT COVID-19: A TIMELINE

### DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

The basic education system comprises about 13.5 million learners and educators. On 16 March 2020, Minister Angie Motshekga announced that the Council of Education Ministers had met after the president declared the national state of disaster. Schools were seen as fertile ground for the transmission of Covid-19, and the ‘drastic’ resolution was taken to close public and independent schools from 18 March 2020, as noted above. At that time, it was envisaged that 10 school days would be lost, and schools would reopen on 14 April 2020. In fact, schools only reopened, partially, on 8 June 2020 (panel g in Figure 5.2.1). To compensate for lost days, the plan was to shorten the mid-year holiday and increase tuition time. Each province, district, circuit, and school had to develop a recovery plan. Schools had to cancel or postpone events that involved large gatherings and to develop and distribute materials that learners could use to continue learning with help from their parents. The DBE committed itself to consulting school governing bodies and teacher labour organisations on future plans.

On 29 May 2020, the DBE (2020c) provided guidelines for the phased return of learners, educators, and officials to schools:

- **1 June:** Partial reopening: School of Skills (year 4) and mainstream public schools (grades 7 & 12).
- **6 July:** Further reopening: School of Skills (years 2 & 3), mainstream public schools (grades R, 3, 6, 10 & 11), ECD institutions, schools for learners with severe intellectual disabilities (grades 1–3 & 6), and special care centres for learners with severe and profound disabilities (years 1–3).
- **27 July:** Complete reopening of grade 1.
- **3 August:** Complete reopening of schools: School of Skills (year 1), mainstream public schools (grades 4, 5, 8 & 9), and schools for learners with severe intellectual disabilities (grades 4 & 5).

*Box 5.2.3: Point of view: The DBE on mitigating the impact of school closures*

According to the Director-General of the DBE, the department had always been sensitive to the fact that school closures affected the most vulnerable children more severely. As a sector, the department is strongest in contact teaching and learning, and it therefore sought to have learners back in class as soon as was feasible and safe. Various interventions were implemented to mitigate the impact of school closures, including:

- continuing the school feeding programmes,
- worksheets and learning packs that could be fetched from school and returned for marking,
- radio and TV lessons, including use of community radio stations, and
- education materials available on zero-rated platforms.

*Source: Interview with the Director-General of the DBE, Mr Hubert Mathanzima Mwel*

The phased return of learners, educators and officials was contingent on schools and education offices complying with minimum health, safety, and social distancing measures. Parents could elect not to send their children to school. In this instance section 4 of the Schools Act (a learner may be partially or conditionally exempt from compulsory attendance at school, provided this is in the best interests of the learner) was invoked. However, the parent would then be obliged to apply for home education in accordance with the Act.

Events involving gatherings of learners and educators (e.g., choir rehearsals, sporting activities, and cultural festivals) were still suspended. The May/June 2020 Senior Certificate and National Senior Certificate examinations were to be administered in November/December 2020. Principals had to issue certificates and permits for travel to and from school. Schools and offices had to develop work plans. Parents and guardians were asked not to send learners with symptoms of Covid-19 to school.

Screening for observable symptoms, based on Department of Health guidelines, had to be conducted at schools and education offices. Reports of individuals presenting symptoms had to be sent to the designated official. If an individual presented with symptoms, the school or office needed to:

- (a) not permit the person to enter the premises; or (b) if the person is already on the premises of a school or office – (i) immediately isolate the person, and require that person or, in the case of a learner, advise the parent or guardian, to make arrangements to be transported in a manner that does not place any other person or members of the public at risk, either to be self-isolated or for a medical examination or testing; and (ii) assess the risk of transmission, disinfect the area and any official's, educator's or learner's workstation, refer those persons who may be at risk for screening and take any other appropriate measure to prevent possible transmission (DBE, 2020c).

An employee who contracted Covid-19 at the workplace could be compensated in terms of the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act. Anyone testing positive was required to self-isolate and only return to school/office once they had obtained a negative test result.

Schools and offices were required to have PPE that was effective and easily accessible, with adequate quantities of sanitisers, masks, disinfectants, and facilities for handwashing (with soap and water). Surfaces and equipment had to be cleaned before and after school or office work, and shared

equipment or facilities had to be cleaned more often. Each educator or official had to be given two face masks, and any person entering the premises would be obliged to wear a face mask.

Social distancing (individuals at least 1,5 metres apart) had to be implemented; in lieu of this, schools could operate at a maximum of 50% of capacity. Timetable models could be '(i) daily or weekly rotation, (ii) bi-weekly rotation, (iii) platooning or shifts, (iv) traditional and daily, (v) hybrid' (DBE, 2020c). Schools with adequate space and facilities, and which could comply with social distancing, health, and safety regulations, did not have to change their timetables. Also, the curriculum would be de-densified and reorganised, in keeping with section 3(4)(l) of the National Education Policy Act.

## THE PSET SECTOR

The PSET system comprises about 2,5 million students and staff. On 15 March 2020 Dr Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, announced the suspension of academic activities in the PSET sector, and associated institutions went into early recess.

On 28 April 2020 the DHET (2020a) published a disaster management report that assessed the measures it had taken to deal with the pandemic. These were as follows:

1. The sector implemented the early recess (above), soon after the national state of disaster had been declared.
2. Most universities helped students to vacate residences (e.g., with transport to home provinces).
3. By the time of the lockdown, most students, including international students, had returned home. Of the total university student population of just over 1 million, only 6270 students remained on campus across 26 universities.
4. All technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges closed for early recess on 18 March and were expected to reopen on 15 April 2020. Examinations for the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (Engineering Studies), which were scheduled to start on 30 March, were postponed, and students were advised to continue preparing for examinations. Lecturers were requested to issue assignments for students to complete during the recess to help them prepare for the examinations upon their return.
5. The TVET Branch issued a circular to regional offices and principals on 1 April 2020, setting out measures to support students with self-learning. Initiatives were set in motion to give students free access to data. The TVET Branch reviewed online programme offerings at public TVET colleges, 15 of which reported using some online methodologies in a blended learning environment.
6. The DHET acknowledged the importance of access to information and communications technology (ICT) for online learning. A ministerial task team (involving Higher Education, Science and Technology; and Communications and Digital Technologies) was set up to oversee the zero-rating of URLs for educational purposes.
7. The DHET developed a National Open Learning System, and the State Information Technology Agency migrated it to an operational site where lecturers and students could upload learning materials. As materials were being made available through TVET colleges, these were uploaded.

8. The National Open Learning System (a learning management system, a content repository, and an administrative module) became the DHET's primary site for supporting online learning.

On 29 April 2020, Dr Nzimande issued a notice on the provision of essential goods and services for higher education, science, technology, and innovation institutions. These included devices (e.g., laptops and modems) for online and blended teaching and learning; chemicals for the preservation of biological materials; food for laboratory animals; and hard copies of printed learning and teaching support materials, including textbooks and stationery, together with digitally stored materials. The transport of learning and teaching support materials was declared an essential service (DHET, 2020d).

On 1 May 2020, South Africa moved to alert level 4. Based on recommendations by the National Command Council, Dr Nzimande announced the decision not to allow students to return to public and private PSET institutions for contact-based learning on campuses. Final-year medical students could assist the Department of Health at this time. To facilitate the change, 'effective, multimodal remote learning systems [complemented by] physical delivery of learning materials' were envisaged. Data provision and connectivity support were being leveraged from mobile network operators; emergency funding for higher education institutions would be secured; and plans for deep cleaning all PSET institutions were announced (DHET, 2020b).

On 26 May 2020, Minister Nzimande announced that final-year medical students could travel and restart their studies (DHET, 2020e). On 9 June 2020, he announced a risk-adjusted, phased return of students to PSET institutions: 'We want to ensure all students and campus staff have the tools and information necessary to deal with coronavirus.' Government adopted the motto 'Save The Academic Year, Save Lives'. To assess the readiness of higher education institutions for a phased return of students, Dr Nzimande visited Tshwane University of Technology, the largest contact university in Africa. He found that the university had reprioritised funds to implement Covid-19 measures, using their chemical engineering laboratories to produce sanitisers and disinfectants for the institution. He was very satisfied that their plan for multimodal learning was advanced and effective in reaching students in very remote areas (DHET, 2020c).

Higher Health supports the health and well-being of students in PSET institutions. It launched an app called HealthCheck to help detect and monitor Covid-19 (students and staff were to use the app daily to assess their risk level before entering the campus). Higher Health also addressed substance abuse and mental health issues that could be exacerbated by the pandemic. Along with issuing a Protocol on Routine Cleaning for Covid-19 Prevention, it dealt with social distancing, personal hygiene, screening booths, student residences, campus canteens, proactive screening and testing, and medical care and quarantining. Higher Health was expected to extend its services to private higher education institutions and community training centres.

From 1 June 2020 to 31 August 2020, students funded from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and Funza Lushaka obtained 10 GB daytime and 20 GB night-time data subsidised by government. Plans to zero-rate the local educational content of private and public universities and TVET, community

education and training, nursing and agricultural colleges were advanced. Access to these institutional websites would be free of charge, although embedded content (e.g., YouTube videos) might incur charges. The Covid-19 Responsiveness Grant for universities was expected to cover students' data costs. Universities reached individual agreements with mobile network operators and provided them with students' details (DHET, 2020c). Nationwide zero-rating of a number of educational websites was announced on 5 June (DCDT, 2020). However, not all websites were zero-rated (including Zoom, for example). High data costs made remote learning impossible for many students, especially if they needed to download videos and materials from non-zero-rated websites. Finally, providing access to online learning also required the institutions to incur significant data costs.

As had the DBE, the DHET often emphasised the need for caution in the reopening of educational institutions. The gradual reopening of all institutions announced on 8 June 2020 (DHET, 2020f) took into consideration the preparedness of infrastructure and teaching and learning spaces; screening of staff, students/learners and members of the public visiting these institutions; physical distancing; and the implementation of hygiene protocols in terms of the regulations.

## **THE EFFECTS OF THE MEASURES**

In the PSET sector, the DHET approach helped prevent the spread of the virus. The number of university students and staff who have been infected by the virus remains small. Given the rapid lockdown, any spread from infected individuals was prevented. As large numbers of students live in campus-based and off-campus residences, with many sharing rooms and bathrooms, physical distancing on university campuses would have been extremely difficult.

There is very little statistical information on the effect of the lockdown. One exception is the NIDS-CRAM survey, which found that inequality in especially basic education increased during the lockdown. Middle-class children were twice as likely to attend school as those in no-fee schools. About 70–80% attendance was recorded for 'open' grades (6, 7, 9, 11 & 12) across all groups in July. For 'closed' grades (1–5, 8 & 10) attendance was 50% for fee-paying schools and 15–20% for no-fee schools (Mohohlwane, Taylor & Shepherd, 2020).

Mohohlwane et al. (2020) also found as follows:

- South Africa was among 193 countries that closed schools in April 2020, but by June it joined only 81 other countries in partially reopening schools. The scheduling of the reopening was different for private and public schools, depending on available facilities. Indecision around reopening schools and the timing of DBE statements in this regard caused significant anxiety.
- While policy measures had been set out, financial support for implementing them was not always sufficient. For example, the directives for the phased reopening of PSET institutions (DHET, 2020f) were extensive and adequate, but funding was a critical problem. Institutions incurred huge costs for purchasing data, computers, and other specialised technology. This forced many to make internal financial adjustments; for example, some withdrew staff performance bonuses.

- Uncertainty about the return to schools was exacerbated by inadequate preparation and a lack of PPE. Initially it was envisaged that schools would reopen on 1 June 2020; this was changed to 8 June 2020 ‘when provincial monitoring reports indicated that schools had not completed all Covid-19 protocols’ (Mohohlwane et al., 2020:3). The DBE recognised the need to return to school, but schools had to close again between 27 and 30 July 2020 because of rising infection rates and concerns expressed by parents and other commentators.

Stakeholders held strong and opposing views on the closing of schools. Based on a survey conducted by researchers from the University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Alexander and Bohler-Muller (2020) found that 60% of adults thought schools ‘should not reopen this year’. Table 5.2.1 reflects their findings on this issue in terms of political party allegiance. Of the small percentage (14%) of the sample who motivated for schools to open, the largest portion supported the Democratic Alliance (24%). A greater proportion of supporters among all political parties preferred schools to remain closed. This was despite an earlier round of this survey (13 April to 11 May 2020), in which 79% of respondents had been ‘very concerned’ that Covid-19 would have ‘a negative impact on [their] child’s education’.

*Table 5.2.1: Support for reopening of schools, by political party allegiance*

Schools have begun to reopen, which one of the following statements comes closest to your view?	African National Congress	Democratic Alliance	Economic Freedom Fighters	Another party	Would not vote	Don't know/refused	Total
Schools should reopen for all grades	11%	24%	8%	23%	14%	16%	14%
Schools should only reopen for Grade 7 and Grade 12 learners	30%	11%	25%	18%	13%	15%	21%
Schools should not reopen this year	56%	55%	64%	55%	65%	63%	59%
(Don't know)	3%	10%	3%	4%	8%	6%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Source: Alexander & Bohler-Muller, 2020*

The Minister of Basic Education’s gradual reopening of schools was a bold step considering the opposition she encountered. ‘The decision to reopen schools has been contested publicly by political and education commentators and teacher unions, amongst others’ (Mohohlwane et al., 2020:3). Powerful opposition also came from school governing bodies and student bodies, such as the Congress of South African Students. The South African Democratic Teachers Union was quoted as saying that ‘corpses can neither be taught nor can they teach’ (Van Bruwaene et al., 2020:574). The union’s National Executive Committee ‘resolved that schools close until the end of the peak. [Secretary General] Maluleke said evidence on the ground showed there was no effective teaching and learning at schools during the current conditions’ (The Citizen, 2020).

Naptosa's proposals for the responsible reopening of schools (Oudtshoorn Courant, 2020) 'outlined a number of proposals, which were agreed to with other unions, around the closing of schools:

1. Schools should be closed with immediate effect to allow the peak and winter to pass. The system should use this time to attend to all outstanding issues, including ... the provision of water, the building of toilets and additional classes and providing the required number of teachers.
2. Schools should reopen at the end of August 2020 unless the situation dictates otherwise.
3. Education departments should provide teachers with the necessary tools to work from home and prepare work for the reopening of schools and return of learners.
4. Grade 12s should be prioritised and different modes to assist them while they are at home should be investigated. Grade 12s should return on Monday, 17 August 2020.
5. The DBE and stakeholders should discuss the curriculum post this calendar year, focusing on reading for the remaining months of 2020.
6. The DHET should be engaged to consider late registration for first years in 2021.
7. All stakeholders should focus on advocacy campaigns, educating the nation about this invisible enemy but also urging them to follow all precautionary measures, including staying at home.'

There were other reasons for the resistance to the reopening of schools. The WHO cautioned against the concept of 'herd immunity': opening schools early, without knowing how prone children are to being infected or infecting others, could be disastrous for the entire community (Sayed & Singh, 2020).

But the motivation to reopen schools was also strong. Covid-19 underscored deep inequalities in education. Most South African children lacked access to the digital resources needed to study online. The same was true in sub-Saharan Africa, where the vast majority of learners do not have access to either household computers (89%) or the Internet (82%). Almost half of the 56 million learners worldwide who do not have mobile network coverage live in this region (Sayed & Singh, 2020:29). Such problems were compounded by the prolonged neglect of schools, which entrenched inequality long before the pandemic; Black and colleagues (2020:46) refer to these as 'societal comorbidities'.

Another aspect of inequality was parental education. Parents with better education were likely to possess the tools, financial resources, and digital know-how to help their children access online teaching websites and materials. Poor children, in contrast, had little access to tutors, whether online or face-to-face. Not all parents could homeschool, as this required a basic knowledge of the different disciplines and the capacity to read and understand the child's work. Homeschooling is more complicated if the children in the household are in different grades. Post-school students coped better, although they were hampered by problems of data provision and connectivity. Overall, 'students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down' (Schleicher, 2020:4). Families who could barely manage to survive financially had very few options to advance their children's education.

The DBE (2020d) standard operating procedures for schools set out steps principals had to follow if Covid-19 cases were found in their schools.

- *'Ensure that learners and employees are screened when the schools reopen using the [national Department of Health] Covid-19 procedure and questionnaire. Learners and employees should report any of the following additional symptoms: body aches, loss of smell or loss of taste, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, fatigue, weakness or tiredness.'* There was some scepticism around this. Many schools did not have (sufficient) screening kits, and simply asking about the children's health might not have been enough. Also, young people seem more likely to be asymptomatic carriers; they could unknowingly infect other children, who could in turn infect their communities.
- *'Ensure that learners and employees are informed, trained and instructed as to the correct use of cloth masks.'* Some respondents to the questionnaire noted that children resisted the use of the cloth masks for a full school day because the masks were highly restrictive.
- *'Ensure that a risk assessment is conducted to identify categories of employees requiring ... PPE. Those employees should be provided with the accredited PPE in accordance with Department of Health guidelines.'* Several respondents indicated that no PPE had been provided, although it was clear that the DBE promised to provide PPE only if there was an established need.

The document also stipulated that all members of the school community should:

- *'Avoid gatherings as the disease is spread through direct contact with the respiratory droplets of an infected person, which are generated through coughing, sneezing or talking'* and *'maintain a social distance of at least 1,5 to 2 meters with others, where possible. It is recommended that a phased approach to the arrival and departure of learners and employees should be followed to further limit social interaction. Staggering break times will prevent a concentration of learners in common areas.'* This was a difficult because teachers struggled to manage and establish such control. Young children tend to enjoy social games from distances less than 1 metre apart.
- *'Frequently wash hands with water and soap. If water is not available, use a 60% alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Resources should be available to all learners and staff to practice uninterrupted hygiene.'* Clean water and soap were often not readily available, and many schools could not afford the alcohol-based hand sanitiser. The sanitiser provided by the DBE had, in many instances, been depleted rapidly. Hygiene is taught as part of the Life Orientation curriculum in the further education and training phase (grades 10–12). However, it is not covered in the general education and training phase (grades 1–9). Health and hygiene had formed a key part of the Health Education subject in the pre-1996 era. Learners might have adjusted more easily to the sanitary measures around Covid-19 had they received formal education on health and hygiene.
- *'An employee exposed to an unconfirmed case of Covid-19: If an employee has been in contact with a person who is a suspected case but has not yet received a positive result for the Covid-19 test, the [Head of Department] will decide whether restrictions or special control measures are necessary. [This] decision will be guided by the [national Department of Health], Legal Services and Human Resources'* (section 5.5.3). While this might be a useful mechanism to protect schools from being overwhelmed with teacher absences, the risk of having a person with the potential to spread

the virus among many hundreds of students is hard to contemplate. The DBE has to reconsider the weight of this risk against the possibility of losing teaching and learning time. Again, the DBE had taken a brave decision in opening schools in the absence of sufficient data about transmission and the effects of the virus on children.

## CONSULTATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

On 30 April 2020, the Minister of *Basic Education*, Mrs Angie Motshekga, released a list of extensive consultations and discussions with experts in the field (see Annex 5.2.1). This list includes the Council of Education Ministers. In broad terms, the consultations centred around the reopening of schools at the appropriate time, the provision of PPE, and the reopening of special schools.

*The DHET* established a Covid-19 Command Council to coordinate the sector's response and collate institutional case management reports. The Council comprises Universities South Africa (USAf), the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), Higher Health, and health experts. The team was led by Deputy Minister Buti Manamela, giving the Command Council a very high profile.

The DHET worked in close consultation with public higher education institutions and the Department of Health in developing its response. Most PSET institutions cancelled large events, such as graduations, along with contact lectures. On 17 March 2020, Minister Nzimande met with USAf, SACPO, and the South African Union of Students to agree on a common national Protocol and Management Plan across the sector. He also received written submissions from these entities, as well as from student political organisations, trade unions, Higher Health, state organs, and interest groups.

The following protocols were agreed upon:

1. All international travel would be cancelled or postponed.
2. Individuals who had travelled internationally in the past three weeks had to self-isolate for 14 days.
3. Travel within South Africa would be limited to essential journeys.
4. Institutions had to develop communication strategies for regular interaction with communities.
5. PSET student health clinics would work with Higher Health on Covid-19 preparedness.
6. Students and staff were urged to implement social distancing protocols strictly.

## SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

The education sector has achieved some significant successes in implementing mitigation measures during the pandemic. Highlights include the following (see also Box 5.2.4):

1. The relative ease with which some schools and post-school institutions transitioned into online and blended learning modes, providing training and continuing with teaching within a few weeks.
2. The close collaboration between the PSET sector and Higher Health, and at school level, between the DBE and the Department of Health.
3. The phased return of students according to need and stage of study: universities allowed students in their final year of study and those who needed practical laboratory sessions to return first.

4. The DBE's risk-adjusted differentiated approach to reopening schools: grade 12 and 7 learners were phased in first, because they were at important stages of transition (from school to higher education and from primary to secondary school, respectively).
5. The curriculum trimming and the reorganisation of school timetables.
6. Visits by ministers or their representatives to schools and universities to monitor adherence to regulations, provide support, and inform future decisions.
7. The rapid provision of data and subsidised laptops for students by some institutions.
8. The successful completion of most first semester sessions in most PSET institutions, albeit using online technology for teaching and assessment.
9. No large-scale infections reported in educational institutions in general.

*Box 5.2.4: Point of view: The DBE on its achievements during the pandemic*

The DBE also acknowledged the following successes in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. The use of economies of scale to save money (e.g., when purchasing PPE), and having a special team to determine the quality of items in terms of minimum standards.
2. Entrenching minimum standard operating procedures during emergencies/crises.
3. Consultation and working with all stakeholders to find solutions – the department met with much resistance from unions and parents about children returning to school in June 2020. Managing the stigma associated with the virus was also important.
4. The DBE is now 'wiser' in terms of how to respond to the pandemic because of the knowledge and science related to the virus and the availability of tools and instruments, including directions and standard operating procedures.
5. The DBE was able to explore, invest in and activate sustainable access to ICT infrastructure for all stakeholders. According to the department, it was able to ensure 'all' learners have access to digitised learning materials and to remote (online) learning opportunities. The DBE also broadened the availability of training in remote learning for teachers and learners.
6. The department ensured access to psychosocial support for learners, parents, and educators through partnerships with the departments of Social Development and Health, as well as non-governmental organisations. It recognises the importance of ensuring that school-based and district-based support teams are fully functional. It also supports the use of virtual training and debriefing, as well as telephonic and online counselling.
7. It recognises the need for stronger, more comprehensive support for learners with disabilities.
8. The department encouraged the use of virtual platforms and remote working arrangements towards better efficiency, effectiveness, and cost and time savings. The significant savings made in travel and accommodation could be used to increase investment in ICT capacity and functionality.

*Source: Interview with the Director-General of the DBE, Mr Hubert Mathanzima Mweli*

However, the implementation process also brought new challenges for education at all levels:

1. *Impact on vulnerable children and students from low-income families:* These children had little opportunity for learning during school closures because they could not engage in remote learning, buy the required resources, consult with private tutors, or obtain material or other support from their parents. This was true in most low-income countries: only about a quarter of poor countries could provide remote online and broadcast learning opportunities (Bernard et al., 2020).

2. *Reprioritisation of 2020/21 state funds for Covid-19*: The earmarked grant for infrastructure, the efficiency grant, and university subsidies were decreased as funding was reprioritised for Covid-19-related activities.<sup>1</sup>
3. *Parents not trained to teach*: During the lockdown, parents were expected suddenly to assume the position of homeschool teacher. Traditionally, parents engage in children's education when there is a problem, for example, when a child is underperforming. In the South African context, few parents have the resources (time, money, and qualifications) to adjust their schedules to support their child's academic needs and social and emotional well-being in full. Most parents would have been unable to provide their children with the requisite pedagogical knowledge for future grades. This work might have to be redone or excluded completely from the curriculum.
4. *Social distancing with large classes*: At least 50% of learners are in classes comprising 40 or more learners, and 10–20% are in classes comprising 60 or more learners. Classrooms are too small to seat this number of learners 1,5 m apart, and 'at least half of South African learners will not be able to practice social distancing within a classroom' (Van der Berg & Spaul, 2020:16). Note that social distancing was not a problem for the PSET sector, which engaged in online learning.
5. *Unavailability of PPE*.
6. *Teacher and lecturer burnout*: With a change in the style of teaching and in the content of the curriculum, teachers and lecturers have been working tirelessly to produce new materials; some experienced burnout because of the continued, intense demands on them in a disruptive year.
7. *Private school closures*: One respondent to a questionnaire noted that a private school had to close because learner numbers had decreased, and the school was no longer viable.
8. *Communication* between the departments of education and institutions, learners/students, parents, and staff had not always been adequate or effective.

## PRELIMINARY LESSONS LEARNT

Even at this stage of the pandemic, several preliminary lessons can already be identified.

### DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

1. *School infrastructure must be upgraded*. The lack of basic infrastructure (e.g., water and sanitation) in schools needs to be addressed as a matter of principle, not in response to a crisis. Borrowing from Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), Covid-19 is more than a health crisis – it has revealed a systemic, civilisational crisis. It has also revealed a human rights crisis. The need for the Covid-19 Emergency Water Supply to schools, for the installation of water tanks at schools, and for Covid-19 Emergency Sanitation (chemical toilets) at schools shows that the provision of basic infrastructure, to which all people have a right, has long been neglected.
2. *ICT infrastructure in schools need to be upgraded*. Teachers highlighted the lack of computers, Wi-Fi and other technology that could have provided a better remote learning service. Bangani (2020) notes that 'the digital learning divide has been highly evident. Learners from impoverished areas

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rodoyowebdesign.co.za/ADDENDUM.pdf>

attend government-funded schools where education is free, but [they] are marked by dilapidated infrastructure, illiteracy, a lack of books, overcrowding, fewer teachers and high dropout rates. The disparities ... between fee and no-fee schools and private schools in terms of quality of education and access to resources ultimately determine the success or failure of the learner.'

3. *Connectivity was a problem.* Again Bangani (2020) found that: 'Internet connectivity issues, limited data and a lack of resources are the three main barriers to online learning for school children in impoverished areas.' The education departments should work with mobile network operators to provide ALL students with low-cost data for particular websites.
4. *Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots should be established* in villages, towns, and cities, so that students can access information without travelling great distances.
5. *Students should be taught about health issues in schools* (e.g., cleanliness and hygiene), not simply during a pandemic. Nutrition and hygiene should be a compulsory part of Health Education from the earliest grades.
6. *Community centres and libraries must be upgraded* to give students spaces to work, access and download information, be taught, and write examinations, if necessary.
7. *Continuous teacher professional development* should include blended learning and the use of innovative tools of pedagogy.
8. A portion of the funds from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, Funza Lushaka and other bursaries/scholarships should be allocated to *meet the costs of devices and data*; remaining funds could then be disbursed to students.
9. *Communication with schools, parents, and teachers should be regular and ongoing.* Parents could be helped to teach their children the value of learning and assist them in developing into successful learners. Parents understand their children's weaknesses and strengths. They can, with support from the school, become more engaged in their children's learning, help them address their weaknesses, and build on their strengths.
10. UNICEF (2020) claims that 'at least 6,2 million children have been provided with *remote learning resources*, including through online platforms, broadcast (radio and TV) and social media'. But Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2020) found that only about 5% of respondents used material on radio and about 28% on television. The majority of respondents in the Statistics South Africa study were from higher-income provinces (Gauteng and Western Cape) and might well have already had access to the necessary media devices. A more extensive study might find much lower access to such media when all children are counted. These media need to be exploited further to help compensate for the lack of digital devices among learners in poorer areas.

## DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Based on the DHET's Covid-19 Pre-Disaster and Disaster Management Phase Report of 28 April 2020, the following observations can be made:

1. Coordination, communication, planning, teamwork, and swift implementation of the Covid-19 measures were critical elements of the DHET's response and remain vital during the pandemic.

2. The DHET has made significant strides in safeguarding students while also saving the academic year. It has considered the pandemic's impact on the way universities teach and conduct research.
3. The capacity and capability of educational institutions are uneven. The DHET worked with all institutions to ensure their readiness and analysed individual university plans for remote learning. Some of these plans offer important lessons for future teaching and learning across the system.
4. The DHET recognised the need for support interventions at some institutions; this will be an important area of its future work and will also change the way universities work.
5. The DHET noted the number of foreign students who returned to their home countries at the start of the lockdown and the need to deal with the modalities of their return.

## PREPARATION FOR A 'SECOND WAVE'

Attempts to find tangible evidence of plans for a second wave of the pandemic were quite unsuccessful. The teachers, principals, and union members who responded to the questionnaire expected no new plans in this short period. This may well not be the case – the departments may have been planning to mitigate the possible effects of the second wave.

The PSET sector has adapted to online learning and is considering retaining this form of teaching well into 2021. This almost seamless transition bodes well for dealing with a potential second wave of the pandemic and for the future of the sector.

In the basic education sector, however, when schools were first closed and later reopened, attempts were made to produce online materials, use television and radio, and print hard copies of work materials<sup>2</sup> for all school learners. It is not clear how many learners accessed these different modes of content presentation, given the difficulties noted above. In preparation for a second wave of the pandemic or for future disasters, the DBE should institute substantive methods to monitor and control the use of alternate curriculum media.

In its Annual Performance Plan, the DBE (2020a:11) 'reprioritised considerable amounts of its budget towards responding to infection control, school rearrangement, curriculum recovery and emergency space and sanitation requirements'. Crucially, it re-examined its priorities around reducing poverty and inequality. The DBE also committed itself to improving learning outcomes by expanding the provision of books, quality teaching, infrastructure, and support for early grade reading. If these commitments could be met, even partially, this would help the sector cope with a second wave.

In preparing for a second wave, the education departments have the advantage of building on the experience of the first wave. Carvalho et al. (2020:ii) stress the five critical dimensions required for the reopening and recovery of schools. These are:

1. Engaging communities in reopening plans
2. Targeting resources where they are most needed

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.gov.za/covid19supportpackage.aspx>

3. Getting children back to school
4. Making school environments safe
5. Recovering learning loss and improving on past experience.

These are important dimensions for the departments to consider. Plans must be acceptable to the community, including staff, students/learners, parent bodies, student unions, staff unions, non-governmental organisations, and other interested parties. Resources can be shuffled within and across institutions, depending on need, but education budgets should not be reduced. As a priority, children and young adults must be returned to their educational institutions, albeit under controlled and safe conditions. Not only should there be an attempt to recover the lost learning time and content, but there must also be a deliberate effort to develop a more resilient curriculum and teaching-learning environment, to ensure that education as a whole becomes stronger after the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The unprecedented Covid-19 crisis has presented the education sector with a unique opportunity to show that the departments of education, schools and higher educational institutions can and must:

1. Adapt to the changing teaching and learning environment.
2. Transform the status quo (e.g., the socio-economic and digital divides) in South Africa.
3. Provide leadership to prepare all South Africa's people for overcoming this crisis and provide all learners and students with tools to handle future pandemics and other crises.
4. Develop programmes to address the lost teaching and learning time and mitigate the effects of the missing curriculum content. Consider conceptual progression in future years.
5. During lockdown periods, maintain contact with learners and students – the PSET sector was generally successful in maintaining an online presence. The school system, however, needs better ways of online teaching and learning. Rather than wait for the next crisis, it should start developing structures and methodologies to help educators and learners engage with innovative strategies.
6. Develop effective communication systems to avoid confusion and ensure that all are fully aware of the policy, procedures, and actions to be undertaken.
7. Ensure that decisions to close or reopen schools are not driven solely by health considerations (e.g., mortality or morbidity among children). People's needs, especially those in vulnerable, high-risk settings, should be an equally important consideration.
8. Rethink the meaning of learning. In the pandemic, learning was equated to curriculum coverage. However, it transcends the curriculum to include socialising, interacting with peers and teachers, and developing skills for cooperation, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, and so on.
9. If social justice is to be a central feature of offering quality education for all in times of crises, decide how this could be achieved.
10. Ensure political will to drive sustained investment in quality education (with its infrastructure) and healthcare, so that institutions can weather the effects of disasters.

In this regard, the DBE's Annual Performance Plan (DBE, 2020a) identified the following outcomes:

1. Maintain and develop the system of policies, including for curriculum and assessment, governing the basic education sector to advance a quality, inclusive, safe, and healthy basic education system.
2. Maintain and develop information and other systems that enable transformation and an efficient and accountable sector.
3. Maintain and develop knowledge, monitoring and research functions to advance more evidence-driven planning, instruction, and delivery.
4. Advance the development of innovative and high-quality educational materials.
5. Conduct strategic interventions to assist and develop provincial education systems.
6. Communicate information to, and partner with, relevant stakeholders in better ways.

On 5 July 2020, the Minister of Basic Education (Motshekga, 2020) announced that strategic plans on improving school infrastructure (including general maintenance, water and sanitation, and ICT) had to be brought forward and fast-tracked.

An important learning point from the pandemic is that the departments of education should assess the preparedness of educational institutions to operate safely under difficult conditions. This should include the availability of sanitisers, PPE, cleaning agents, and cleaning and screening personnel. More importantly, the assessments of infrastructure must include the teaching and learning environment. Are teaching staff safe (e.g., their own health)? Can institutions manage with the current number of staff, or should more personnel be deployed? Could certain institutions share resources and infrastructure? Could spatial limitations around safe distancing be addressed by sharing spaces among different schools (e.g., allowing school halls to be used by other schools)? Could teachers from some schools be sent to others where staff may be older, for example, and there may be fears around comorbidities?

As a final recommendation, any decision to close educational institutions and continue with learning at home must consider the spatial, infrastructural, and socio-economic disadvantages that are the lived experience of a majority of students.

## ASPECTS BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER

Despite the extensive research involved in this chapter, limited time and resources meant that some aspects could not be addressed, including the following:

1. The actual number of infections among teachers and the effects this has had on their mental and personal lives.
2. An in-depth study of the effects of poor school infrastructure and the resultant inability of schools to maintain social distancing.
3. The psychological impact of Covid-19 on learners because of the loss of their families and educators. This chapter could not assess the anxiety of learners who were writing matric exams.
4. The three court cases that involved the DBE.
5. Some previous study results may have been based on small samples, but this paper argues that the findings are useful to develop discussion and further explorations.

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## ANNEX 5.2.1: CONSULTATIONS ON BASIC EDUCATION

On 30 April 2020, Minister Angie Motshekga released a list of extensive consultations and discussions with experts in basic education, as shown below. The list includes the Council of Education Ministers.

1. On 7 and 26 April 2020, the DBE consulted with the South African Democratic Teachers Union, the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa, the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwyser Unie, the National Teachers Union, and the Professional Educators Union.
2. On 10 and 26 April 2020, the DBE met with the following organisations:
  - South African Association for Special Education
  - Education Management Association of South Africa
  - South African Principals' Association
  - Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools (FEDSAS)
  - National Association of School Governing Bodies
  - Governing Body Foundation
3. On 2 April 2020, the DBE consulted the Independent Examination Body and the National Alliance of Independent Schools Associations.
4. On 25 and 28 April 2020, the DBE met with the South African Comprehensive Assessment Institute and the Southern Africa Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, respectively.
5. On 13 and 17 April 2020, the DBE consulted Umalusi; the Education Labour Relations Council; the South African Council for Educators; the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA); and the National Education Collaboration Trust.
6. On 22 April 2020, the DBE met a number of organisations, including the National Association of Social Change Entities in Education, TeachSA, the Primary Science Programme, COUNT, Maths Centre Incorporating Sciences, the Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education, Nal'ibali, the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, Room to Read, Project Literacy, the Read Educational Trust, the New Leaders Foundation, Symphonia for South Africa, the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes, UNICEF, MIET Africa, Save the Children, Section27, the Equal Education Law Centre, the DG Murray Trust, the Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa, ETDP SETA, Nedbank, FirstRand, Standard Bank, Zenex, Anglo American, Old Mutual, Kagiso Trust, Trialogue, the Education Deans' Forum, Nelson Mandela University, the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Free State, Ilifa Labantwana, and Smartstart.
7. After the consultation with the governance structures of independent schools (ISASA, 2020a), the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) took the following decision: 'ISASA is not a public health expert and, consequently, will take its lead from the relevant government departments who will issue updated guidelines, as the need arises. We commit to keeping membership updated through a dedicated tab on the website, where all pertinent materials submitted to ISASA by member schools or gathered from media reports will be available' (ISASA, 2020b).