



Managing the Covid-19 pandemic in South African Schools: turning challenge into opportunity

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Abstract

This article reports on challenges faced today by the South African schooling system due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with the emphasis on the public school system. Its aim is to show the extent and nature of these challenges and how they exacerbate existing challenges and impact the quality of post-matric study and tertiary education. A number of specific challenges are focused on such as large class sizes, physical distancing requirements, and the use of online and digital learning platforms to facilitate education, and how this style of teaching and training is not practical for most of the South African school population. The discrepancy between the real situation in schools and the applicability of Covid-19 protocols is also examined. In addition, I discuss the problems posed by the schooling time that has been lost, the effect of curriculum trimming, and the long-term price post-Grade 12 study and tertiary teaching and learning may have to pay. Finally, looking through a positive, future-oriented lens, I endeavour to place the overall situation in South African education in perspective.

Keywords

Converting challenges into opportunities, Covid-19 pandemic, post-Grade 12 study and quality, South African schooling situation, teaching and learning challenges

The primary, secondary, and tertiary education system in South Africa has always had to deal with major challenges such as the large numbers of learners in classrooms, inadequate learner support material, lack of clean water, insufficient and unhygienic ‘bathroom’ facilities, poor quality of teaching, and inadequate support, especially in disadvantaged communities (Pillay, 2021). During my own research over the years (Maree, 2011, 2020; Maree et al., 2006; Maree & Molepo, 2007),

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I have often encountered a sense of demotivation, feeling traumatised, and even hopelessness among many teachers, parents, and learners in disadvantaged environments, in particular where extreme poverty, under-resourced schools, and fragmented families severely limit learners' chances of succeeding in their tertiary studies and eventually of achieving success in their later career lives. Such learners are restricted in acquiring the skills needed to become more adaptable and employable (instead of merely 'finding work') (Fugate et al., 2004), in choosing and constructing careers successfully, and in designing themselves adequately (Savickas, 2020). There is therefore a pressing need to review the current situation in education with a view to bolstering education departments' efforts to deal with and minimise the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its destructive and disruptive impact on the physical, emotional, and volitional well-being of people in general and children in particular has intensified many of the challenges already faced by school learners and tertiary students (Kanyane, 2020). The pandemic has had major short-term adverse psycho-educational and psychosocial effects and may also jeopardise the future of many learners in the medium and long term. According to UNICEF (2021), '[L]earners in South Africa [are already] up to one school year behind where they should be' (p. 1). In addition, the fact that very few Grade 12 learners have written any examination over the past 18 months means that they are inadequately prepared for the pending end-of-year examinations.

The goals of the article were to (1) clarify the extent and nature of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) examine the extent to which these challenges have increased the problems confronting education departments and how they have affected teaching and learning in South African schools as well as post-matric study and tertiary education quality, and (3) map the way forward regarding various facets of primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

Approach to the literature review

An adapted form of the qualitative review style proposed by Higgins and Green (2011) was used in the study. This article is based on a qualitative literature search. As the pandemic emerged only some 21 months prior to writing this manuscript, it was essential to gather as much information as possible on the current situation in primary, secondary, and tertiary education with a view to formulating intervention strategies to reduce the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning in basic as well as higher education. These strategies called for the use of as many recently posted internet-based sources as possible to enable me to arrive at a point of data saturation with no more 'new' themes appearing (Booth, 2001). The literature review focused on sources such as 'standard' sources including books, book chapters, and articles, as well as online articles and social media such as magazines, internet forums, social blogs and vlogs, YouTube, Academia, ResearchGate, podcasts, and webinars. Once the data had been constructed (gathered), the information was integrated and synthesised. The following procedure was adhered to: (1) The Department of Psychological Education's academic information specialist and I searched on Google Scholar as well as Google for abstracts in several databases to gather the widest range possible of recent and relevant sources. (2) We signed up to a number of internet publishing entities for the most recent information on the topic (COVID-19 and primary and secondary education-related information, especially). (3) We removed duplicate sources that did not add significantly to the search. (4) Once I had verified the appropriateness of all sources, full texts were requested (where applicable).

The following inclusion criteria were used: (1) evidence that the sources shed light on the topic, (2) the sources reflected more than mere personal views, and (3) The information complemented the literature overview. The exclusion criteria were instances where the sources (1) reflected mere personal opinions or bias, (2) were largely unrelated (or related unsatisfactorily) to

the topic, and/or (3) were outdated. The next section covers the specific challenges faced by the South African schooling system.

Challenges faced by the South African public schooling system: the reality in public schools

Challenges associated with large class sizes and physical distancing requirements

Large class sizes have always been a feature of public schools in South Africa. According to Businessstech (2018), on average across the nine South African provinces, class sizes in primary schools (35.2 learners per class) are generally higher than those in high schools (27.7 learners per class). However, Gustafsson and Maponya (2021) maintain that

[a]round half of South Africa's primary learners are in classes with more than 40 learners. About 15% are in classes exceeding 50 learners. The averages and inequality are considerably worse than what one sees in countries such as Chile, Indonesia, Morocco and Iran. (p. 1)

Finding sufficient space in classrooms to accommodate more learners during the pandemic especially was a major problem for most schools. As learners were expected to maintain a 1 m (when seated) and a 1½m (when standing or walking) social distance, some schools (that could afford it) rebuilt and rearranged school desks in many classrooms. Careful planning and accurate measurements were done to limit the space desks were taking up and to provide room for social distancing. In addition, some classroom resources were removed from schools, consequently limiting learners' teaching and learning experiences. Learners of all ages were constantly reminded of the need to practise social distancing at all times. Ensuring that learners maintained social distance while leaving classrooms and during breaks or before and after school was particularly challenging.

How practical is online and digital education for the majority of South Africa's population?

Nzimande (2021) emphasised the lessons that have been learned during the pandemic regarding the importance of enhancing education societies' capacity to innovate and digitalise development systems that promote students' digital teaching and learning (TEL or technology-enhanced learning) skills (Businessstech, 2021a). During the past 18 months, I have participated in numerous digital communication and conferencing platforms as well as radio and TV programmes. I have also had private conversations with national and international colleagues, teachers, education officials, learners, parents, and under- and postgraduate students. What has become clear is that private schools and schools in more affluent areas have adapted reasonably well and have been quite successful in using a combination of in-person, hybrid online, and digital formats of teaching and learning. Various messaging apps, digital communication platforms, as well as conferencing services, such as WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, YouTube, and Blackboard, were used to communicate with learners and to share information (teaching and learning support material, etc.) with them (N. Maree, personal communication, December 8, 2020; September 8, 2021). Schools used (and continue to use) virtual platforms, which work well and require relatively small amounts of data. (Most teachers received intensive training in the use of these platforms.) However, many schools in disadvantaged, impoverished, and resource-scarce regions have struggled to make the transition from teaching almost exclusively in in-person format to teaching and

learning successfully in online format (Mahlangu, personal communication, August 1, 2021). Learners in these regions and also learners from low-income families attending schools in more affluent areas either did not have smart phones and/or access to the internet or to Wi-Fi or did not have the skills needed to navigate the available online resources. This necessarily impacted these learners' ability to benefit from online and digital learning platforms (C. Jude, personal communication, July 7, 2021). Lack of parental support at home further impacted negatively on some learners' ability to use these platforms satisfactorily.

These conversations revealed general consensus that online education should be facilitated at all levels of education. In this regard, I support the notion of adopting a customised (tailored) blended learning approach, especially in the two gateway subjects, namely mathematics and physical sciences (Olivier, 2020).

Applicability of COVID-19 protocols: the real situation in schools

Nationwide research was carried out by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to establish the state of education during the pandemic (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; Sithole, 2021). The ensuing report revealed that schools implemented the following three time-tabling models (arranged in order of schools' preference) during the pandemic: (1) daily rotation, (2) weekly rotation, (3) hybrid, and (4) platooning (splitting the school day into two sessions of roughly 5 and 4½ hr sessions to ensure that all learners attended all classes). It was also reported that while great care was taken in the planning and implementation of COVID-19 protocols in schools, and schools in general did their best to ensure that protocols aimed at curbing the spread of the virus were carried out effectively, many almost insurmountable problems (discussed below) were encountered in terms of the actual situation in schools. While many schools have now resumed full-time classes, others are still working rotationally (Businessstech, 2021b).

Dealing with challenges posed by the substantial schooling time that has been lost: are school catch-up systems or DBE catch-up systems working satisfactorily

Fricker and Alhatab (2021) (in UNICEF, 2021) contend that learners lost between 9 months and a complete school year between the beginning of the pandemic and July 2021. However, the amount of schooling time lost differs from school to school. Whereas many schools lost a great deal of time, well-resourced schools with good infrastructure and a high percentage of motivated, highly trained teachers were able to find ways to ensure that minimal time was lost during this period. Using guidelines devised and distributed by the national Department of Basic Education (DBE), schools could tailor these guidelines to meet their own specific needs and circumstances. When rotation of classes was introduced, many schools extended the school day and conducted assessments on Saturdays. In addition to the schooling time lost, some 400,000 to 500,000 learners may also have discontinued attending school during the past 16 months or so (Education in SA, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). That the vast majority of these learners are from disadvantaged, impoverished households in rural areas and informal urban environments is of great concern (United Nations, 2020).

Trying to catch up on all the lost teaching and learning time is fraught with difficulties. Part of the solution may be to recruit experienced 'retired' teachers, teachers who have taken package deals, and unemployed teachers. At the same time, parents should be offered support to help them assist their children with their studies. Well-resourced schools should also be encouraged to assist less well-resourced schools where they can.

Trimming of school curriculum content: the long-term cost

Here too, there were differences between the amount of subject content that was trimmed at various levels and in different grades. Many schools ignored the so-called limited trimming programme (LTP) and reverted to the annual teaching plan (ATP) to ensure a solid foundation for subsequent grades. Opinions differed on whether and which grades should be prioritised over others. Some teachers expressed concern about the situation of learners in the foundation phase (Grades 1–3) especially. They argued that these learners could least afford the disruption caused by the pandemic and that measures for making up for teaching and learning time lost due to the pandemic were inadequate. Laying a sound foundation in reading, writing, and basic literacy skills during the foundation phase is generally considered crucial. It was therefore deemed of the utmost importance that foundation phase learning programmes were neither trimmed nor accelerated – especially in resource-scarce, disadvantaged areas – and that it was especially important to ensure that learners proceeded to the intermediate learning phase only once this foundation had been laid. Without a solid foundation, gaps in learners' knowledge base are bound to increase, thereby reducing their chances of achieving future success. These learners' acquisition of basic learning skills, social and communication skills, study orientation, work ethic, sense of self-directed learning, and respect for others will be seriously compromised. Using an active mastering of passive suffering (experience) (Savickas, 2019a, 2019b) lens, I believe that many learners are not being assisted sufficiently to master developmental phase-related psychosocial and psycho-educational 'tasks' such as gaining basic knowledge in various subjects, socialising, developing their sense of self and of identity, feeling part of a group with whom they can identify, and being able to solve problems. Such tasks or assignments that are not mastered satisfactorily may well manifest later in life as 'pathology' (Erikson, 1994; Freud, 1991; Savickas, 2019a, 2019b).

The South African schooling system is highly unequal. Better resourced schools have generally dealt better with measures instituted to deal with the pandemic. Factors that impact negatively on TEL in poor and rural communities include the following: First, connectivity is often poor and unreliable in these areas. Second, many learners live in dire poverty (sharing one or two rooms with a number of other family members). Third, parental support and support for parents in these areas is often a challenge, considering the social circumstances and deprivation. Unless these structural problems are resolved satisfactorily, the deep fault lines that characterise education and training at all levels in South Africa will become even more pronounced, leading to a volatile situation in the country. Disadvantaged learners (who can least afford to fall further behind) have been affected the most adversely. This inequality has been highlighted by the pandemic and seems to have led to increased realisation of the pressing need to take steps to remedy this situation (ILO, 2020; Sithole, 2021).

Discussion

Leoka (in *Businesstech*, 2021c, p. 1) contends that the South African Grade 12 certificate is 'not worth the paper it is printed on'. Irrespective of one's view on the matter, it is clear that basic, secondary, as well as tertiary education in South Africa is today facing daunting challenges – exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. In addition, regrettably, efforts to improve Grade 12 pass rates often appear inadequate. Bernstein (2021, in Schirmer & Nkomana, 2021), for instance, contends that roughly 250,000 learners (almost a third of all learners who enrol for the Grade 12 examination) repeat Grade 12 annually through the DBE's second chance matric programme (Centre for Development and Enterprise [CDE], 2021). Disturbingly, in 2020, only some 40,000 of these learners obtained their Grade 12 certificate in this way. Schirmer and Nkomana (2021) argue that the basic education employment initiative (BEEI) (involving employing young people between the ages of 18 and 35 to assist teachers for a period of 4 months – introduced in December, 2020)

to enhance the quality of TEL was ‘crisis-driven’ and ‘created in haste, poorly planned’ (p. 8). How the project assisted teachers, bolstered young people’s proficiencies, and enhanced their adaptability and employability remains unclear. (The introduction of a similar programme was announced in September, 2021; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021.)

Pandemic arrives at a particularly challenging juncture

COVID-19 arrived at a particularly challenging time in world history when major concerns were already being expressed that the fourth (and the impending fifth) industrial revolution would increase the gap between the life chances of people with poor access to adequate support structures and resources and those with good access to such structures and resources and thus magnify the ‘Matthew effect’ (rich people become richer and poor people become poorer) (Merton, 1968). People in the former category in particular were overwhelmed by speculation that the jobs of humans (especially technical, repetitive work) would be taken over by robots (Grey, 2014). Educational discourses on the future of work centred on possible massive job losses and decreases in work opportunities. More than ever, people were speculating about the meaning and the sense of work. Existential questions were being asked such as ‘Why do I work’, ‘What does work mean to me?’, and ‘Does my life have personal or social meaning?’ Workers and work-seekers were struggling to make meaning in their personal and work-lives, were experiencing a lack of sense of meaning, hope, and purpose in the workplace, and were beginning to lose hope for the future of work itself. This happened at the very time calls were being made to help all people able and willing to work to access and retain decent jobs. It was hoped that this would rekindle workers’ sense of self-worth and self-respect, help them ‘experience freedom and security in the workplace’, and also increase their ability to ‘make social contributions’ (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016, p. 9).

Education departments need to join hands with all stakeholders to describe and analyse the current situation and devise practicable strategies to achieve the most appropriate style of teaching and learning at this time in the history of teaching and learning in South Africa. Stakeholders include parents, learners, providers of digital technology and private schooling, representatives of international education departments, and funders.

Restructuring the curriculum

Nzimande (2021) believes that changing curricula regularly is key to preparing students to deal with evolving and as yet undefined major challenges brought about by the fourth industrial revolution. Revisiting and updating curricula regularly over the next few years will indeed be needed to determine how well core contents have been covered. Contents no longer considered essential or useful by subject field experts should be trimmed and replaced by contents that promote the acquisition of ‘thriving skills’ (Maree, 2016). The South African schooling system is lagging behind developed countries in this regard. The introduction of new subjects such as robotics and coding will benefit learners’ occupational future. Dawson et al. (2021) believe that the future of teaching and education at all levels should be seen from the point of view of people who have never done waged or salaried work (the ILO, 2020, puts this figure at 66.7%).

I have in the past often advocated the revamping and innovating of life orientation to include modules on postmodern, integrated qualitative-quantitative career counselling. This approach has been shown to yield excellent results in secondary as well as tertiary education environments in terms of helping learners choose and construct careers that can promote the idea of a purposeful life. This is better than attempting to help them choose and pursue careers from the outdated perspective of staying in one job for a lifetime (Maree, 2020; Savickas, 2019a, 2019b).

Emotional impact of the pandemic

Fricker and Alhattab (2021) highlight the negative impact of not being at school for a long period of time due to COVID-19, which includes the loss of learning, emotional distress, exposure to violence and abuse, failure to benefit from school-based feeding schemes, and inadequate socialisation. Learners were traumatised and the future occupational prospects for many of them were potentially seriously undermined. Contextualising and revamping career counselling at school is therefore urgently needed to update and improve individual career and personal counselling by psychologists to all learners (Pillay, 2020). What is needed is holistic education and training that can enhance learners' chances to succeed later in life in constantly changing work environments. The focus should be on learners' strengths and resilience rather than on the enormity of challenges facing them and their perceived limitations and 'weaknesses' (areas for development). Ultimately, the aim is to promote school learners' and university students' 'optimal [personalised emotional, physical, and spiritual] health at the human-environmental interface' (Seymour, 2016, p. 9).

Dire situation of disadvantaged learners in particular

The OECD (2019) contended that finding a way to adapt an education system based on and assembled around physical schools ranks among the greatest challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This statement is evidenced by the fact that, at the peak of the pandemic, 188+ countries closed their schools – which adversely impacted almost 91% of all learners enrolled at schools globally. As mentioned earlier, of great concern is the long-term impact of Covid-19-related challenges on disadvantaged learners in particular who can least afford to lose teaching and learning time. Here, I am referring to learners from resource-constrained and low-income environments, from single-parent and child-headed families, and from marginalised contexts across the diversity spectrum especially. This includes learners that experience barriers to learning, too. These learners' progress was always most likely to be affected more negatively than learners from less disadvantaged and/or marginalised contexts. As mentioned elsewhere, it is a well-known fact that, in some remote areas of South Africa, some learners were forced to survive on a diet that included grass and wild plants (Brown, 2020). Krull and De Klerk (2021), citing a DHET (2021) survey, stated that 96% of the 49 000 university students who participated in their survey "had learning devices in 2020, of whom 89% had smartphones. But half of all respondents found a smartphone difficult to use for learning" (Krull & de Klerk, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, more than 40% of the 13 000 students that participated in a DHET (2020) study indicated that they could not afford to buy food during the pandemic. In addition, while more than 30% of these students did not have access to adequate study spaces, "6% reported not having electricity, and more than 40% felt socially isolated" (Krull & De Klerk, 2021, p. 3).

The impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged learners' achievement in gateway subjects such as mathematics and physical sciences constitutes another area of major concern to educationists and psychologists alike. Even before the pandemic, disadvantaged learners were lagging behind in these subjects – a perennial problem in many contexts globally. Van der Berg (2020), too, maintained for instance, that rotating classes and not being able to attend classes in subjects such as mathematics and physical sciences especially on a daily basis impacts disadvantaged learners more adversely than learners from affluent areas.

Looking at the pandemic through the lens of creating opportunities

In the field of education, in particular, it is essential to be self-critical, reflective, and willing to attend to challenges with an open mind. I agree with Waghid's (2021) claim (in relation to teaching

and learning challenges posed by the pandemic) that '[t]he assumption that pedagogical engagement is more suited for face-to-face tuition is premised on a spurious assumption that teachers should always be the speakers and students the passive listeners' (p. 15). I too prefer to look at Covid-19 as presenting an opportunity for teaching and learning rather than just as a threat, despite the adversity caused by it. First, there is no disputing that the pandemic has accelerated e-learning and the digitalisation of teaching and learning in a way that no one would have predicted previously. Second, learners from all walks of life and from across the educational spectrum have benefitted from digital innovations in teaching and learning interventions over the past 18 months or so (United Nations, 2020). Some 21 months after the arrival of the pandemic, the vast majority of learners today are far better prepared for the rapidly changing world of work brought about by the fourth industrial revolution.

Moreover, despite the detrimental effects of the pandemic on many learners, humankind's resilience in general and learners' resilience in particular have been clearly demonstrated. Prior to the pandemic, only a handful of learners at school (in private schools especially) were being prepared for tertiary environments that have increasingly been adopting blended and hybrid teaching and learning modes. Today, however, virtually all learners have been introduced to and have learnt basic e-learning skills. These newly acquired digital skills (especially if online teaching and learning is maintained and promoted to the extent that is possible and practicable) will stand them in good stead during their tertiary studies as well as in occupational contexts.

I believe the pandemic has provided an opportunity for stakeholders to rethink and restructure teaching and learning in a way that promotes the best interests of all learners at all levels of teaching and training. It also provides us with the opportunity to ensure that learners are more adequately prepared to 'hold themselves' (Winnicott, 1965) in the workplace and to help drive the economy to meet the changing demands of a postmodern society.

Recommendations and implications for theory, practice, research, and policy

As already stated, the existing fault lines in the South African schooling system have been exacerbated by the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a 'defeatist', negative attitude regarding these fault lines should be avoided. I agree with those (United Nations, 2020) who point to the exemplary manner in which the teaching and learning challenges posed by the pandemic have been dealt with during the past number of months indicating that major change can be brought about in a relatively short space of time if the necessary will is there. I also share Barron et al.'s (2021) view that the pandemic has shown the resilience and adaptability of stakeholders involved in the field of education – even young children (Bourke et al., 2021) – when faced with major challenges (Hartung, 2015).

During the COVID-19 lockdown period, learners (even young children) showed remarkable ability to adapt to change (Bourke et al., 2021). Over the years, humankind has demonstrated that it can devise solutions to major challenges and in fact convert these challenges into opportunities for development (Freud, 1991; Savickas, 2019a, 2019b). Merging current 'best practice' with what may be best practice in the short, long, and medium term should be attempted here and should be based on sound research on the best ways of incorporating in-person and e-teaching learning in diverse contexts.

Learners should be prepared for a constantly changing teaching and learning (and occupational) environment and not for an environment that either no longer exists or is losing its currency. To this end, revamping teaching and learning strategies at all levels of education continually and in tandem with the training and upskilling of teachers and lecturers is the key to success. Scheicher (2021) (in

OECD, 2021a), for example, recommends that ‘teachers become active agents for change, not just in implementing technological and social innovations, but in designing them too’ (p. 6). Policy-makers at national level should encourage the exchange of ideas and collaboration between stakeholders such as learners, parents, teachers, researchers, scholars, professional bodies, labour unions, and provincial education departments on the future of teaching and learning in general and on e-strategies and intervention methods specifically.

The implementation of creative-innovative teaching and learning strategies should be promoted in all educational contexts. This includes devising and implementing appropriate strategies to facilitate and expedite learners’ transition from secondary schooling to tertiary teaching and training – vulnerable learners especially. These strategies should include the following: First, for example, libraries and well-equipped TEL centres with functional kitchens, water, toilets, food, laptops and computers, Wi-Fi, and adequate connectivity across the country. Such facilities will help education departments expedite TEL, promote group work in schools, and enhance learners’ chances of successfully navigating the challenges referred to in this article. (Whereas online and digital infrastructure at many centres of teaching and learning across the country has been improved substantially – however, the situation in remote and poverty-stricken areas is still dire.) Second, additional bridging programmes should be designed and tailored to the needs of vulnerable or at-risk students in particular to ensure that their knowledge and digital skills bases are enhanced before they commence their future studies. Third, students’ ‘micro-stories’ should be elicited and carefully considered (in conjunction with the outcomes of, for instance, the ‘scores’ in national benchmark tests) to assess their unique situation, to determine their realistic chances of succeeding at tertiary level, and also to establish the kind of support they need to succeed at this level (OECD, 2021b). Fourth, lecturers should receive training in the basic aspects of cross-cultural communication to ensure satisfactory communication and mutual understanding between themselves and students from diverse backgrounds. Fifth, as mentioned earlier, of crucial importance is facilitating individual and group-based support (taking special care to ensure that vulnerable students know where to find help as and when needed) in regard to study, career counselling (general, psycho-educational, and psychosocial), emotional, and digital learning issues. This support can be provided by lecturers, mentor students, psychologists, and technical support staff members. Sixth, ongoing monitoring of students’ progress and facilitating appropriate intervention should be undertaken as and when needed. My own and my colleagues’ research (Maree, 2020) has shown that seriously disadvantaged students often need a period of up to 6–18 months before they start to find their feet in tertiary environments (Maree, 2011, 2020).

Containing the pandemic at a time when socio-economic deprivation is worsening calls for the introduction of a broad array of measures. At the same time, learners should be helped to take ownership of their growth and development by being taught how to draw on their emotional, social, and spiritual intelligence to succeed in ‘new’ work environments. For this to happen, compassionate teachers, mentor teachers, psychologists, and technical support workers will need to provide individual as well as group-based support on an ongoing basis (Maree, 2011). Learners and students should also be referred to other health professionals as and when help is needed.

Taking politics out of the education equation and leaving education where it should be (in the hands of academics) is a prerequisite for any sound future strategy aimed at addressing the major educational challenges highlighted by the pandemic.

Conclusion

Referring to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rudman (2021) maintains that ‘[u]niversities are rich, yet fragile, human ecosystems. New technologies can improve this ecosystem, while at

the same time re-configuring it in a disruptive manner' (p. 11). This applies also to schools. Consideration of the impact of the pandemic on education and training in South Africa confirms the validity of this view. Many invaluable lessons have been learned from the pandemic. Looking at what has happened and may still happen through a positive, future-oriented lens suggests that what has been gained as a result of the pandemic outweighs what has been lost. While tertiary training institutions had been making steady progress in implementing hybrid and blended teaching and learning over the past few years, only a handful of learners, predominantly at private schools, were introduced to this new mode of teaching and learning. Given the need to educate learners in a way that equips them with the skills to succeed in occupational contexts in the fourth (and fifth) industrial revolution(s), the progress that has been expedited by the pandemic should be welcomed. The need for 'life purpose counselling' (Maree, 2020) and emphasising the importance of helping traumatised learners understand that career-life journey arcs rise and fall repeatedly – and that each rise and fall comprises yet another transition that needs to be negotiated has been emphasised like never before (Bunting, 2020). Instead of deploring what has happened and yearning for a world that either no longer exists or is disappearing, we are now in a much better position to embrace the future and understand and accept that change is the actual and only 'normal' – not some 'new normal'.

In planning a strategy to innovate and restructure teaching and learning in South Africa, the following observation (Stevens, n.p., in SABCNEWS, 2021) should be borne in mind: 'Maybe [I won] because I have a commitment towards my work and also hard work. I didn't become a teacher because of money but because of the love and the passion of becoming a teacher'. Coming from the most recent winner of the Global Principals' Award, these words need to be heeded if real and lasting change is to take place in education at all levels.

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