

Systemic Issues And Emotional Compliance To Pandemics In South African Schools: A Policy Flaw Or Foresight Deficit In The Case Of The Emergence Of The Novel Coronavirus

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Abstract

It is no doubt that the outbreak of the novel coronavirus caught the world including South Africa, off-guard. This statement refers in particular, to the fact that the outbreak of the pandemic firstly exposed the level of unpreparedness of government and its different departments, including the private sector to deal with unforeseen outbreaks like the coronavirus which leads to COVID-19. This is a typical example of systemic problems within the government and the private sector. Secondly and most importantly, this outbreak exposed the level of inequality between schools in rural areas and those in townships and affluent parts of the country which are mostly habited by black middle class and white people. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the systemic challenges and the emotional impact of this virus on the learners and their parents; the learners and their teachers, and to venture into the policymaking and implementation terrain of the Department of Basic education with a specific focus on how the DBE responded to the outbreak. Furthermore, this paper makes a case out of the emerging case by case approach of the government and the DBE in dealing with the threats which are posed by this pandemic to communities and schools. The researchers hold the view that this paper will expose the levels of inequality between schools in different parts of the country and advocate for a culture of foresight in the education management system; a culture that acknowledges that schools, like communities and business entities, are vulnerable and susceptible to external forces that may have long-lasting effects on their functionality.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic(s), inequality, outbreaks, policymaking and implementation, emotional compliance, systemic challenges, case by case approach.

INTRODUCTION

Research and public discourses have it that South Africa is an acutely unequal society. This is more often focused on the social differences between different races and classes of people in respect of income and means of livelihood. Post 1994 socio-political experiences also reveal unimaginable disparities in the provision of resources for different racial groups. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease in 2019 or COVID-19 has brought fear to the global community with no exception and it has shaken school systems to their foundations. In January 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic, only two and a half months after its outbreak (Department of Basic Education, 2020a; Kennedy, 2020; Kim, 2020; Viner, Russell, Croker, Packer, Ward, Stansfield, Mytton, Bonell, & Booy, 2020). COVID-19 is a disease that is caused by a novel coronavirus that is not as yet understood in terms of what it is, how it spreads and how quickly it spreads from one person to the next (Sismondo, 2020). The disease has no profile because it is still new, but it affects schools and communities alike. It also affects people of all ages but some, especially those who have comorbidities (underlying health issues), are more vulnerable than others (Croft, 2020).

The emergence of the novel coronavirus has further exposed the different and unequal opportunities enjoyed by different aggregates of the South African population, where citizens in rural areas have little or no exposure to amenities such as the

internet, adequate water supply and they are known to have sub-standard infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. Furthermore, the virus has challenged communities to think anew about the way they should react to new threats now and in future (Shingler-Nace, 2020). The article seeks to describe, document, and theorise how the DBE policies, if any, were employed when the COVID-19 pandemic started affecting schools. The response to the pandemic is looked at from the perspective of the implications of the outbreak on schools and how teachers grappled with it amidst the other contextual factors that characterize schools. The purpose of this paper is to tap into the manner in which the government of South Africa and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in particular, handled the outbreak of the novel coronavirus; and how this affected teaching and learning in public schools. Primary to the purpose above, this paper will investigate and outline how the disparities indicated above, almost led to the collapse of the entire education system, particularly in the rural areas.

CONTEXTUALISATION

The manner in which social systems such as health education respond when a crisis hits determines their preparedness to stand or collapse when a similar challenge or something worse, is faced in future. A system that responds effectively is the one that has plans, strategies and policies to deal with the prevention of loss of life when it faces crises like HIV-AIDS, Ebola, COVID-19 and so on (Kruk, Myers, Varpilah & Dahn, 2015). Long before the first Covid-19 case was reported in schools, the Minister of Basic Education in South Africa informed schools that their actions in case of possible infection of learners or staff should be led by the Department of Health (DoH) (Mathews & Siegfried, 2020). This means that schools were denied the authority to make their own decisions about possible Covid-19 outbreaks. There is further sufficient evidence that the same DoH does not have the requisite capacity to handle pandemics such as Covid 19. Despite this directive from the DBE, schools were still expected to respond to the outbreaks without the requisite policies from the DBE to inform their actions to handle the outbreak and to deal with possible cases of infections in schools.

Interested groups like teacher unions demanded that detailed documents be made available to schools and stakeholders for effective management of cases if they arose (Equal Education Law Centre, 2020). The need for a well-coordinated response to pandemics requires that there should be an inter-sectoral approach between the Department of Health (DoH) and DBE so that schools know their exact roles when there are outbreaks. Appropriate measures of dealing with the pandemic as proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other health experts include, inter alia, regular washing of hands with soap, social distancing of at least 1,5m and having class ratios of about 1:24. To achieve these ideal conditions requires that schools must have running water, enough furniture, human and physical resources. Unfortunately, rural environments have circumstances that militate against these practices and they are often associated with inadequacies (Mukeredzi, 2013; Penrice, 2011). Rural schools typically do not have drinking water, electricity, toilets and so on (Gardiner, 2008; HSRC, 2005; Weber, 2007) and these challenges are an antithesis of the recommended measures that are supposed to lessen the impact of COVID-19.

COVID-19 challenged the education system in an unprecedented way as it dictated that the system should deal with time-bound plans and budget issues where it had to provide resources like protective personal equipment (PPE), adequate water and toilet facilities, additional classroom space and teachers, and psycho-social support. Non-negotiables for school reopening were set for the DBE and it struggled with these as some of the provincial departments indicated that they would not be ready on the tentative opening dates that were set for the reopening of schools (Equal Education Law Centre, 2020). Furthermore, when schools reopened, they were expected to adhere strictly to the Standard Operating Procedures for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in schools and School Communities (SOPs) and health protocols that we alluded to above despite the challenges that they had (Department of Basic Education, 2020c).

We argue in this paper that the education system's response to COVID-19 shows its unpreparedness to deal with pandemics as evidenced by its seesaw approach to giving directives on COVID-19 to parents and schools. This indecisiveness was further confirmed by the DBE's apparent ill-advised closing and reopening of schools. It is the researchers' view that schools only complied emotionally with the DBE's call to return to school whilst they perceived this to be a health risk manoeuvre. Emotions play an important role in an individual or a group of people's response to a situation and they guide them on the action they should take. A significant body of research indicates that emotions can inspire people to action or resistance (Peterie, Ramia, Marston, & Patulny, 2019).

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic to put the people of South Africa and the world on trauma mode. Some of the pandemics of our modern day, such as swine flu, N1H1, Ebola, Cholera and HIV/AIDS to mention just a few, also had their fair share of the attention of the medical fraternity and ordinary people. During their outbreaks, these pandemics, like COVID-19, turned the entire world upside down. It is important to indicate that COVID-19 is probably the first modern day pandemic that almost brought the world to a halt. Schools had to be closed; churches, businesses and the world economies were also not spared. The closure of all the institutions indicated above was to try and flatten the curve, i.e. to avoid the spread of the virus and to give the Department of Health enough time to prepare the health system to cope with the escalation of the infections.

It is this shutdown of institutions, particularly schools that forms the centrepiece of this study. Pressure mounted on the DBE to present plans to save the academic year; with parents and other stakeholders in society such as labour formations, school governing body associations, academics, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) presenting their own perspectives on the matter. Arguments such as ‘dead teachers’ cannot teach ‘dead learners’, ‘abandon the school year and progress all the learners to the next grade,’ etc. took centre stage because of a myriad of reasons that were related to emotional discomfort related to the Coronavirus. The increasing number of infections and deaths related to the pandemic also threatened the DBE’s plans to reopen schools albeit the proposed piecemeal phasing in of the grades. Furthermore, the reopening of schools was labelled as a choreographed move by the DBE to expose teachers and learners to die of the pandemic just to save the academic year. This situation landed the DBE at the crossroads as all its proposals, gazettes and spare of the moment policies were criticised by the different stakeholders and commentators in the education front.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to isolate the following issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and to look at them closely:

- the systemic readiness of schools to deal with health-threatening outbreaks like COVID-19;
- the emotional compliance of teachers to deal with COVID-19; and
- identifying and outlining the perceived risks experienced by teachers in dealing with COVID-19.

This paper will add value and contribute to the existing body of knowledge by adding insight into how strategic response systems to pandemics may be set up in future. It will further assist policy and decision makers to have watertight policies and contingency plans to deal with outbreaks in future. Finally, this paper will enable the DBE to draw lessons of a psychosocial nature from these experiences to deal with unforeseen pandemics in the future.

SYSTEMIC READINESS OF SCHOOLS TO DEAL WITH HEALTH THREATENING OUTBREAKS LIKE COVID-19

Education is a system that survives because of several integrated subsystems that interact to achieve the primary goal of ensuring that teachers teach, and learners learn. In this context, the subsystems may include, inter-alia, administrative and management functions, provision of appropriate leadership, formulation of relevant policies and their implementation. Systemic readiness refers to ensuring harmonious working together of the different subsystems that make a school a system. The systemic readiness construct begs the question of whether the school as a system and an element of the broader education system has a working integrated plan to handle any threat including the outbreak of the novel coronavirus and other similar diseases that have the potential of turning into global outbreaks. At the centre of the subsystems indicated above, the administrative and leadership subsystems must ensure that relevant policies are in place to deal with any unforeseen health threat in the school.

The systemic seesaw that characterised the opening and closing of schools confirms that there were no national or provincial guidelines for schools on how to deal with health outbreaks before March 2020 and this means that the DBE never anticipated the outbreak of any pandemic that could close down schools (Mathews & Siegfried, 2020). The DBE instituted measures to deal with the pandemic only after South Africa had declared a state of disaster (Department of Basic Education, 2020c). Teachers had to be trained on standard operating procedures long after schools were closed, and this was only done when the DBE encountered resistance from teacher unions and other stakeholders. The DBE was slow in reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic and it appears as if its reaction was pushed by the obligation to provide education and nutrition as a matter of compliance with the Constitution (Equal Education Law Centre, 2020). While it is appropriate to have interdepartmental cooperation between different state departments to deal with issues of national interest in a coordinated manner, the reliance of the DBE on the Department of Health (DoH) for policies to deal with the outbreak of the Covid 19 was the last straw that broke the camel’s back. This implied that the DBE could not do anything or take any action related to the pandemic unless that action was blessed by the DoH. In essence, the DBE was looking for solutions to deal with the pandemic and rescue the academic year outside what Wagner (1993) describes as its operational space as a system. The DBE’s response to the pandemic most of the time indicated a lot of policy uncertainty and indecisiveness on its part. This flaw was demonstrated when the department issued contradicting statements on issues relating to the procedures to be followed in case a learner tested positive for COVID-19 during exams where it initially stated that the infected learner would not be allowed to sit for the exams the following year (Masemola, 2020) only to change its stance within a few days after (Department of Basic Education, 2020a; Masemola, 2020). It is an honest view of the researchers that it was appropriate for the DBE to have a team of medical experts advising on the technical aspects of the pandemic but not to depend on the DoH for policy formulation and implementation.

Observing COVID-19 protocols mandated, inter alia, that schools exercise social distancing that required more teachers and classrooms (Paul & Bangani, 2020). Additionally, learners and staff were expected to have a phased approach to their arrival

and departures; staggering of break times to prevent a concentration of learners; wear a cloth mask at all times; avoid shaking hands or hugging; frequently washing hands with water and soap; use a 60% alcohol-based hand sanitiser, and ensure that resources were available to all learners and staff to practise uninterrupted hygiene (Department of Basic Education, 2020d). Furthermore, schools faced other systemic challenges like poor sanitation, lack of infrastructure and water shortages (Mukwevho, 2020). This suggests that the DBE was not ready for challenges like these as seen in the lack of clear policy directives for schools to deal with them.

THE EMOTIONAL COMPLIANCE OF TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH COVID-19

South Africa, as it has been detailed above, has an education system that is characterised by disparities and inequalities that are well documented. Approaching COVID-19 without taking cognisance of these challenges amidst the increasing infections that ravaged the country was always going to be a dicey issue. The stringent safety measures that were to be applied in dealing with the pandemic versus the infrastructure backlogs in quintile-1 schools posed serious health risks for learners and teachers (Paul & Bangani, 2020). The DBE went ahead with the phased reopening of schools despite contestations by teacher unions and other stakeholders; only to close the schools again after teaching had resumed for a few weeks.

Teachers with comorbidities were given concessions not to report to their workstations but to work from home. Working from home proved to be a challenge for schools because of rurality and the general unpreparedness of the education system to handle such a huge task hence the decision to recall teachers who had comorbidities back to work as soon as the lockdown was lowered to level one with no due consideration of their state of health. The Department of Basic Education is aware of the anxiety that educators may be going through due to the fact that they had to return to school even though they still had comorbidities during this time (Department of Basic Education, 2020). It is against this background that we argue that teachers returned to schools as an act of emotional compliance rather than observance of known policy guidelines on health threats. This type of compliance to the call for teachers to return to work after the expiry of their concessions on the grounds of comorbidities also carries a psychological downside on the concerned teachers which may lead to uncooperative behaviour and at the least, mental breakdown caused by fear of being infected by the virus. Some of the teachers returned to school just to protect their employment in the face of an emotionally draining work environment.

It is also worth mentioning that the decisions taken by parents, teachers and learners to resume schooling activities in the face of reports of growing numbers of infections and fatalities due to the coronavirus, were emotional decisions; informed by emotional actions to avoid being seen as non-conforming to the ideals for a successful academic year. The Department of Basic Education was also not spared from the emotional response to the pandemic. Its seesaw reaction, i.e. relying on the medical experts and bowing to the pressure from interest groups to open and close schools as it happened, was also a typical emotion-informed reaction.

PERCEIVED RISKS EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH COVID-19

Teachers were scared of going back to the classroom and the teachers unions cautioned seriously against it (Kennedy, 2020b). The frenzied objections by teacher unions, parent organisations and other stakeholders concerned with education amidst viral information that teachers easily had access to, created perceptions that they were taking serious health risks when they went back to their schools to teach. COVID-19 was infecting people and these teachers were exposed to the risk of contracting the dreadful pandemic (Croft, 2020) while the DBE, on the other hand, expected them to go back to school and teach. The fear did not only affect teachers but parents as well and many of them were reluctant to send their children back to school (Bagnetto, 2020).

These teachers found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place where the DBE expected them to be at work to fulfil their contractual obligations whilst the afore-mentioned stakeholders were concerned about their (teachers') safety. The perceived risks portrayed teachers and learners as potential victims of being infected with the coronavirus. One outstanding feature of viral infections that are of pandemic magnitude is that they instil fear in many people's lives (Ahorsu, Lin, Imani, Saffari, Griffiths, & Pakpour, 2020). Fear and anxiety are documented as having negative implications on people's emotions and as such, they result in a host of behaviours that temper with their duties (Harper, Satchell, Fido, & Latzman, 2020). The DBE knew and was aware of the perceived risks related to the abrupt reopening of schools. The DBE turned a blind eye on the need for psychosocial assistance for teachers who had comorbidities when they were expected to return to work soon after Lockdown Level 1 was announced by the President of South Africa. Teachers needed to be assisted in dealing with emotions that include fear and anxiety to be able to settle well in an environment that is perceived to be a psychological landmine field for COVID-19. Stated differently, teachers are not machines that can be switched off and on at will but they need psychosocial and even psychological support (Ramrathan, 2020). As it stands teachers were expected to be on their own as long as they reported for work on the day when they were expected to work. This move could have evoked either emotional or malicious compliance on the part of the teachers and it might have led to serious unintended consequences.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE OUTBREAK OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Intensification of teachers' work

The appearance of COVID-19 on the education landscape imposed new demands on schools and changed the way the schools carried out their mandate. These demands affected the way teachers carried out their daily activities as the number of tasks they were expected to perform increased. The measures that were applied to lessen the rate of the spread of the pandemic as outlined above needed to be monitored by teachers. Compliance to wearing of masks, for example, requires that teachers divert part of their teaching time to check if learners complied with the safety/health protocols instead of focusing on the task of teaching them.

Most rural schools are beneficiaries of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Learners who are part of this programme receive food at specified times under the supervision of class teachers. During this time, learners are expected to take off their masks and maintain the social distancing protocol as they eat under the supervision of their class teachers. In addition to their classroom activities throughout the school day, teachers must monitor learner compliance to the COVID-19 protocols. This extends the teachers' role beyond their teaching responsibilities in the classroom and it intensifies their work (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Weber, 2007).

Work intensification occurs when teachers are expected to do more work without additional resources. Moreover, teachers' work intensification causes teachers to have less time for relaxation or to update themselves with developments in their field of expertise and as such, they are actually held hostage by the demands placed on them in the workplace (De Klerk 2014: 198). Monitoring the compliance to the COVID-19 protocols increases the effort exerted in managing the pandemic and it off-sets the time spent on teaching responsibilities thus intensifying teachers' work. All these changes and expectations greatly influence teachers' daily activities. The number of tasks they are expected to deal with is growing, and complaints about increased workload are common. Work intensification challenges teachers' ability to balance their personal and professional lives and it unintentionally leads to a host of undesired outcomes (Lim, 2019). The increased responsibilities result in, inter alia, low teacher morale, teacher burnout and low job satisfaction.

Narrowing of the curriculum

Schools were closed for a long time in South Africa, within uncertain guidelines of dealing with the new infectious diseases. The uncertainty was followed by suggestions and tentative plans to salvage what was left of the academic year (Ramathan, 2020). The DBE ended up adjusting the curriculum for the 2020 academic year in response to the time lost due to school closures that were done to curb the spread of COVID-19. The adjustments were done in the name of 'saving the academic year'. The school calendar was also adjusted several times to solve the same problem. The adjustments in terms of the learning content were in the form of revised annual teaching plans that saw curriculum content being trimmed and in some instances; some subjects were excluded from the planned learning content to allow teachers to cope with the excessive workload.

The re-organisation and trimming of the curriculum were meant for Grade R to Grade 11 and this was intended to assist in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning (Departments of Basic Education, 2020b: 1). It is a moot point if this was going to be achieved when considering the anxiety, fear and other emotions that are associated with COVID-19 that teachers had. What is chronicled in the literature of curriculum studies, however, is that curriculum narrowing is criticised for promoting recitation of learning content, stifling the creativity of learners and for undermining the process of learner engagement in the classroom (Cuban, 2007; Sahlberg, 2010). Trimming the curriculum is one of the unintended consequences of COVID-19 and it is an undesired teaching practice in a schooling system that is already overwhelmed by systemic challenges (Milner, 2013). Other scholars like Ramathan (2020) contend that the emergence of the dreadful Covid-19 should have been used by the DBE as an opportunity to make the school curriculum relevant to the lives of the South African people instead of focusing on issues of curriculum content coverage.

Out-of-field-teaching

One of the protocols that were imposed on the schools and teachers is the observance of social distancing of at least 1m for everyone in the classrooms and the school premises; an act which appeared to be impossible to enforce, particularly during breaks and school-out. Schools could alternatively choose to have learners attend on a bi-weekly basis, may rotate learners to be present on alternate days or implement platooning (Department of Basic Education, 2020b, p. 23). The platoon system was first introduced in the 1940's during the time of Bantu Education to boost school enrolments in order to quicken the process of black labour production for the whites at the expense of quality (Christie & Collins, 1982). The system as it was used in the past and as it is used now in response to COVID-19, addresses the systematic issue of overcrowding that has been with the schooling system for decades (Paul & Bangani, 2020).

Although platooning solves the problem of overcrowding, it inadvertently creates staffing problems. Social distancing necessitated the employment of more teachers to cater for the increased number of classes or that the teachers' allocation of teaching duties had to be redone. The demand for new teachers as dictated by the social distancing protocol and the absence of teachers at school due to comorbidities almost brought schools to a halt (Bagnetto, 2020). The reallocation of subjects in response to the pandemic intensified the work of the teachers who must do it in the first place, but it also meant that teachers had to be assigned subjects out-of-field because of the social distancing protocol.

Out-of-field teaching occurs where teachers are allocated teaching subjects in an area where they are not qualified to teach (du Plessis, Carroll, & Gillies, 2017; Ingersoll, 2002; Shah, Jannuzzo, Hassan, Gadidov, Ray, & Rushton, 2019; Sharplin, 2014; Steyn & du Plessis, 2007). Learner performance and the delivery of quality education are critical issues in a schooling system, and these are dependent on the allocation of teachers to subjects according to their expertise. The allocation of teachers to their areas of specialisation is an international problem that has been ignored for a long time (Sharplin, 2014), but now it has been exposed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social distancing protocols.

The school management team was expected to implement measures to mitigate against the consequences of the pandemic which may include, inter alia, a significant drop in learner performance. The changes that were brought about by COVID-19 in the teaching-learning space have a negative impact on the working lives of teachers. All these changes to the class format, time-tabling and class sizes put pressure on the teachers (Bagnetto, 2020).

Deficit in embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

The emergence of the novel Coronavirus that led to the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic also exposed the fact that South Africa has characteristics of both the first and third world countries. The disparities are clearly defined across the rural-urban divide where rural schools have acute shortage of resources and other important amenities like the internet and access to electricity (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane, 2011; Penrice, 2011; Weber, 2007). When teachers who had comorbidities were advised to apply for concessions to work from home during the initial stages of the outbreak, schools almost ground to a halt because schools did not have the requisite 4IR infrastructure to ensure that teachers were able to interact with their learners, allowing teaching from home to take place (Bagnetto, 2020). To add to this challenge, the department could not appoint enough substitute teachers to take over the teaching in the classrooms. Most of the teachers who applied for the concessions on the basis of comorbidities were above the age of 60, thus casting some doubts if they were technically ready and knowledgeable on the usage of modern technology to teach. To sum it up, those teachers just stayed at home without any work to do.

CONCLUSION

This study has thrown the gauntlet to the policymakers in the Department of Basic Education, particularly in the areas of policies and appropriate systems and contingency plans to deal with eventualities in the system. While the study acknowledged and appreciated the inter-departmental approach that the government uses from time to time to deal with challenges in government generally, it still makes a case about the lack of tailor-made policies in the DBE to deal with life threatening pandemics like the Covid 19. The seesaw approach that was adopted to close and open schools indiscriminately, is evidence of policy flaws, lack of watertight policy positions and foresight deficit on the part of the DBE. The series of events and strategies that were employed to fight the spread of the virus in schools demonstrated a power shift from the DBE to the DoH and this further strengthened the argument that the DBE had either lost the plot or had no plan to fight the spread of the virus.

Several lessons were learned from this study. The most outstanding lesson is the one that confirms that history has a way of repeating itself. The reintroduction of the different school attendance models (platooning, alternating days, etc) to ensure that all learners have an opportunity to learn during the difficult times of the pandemic, may seem new to some parts of the population who come from advantaged backgrounds but to the historically disadvantaged, this either opens up old wounds or is a demonstration of our rich but painful past.

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