



# School curriculum in South Africa in the Covid-19 context: An opportunity for education for relevance

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**Abstract** The pandemic nature of the Covid-19 virus and the infectious potential that this virus has for the global population demands a radical response. This article focuses on school education within the context of Covid-19 and asks a fundamental curriculum question around what knowledge is most worthwhile for school education in response to this disease. Schools within South Africa have been closed for an extended period and, within the guidelines for dealing with this infectious disease, social distancing has become a key component in determining how and when schools should reopen. This uncertainty has led to speculations, suggestions, proposals and tentative plans for a school recovery plan to save the integrity of the academic year. The article reviews some of the suggestions, proposals, and plans, which illuminate a technical concern of curriculum coverage rather than a curriculum concern of what learning should be pursued post the lockdown period. It also argues that, going forward, a review of the purpose of school is needed. If learning is the bedrock for determining a school curriculum, it should of necessity be relevant and responsive to the issues and challenges of the country within a global world.

**Keywords** Crisis · Curriculum · Learning · Covid-19 · Relevance · South Africa

As news about the coronavirus began to capture the attention of the global population, various responses were articulated by political, educational and health leaders across the world. Lockdown, social distancing, and hand sanitizing became the common speak across the globe as an initial response to the coronavirus. As this novel disease spread more intensely it was likened to the most deadly diseases of the past, including the Spanish Flu and the bubonic plague, amongst others, and this meant stricter isolation actions including the imposition of travel restrictions, and the involvement of the national defence forces

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to help keep lockdowns and social distancing rules in place. The severity of the disease became more evident when countries posted their respective statistics on a common media platform that reflected daily cumulative numbers of people infected and the number of persons dying from the disease. Saving human lives at the expense of the economy, job losses, hunger and poverty became the sole aim in many countries.

Within South Africa it was no different. As news of the first and subsequent infections began to filter through the corridors of power and control, tracking and tracing those that might have been infected took precedence. Implementation of a high-level lockdown meant the closure of public spaces such as universities, schools, social and religious gatherings, in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus. While this article is not about the epidemiology of the coronavirus, the sequence of events that unfolded within the country and perhaps globally in unison of process (rather than when they initiated the processes) was noted. Similar precautionary measures were taken in almost all countries that experienced the virus.

This sequence of events provided a backdrop for responses by educational authorities in a quest to support the priorities of the country in attempting to curb and bring the severity of this Covid-19 pandemic under control. Institutions of teaching and learning closed schools and campuses (both basic education and higher education) with the initial intention to bring forward the Easter annual vacation and to respond to the social distancing call to curb the spread of the disease. More importantly, there was a pressing need to think about and respond to the envisaged prolonged period of lockdown and social distancing behaviour that was to become a new socializing norm in relation to educating the learners and students of the country.

The closure of educational campuses (schools, colleges, and universities) and the realization that time to cover the curriculum was being lost led to various responses by leaders and teachers (school, college, and higher education) to address this growing concern to save the academic year.

In this article I present a review of actions taken and examine proposals made to address the concerns and critique presented through the media, notices, social media and guides. Through this review of actual and potential solutions and suggestions for continuing, more specifically, school education, I argue that these actions and proposals constitute a missed opportunity to critically review the school curriculum to move beyond the notion of education for all, and to strive for education that is relevant at both local and global levels. The argument is based on a fundamental Spencerian curriculum question (Spencer 1884) in the context of Covid-19: What knowledge is most worthwhile?

## **Proposals and plans for *when* and *how* school education within the Covid-19 context**

The uncertainty of the period of lockdown and the trajectory of the disease within the country compromised the ability to put together a final plan for the recovery of the academic year. In this uncertain period, several draft plans have been developed by the Ministry of Basic Education and political leaders who have made suggestions for catch-up and curriculum coverage within each of the nine Provinces in South Africa. Scenarios, concerns and suggestions have also been made by researchers and leading scholars of education.

In this review, I capture the essence of these plans, suggestions, cautions and aspirations as published in various public documents, mainstream media, social media and reports, to

highlight the fact that the central concern for school education during this period of school closure has been on curriculum coverage and extension of the academic year. These concerns relate to addressing time lost for the academic year and efforts to save its integrity. Apart from exploring online learning through digital platforms to enhance access to teaching and learning activities, little consideration has been given to reviewing the existing curriculum in terms of what needs to be taught and what needs to be learnt within a changed Covid-19 context.

One of the leading distinguished education professors in South Africa, Professor Jonathan Jansen, in a Times Select posting (April 9, 2020) responding to the reality that “we do not know when schools will reopen nor how they will reopen”, suggested that the school year is effectively over (Jansen 2020). Recognizing the two school world context (Spaull 2013) that currently characterizes the South African school system, Jansen argued that if one is not part of the elite with privileges like access to the internet, Google Classroom and other digital learning platforms, one can get further left behind in an already compromised and divided education system. The two world schools that Spaull (2013) speaks of relate to the great variances in school infrastructure to support teaching and learning that learners from higher socio-economic families are exposed to, compared to the majority of learners from the lower socio-economic stratum of society in South Africa. Jansen (2020) suggested seven steps be taken and this included “scrapping the academic year even if the curriculum is trimmed down”. In this suggestion he alluded to the possibility of trimming down the curriculum. The choice of words used in this proposal does not suggest a review of curriculum content, but rather a mechanistic reduction of content, that can be covered in the remaining time after schools reopen for the academic year.

Another robust suggestion was that “all learners from grade 1 to grade 11 be passed to the next grade for organizational reasons”. Here again, what needs to be taught and learnt is not the focus. Rather, the mechanism of school education in terms of access and exits prompted this suggestion to avoid clogging the system. For grade 12 learners, as his fourth and fifth proposal, he suggested, “universities should commence three weeks earlier to bridge the gap”, presumably because of the lockdown and trimmed curriculum to complete the academic year. This comment is based on an assumption that all of the grade 12 learners will access higher education. The reality within the South African context is that only approximately 17 per cent of grade 12 learners access higher education (Council on Higher Education 2014). The question can be asked: What then happens to the majority of learners who do not access higher education? Once again, this suggestion reinforces the notion that the school curriculum streams learners towards higher education studies (Ramrathan 2017). The Council on Higher Education (2014) in its vital statistics reports that 17 per cent of grade 12 learners access higher education given its capacity limitations despite aspiring, as part of its transformational agenda to increase higher education capacity to accommodate 25 per cent of grade 12 learners by 2030. The Council on Higher Education (2013) also notes that there is huge concern at the under-preparedness of grade 12 learners for higher education studies. In the contexts of these two concerns about capacity and under-preparedness of learners, what difference would a three-week post-school programme make in learners aspiring to higher education studies?

Jonathan Jansen’s third suggestion was to “abandon all continuous assessment marks”, as he believes that these were “not continuous” in nature. Within the Curriculum and Assessment Policy statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education 2011) that guides teaching, learning, and assessment across all grades and subjects taught within South African schools, continuous assessment is a key component of teaching and learning within an assessment for learning philosophy (Black and William 2004) that integrates teaching,

learning, and assessment. By doing away with continuous assessment marks the focus then shifts away from learning and into mechanical coverage of curriculum content which clearly then speaks to issues of accountability through curriculum coverage rather than accountability through competence or outcomes of learning.

As I write this section of the article, I pause to read the *Daily News* (2020), a Provincial newspaper, where the editor of the column, Sne Masuku, entitles a section “Don’t scrap June exams – Professor” wherein I am quoted as being in opposition to the scrapping of the mid-year examinations for learners. The article presents a call by the Congress of South African Students to the Minister of Basic Education to scrap the June exams. My reasoning, despite their argument that the exam period would be used to catch up with lost teaching and learning time, is that most learners do more learning prior to assessments and, if we remove assessment opportunities, we lose opportunities for deep and meaningful learning by learners as they spend more time in engaging with school work on their own.

Jansen’s other proposals included scrapping the June and September holidays, as well as to commence the new year much earlier and to offer psychological support to teachers and learners because they are not cognitive machines that can be switched on and off at will, hence the psychological support to these individuals. These suggestions generated a number of responses, both from the Ministry of Basic Education and others interested in the welfare of education. While some regard his proposal as radical, it nevertheless, stirred ongoing debates on matters of education, especially that of schooling in South Africa, not just within the context of Covid-19, but beyond this dreadful pandemic. Several media channels have broadcast television interviews with Jonathan Jansen on the issues he raised and the proposals made especially in the context of an “overloaded CAPS curriculum”.

The closure of schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the extended lockdown of the country, which may be further extended, means that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) would have to develop a plan to recover the missed school days. Plans by the DBE are emerging in various forms. There are a few through official statements by politicians responsible for basic education (Minister of Education and Provincial Members of the Executive Councils who are political leaders of basic education within each province in South Africa), and other pronouncements speculating what needs to happen in order to make up the lost schooling time. The ministry developed a draft plan in response to the school closure and lockdown measures which was leaked to the media. In summary these responses and speculations include exploiting the digital learning platforms, extending schooling into the pre-planned holidays, extended hours for schooling and lessons broadcast through radio stations. Many of these suggestions and plans yet again demonstrated that the focus has been largely on technical issues of curriculum coverage and modes of delivery, rather than an exploitation of the Covid-19 context to make school education relevant to the lives of the people, the community and the country.

A staggered return to school policy was reported by the Times Live (2020) newspaper edited by Pregga Govender, in which plans were being considered in response to social distancing and loss of teaching days for school education. South Africa currently has approximately 11.9 million learners in its public schooling system with approximately 430 000 teachers. The staggered return plan was to get grade 12 and grade 7 learners back to school at the earliest. The rationale for the early return to school of these grades is that these are transition grades and the learners in these grades should have more time in school to cover as much curriculum content as possible. Other grades would include two grades at a time, grade 11 and grade 6 being the next batch of learners to return to school and progressively all grades to be back at school by mid-July, which is usually the date of return from the mid-year holidays. This staggered return to school was included in a document

developed by the National Department of Basic Education entitled “2020 recovery plan for post Covid-19 lockdown”. Other plans included extra hours and extra school days which would translate into an extension of the day by thirty minutes for the intermediate phase of schooling, one hour per day for senior phase schooling and two hours a day for further education and training phase of schooling. Extended days will be days taken away from pre-planned holidays including the December vacation and the inclusion of Saturdays as part of the school week. Another aspect of the plan was to do away with the June examination but keep the preparatory exams for grade 12 learners. Once again, all of these planned interventions for school education were directly in response to the threat of not achieving curriculum coverage as per the CAPS curriculum. Furthermore, in order to save the academic year, cramming of the curriculum into fewer teaching days has been the mode of choice for the recovery of school education.

Proposals also included no testing of curriculum that has not been taught, suggesting that teaching to assessment would influence what gets taught and what is left out of the curriculum. There is an expectation that teachers would work outside of the normal hours with little consideration of what teacher’s views are on this matter, or the impact of such proposals on the life of the teacher outside of teaching. Part of the catch-up programme included the use of digital platforms for learners and parents to access. In support of the use of digital platforms, some of the mobile network companies within South Africa zero rated (no charge) educational and informational websites, suggesting that there were extensive possibilities for collaboration in making education accessible during and outside of lockdown periods.

Independent schools and public schools that have good infrastructure and financial resources and where most of its learners come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, have the added advantage of digital learning platforms and parental support in teaching and learning. Google Classrooms, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom have become the new modes of teaching and of learning. Learners, teachers, and parents are experiencing a new way of teaching and learning with some parents indicating that it has *become a full-time job to keep [the children] focused* (Sunday Tribune 2020b). A grade 7 learner connected online with his teachers and fellow classmates over the last two weeks during the lockdown (Sunday Tribune 2020a), suggested that independent learning is possible through guided support and adherence to a teaching and learning schedule. Parents, teachers, and learners are adjusting to schooling during the lockdown and closure of schools, but this situation amplifies the two-world school system (Spaull 2013) that exists within the South African context. This proliferation of the two-world schooling system has attracted severe criticisms from social justice scholars. They believe that digital learning further perpetuates inequalities because the large majority of learners do not have access to the internet, or weak internet access due to geographical locations and no access to computers or handheld electronic devices, like smart phones.

*What are we missing among the responses to school education during the Covid-19 pandemic?* The closure of schools and catch-up programme for school education is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. The education system and, indeed, the school education system has found itself in similar situations for a number of years now, albeit under different circumstances. Schools were closed for extended periods largely because of protest actions by teachers facilitated by their unions, and by learners due to several issues including political struggles, poor infrastructure issues, violence, and preventable deaths of learners (Kgatle 2018; Mawokomayi and Dube 2018). Catch-up plans then included shifting school holiday schedules, re-organizing teaching and learning processes and additional support to learners outside of normal school hours. Yet again, the responses have almost

always been the same – a focus on curriculum coverage, additional time for teaching and learning, assessment changes, and support programmes. Curriculum reviewers were almost silent during all of these catch-up school programmes. The Covid-19 pandemic which brought the country and, indeed, the world to a standstill with severe lockdown measures to curb the infection rates among people, has disrupted school education to a point where it is difficult to predict when and how schools will reopen. In this high level of uncertainty, planning for re-opening of schools and catch-up of lost teaching and learning time is almost impossible. To save the academic year in terms of the curriculum policy that guides school education is equally impossible. What then would be an appropriate response to such a tentative situation regarding school education?

The curriculum is where, I believe, we should focus our attention and where we should ask the fundamental curriculum question of what knowledge is most worthwhile (Spencer 1884) in the context of Covid-19 and why this knowledge is most worthwhile for learners. It is clear that the expected curriculum for the academic year as planned cannot be accomplished despite the proposed plans and suggested proposals by the DBE and distinguished scholars of education. Should Covid-19 be a subject of learning within the school education system in the time that is available for school in this academic year? What kind of education should learners be given to address the shortened school year and the organizational challenge that may present itself for learners who have not progressed to the next grade? These are some of the key questions that I will engage with in the following section and conclude with some suggestions related to these key curriculum questions.

## **How can the school education system exploit the Covid-19 pandemic: A curriculum response**

At the moment, the organizational matter of curriculum coverage and recovery programme to save the school academic year are the main subjects of scrutiny. If this scrutiny is shifted to the curriculum space, then the fundamental curriculum questions of what knowledge is most worthwhile and how that knowledge should be developed through the school curriculum in the context of Covid-19, would allow for innovative solutions to emerge. This would not only include questions related to technically saving the school academic year, but also to re-examining the purpose of school education that centres relevant learning for the individual, the family, the community, and the nation.

The school education system spans more than twelve years of a learner's life. This means that there is sufficient time within the lifespan of the schooling for learners in lower grades to catch up with what might have been missed during this lockdown period. For learners who are in grades 10 to 12, it is an appropriate time for them to engage substantially more on guided self-study to engender an independent scholar attitude, largely in preparation for higher education studies where independent learning is a requirement and a key attribute for high achievement. Hence, curriculum coverage should not be the focus in saving the affected academic year of schooling. Rather, curriculum coverage should be considered across the remaining years of schooling. If this consideration is a possibility for addressing the immediate concern of catch-up time, one can then venture into the curriculum space for more innovative solutions to school education within the context of Covid-19.

Three innovative curriculum solutions are possible within this pandemic context. The first is that Covid-19 becomes the medium through which multi-disciplinary

engagement is made possible. Blignaut (2020, p. 5) argues in favour of this by claiming “that curriculum and pedagogic change will only succeed if we embrace new ways of viewing knowledge and as well as embracing multiple knowledge traditions”. Unpacking this multi-disciplinary scrutiny would centre the Covid-19 context in the curriculum from which, amongst others, the economics of this disease could become the subject of learning. The immediacy of the disease itself could become a life science concern and the social learning related to disease control, socialization and social prejudices would become direct relevant learning for learners. Other disciplinary engagements are possible and could include mathematical modelling, extrapolations and predictions about the spread of and containment of the disease.

The second possible solution would be a focus on the organizational aspect of school education. In this respect, a focus on progression competence within the existing CAPS curriculum could be distilled which would frame the teaching and learning when schools do open. Here, the central curriculum question would be to ask, what competence is, therefore, needed for learners to sufficiently engage with the expected curriculum in the next grade of schooling? This question would require a review of the content of each subject at each grade level, to ascertain the knowledge and skills that will be needed as foundational competence to progress into the next year of schooling. This means a fundamental review of the CAPS curriculum. In addition, this review will provide an opportunity to examine the duplications of key learnings across different subjects as well as integration of key learnings into individual subjects being taught in schools. This leads to the third possible solution for school education within the context of Covid-19.

In order to maintain social distancing in schools that have a high population of learners, in some cases as high as 90 learners per class, a review of how subjects are taught in schools is needed. For example, the review could explore the need for every subject being taught each day of schooling. There could well be other possibilities like rearranging the timetable so that fewer subjects are taken each day, halving the learner numbers per class to maintain social distancing. As Jansen (2020) claimed in his live television interview, the CAPS curriculum is currently overloaded. What is the purpose of having a loaded curriculum? How can the curriculum be aligned to a re-purposed school education that embraces global infectious diseases like Covid-19 and national issues like profound social injustices and inequalities which are still evident in South Africa (Blignaut 2020), and issues of global competence within a globalized population.

There is grave concern that shifting teaching and learning into digital spaces would further widen the inequity gap that Spaul (2013) has alluded to through the two school world illuminations in his analysis of learner performance in South Africa. While digital platforms are very useful for supporting guided independent studies, the majority of learners in the country do not have access to the digital platforms, which is mostly related to affordability and geographic infrastructures. Hence being in a school or physical campus is still needed and will be a reality for a very long time, especially within the current context of high levels of inequalities that exist within South Africa. The review of the school curriculum in terms of a reviewed purpose of school education is quite central if any meaningful interventions are to be realized arising from the pandemic Covid-19 global situation. In this respect, I focus my attention to what this re-purposed school education might look like from a curriculum perspective. In doing this, I argue that it is an opportune time to shift our gaze from an education for all perspective to an education for relevance perspective.

## Towards a relevant *core and responsive* curriculum for the school education system

We need a new conceptual architecture of school education that straddles a contextualized and responsive curriculum addressing local educational needs and a global imperative formed by core literacies that will enable one to work within and be part of a globalized world context. Soudien and Harvey (2020) contend that there are multiple and different kinds of “politics” involved in the process of learning in schools, therefore, what gets “learnt” and what gets “taught” within the “politics” should now feature more strongly in our debates on school curriculum and intended learning. While Soudien and Harvey (2020) and Marope (2017) re-ignite the return to biology and brain study of learning into the social and contextual realities and possibilities, they work from the premise that learning is the critical bedrock from which education proceeds. This means that what is to be learnt should be the foundation for and the starting point of developing a school curriculum. The intended learning should then inform the purpose of school education.

In trying to understand why education has not delivered on its promises, especially in the South African context of increasing inequalities, poor learner performances in spite of a substantial budget for education, increasing unemployment and poor economic outlook, Soudien and Harvey (2020) argue that crucial determinative factors present in particular contexts are not adequately engaged with and understood, because of the complexity of the politics surrounding the learning experience. It is proposed that implications of the Covid-19 lockdown have not been engaged with adequately nor have they been clearly understood. These reasons have contributed to the focus on the technical issues of curriculum coverage, catch-up time and use of digital platforms as suggestions for school during and post the Covid-19 lockdown period, instead of a focus on meaningful learning through shifting the discourse into curriculum spaces. The school recovery project within South Africa, through purely technical suggestions, is clear evidence of the politics of curriculum coverage. Hence, during periods of school disruption, as is the case of the Covid-19 lockdown, the politics of education emerge in guiding what and how education should proceed without focusing on what learners can and should learn through and from such incidences as Covid-19. Therefore, in the context of Covid-19 and future contextual challenges, what knowledge and, indeed, what learning is needed should become the focal point of engagement. In this respect, I propose a flexible school curriculum with two broad components, a core component that focuses on the various literacies that one needs as core learning, and a responsive component that focuses on critical elements of being human within a social, economic, and healthy environment.

The core elements of schooling should include the five literacies: Communicative literacy, Numerical literacy, Financial literacy, Environmental literacy, and Digital literacy. The spread of these literacies could span over the different schooling years.

Examples of responsive elements, determined by the needs of the community, of society, and of national development would include: Living a healthy lifestyle (within impoverished communities), Dealing with trauma and social ills, basic health care, stereotyping and socializing, accessible career-focused curriculum, and entrepreneurial education.

Thus, a shift from “Education for All” to “Education for Relevance” would provide opportunities for learners to co-exist in both worlds that exist within South Africa. This context implies an impoverished world that requires an education that will enable them to live and have a healthy life in a healthy environment in their respective communities, and a post-modern world exposure with the literacies needed to sustain a global presence. The

education for relevance is not a new concept. According to Knamiller (1984), the concept “education for relevance” has been part of the education discourse for decades, citing that “everyone believes in relevance” (p. 60). More recently, it has become increasingly popular in education discourses especially in response to the envisaged skills and knowledge driving the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is characterized as being fast-changing, unpredictable with disruptive contextual challenges and opportunities (Marope 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic is one such example of a disruptive, unpredictable, and fast-changing reality which people across the globe are currently experiencing.

## Conclusions

In this article, I briefly mapped out the Covid-19 pandemic within the South African context with a view to illustrating the challenges with which the South African context is confronted and the implications of these challenges for school education. Proposals for protecting the integrity of the academic year from distinguished scholars of education, departmental plans, and media engagements were presented and critiqued. Through the review of these proposals, suggestions, and plans, I contend that the approaches to a school recovery plan for the school time lost due to the pandemic, is technical and abstruse. Through this review, I argue that the recovery plan should be core and responsive, and located within a curriculum space with the focus on relevant learning that allows for a progression into the next grade level of schooling and core learning that should emanate from the opportunities of being exposed to the Covid-19 pandemic. I argue that it is urgently needed to shift the focus on school education from “education for all”, to “education for relevance”. This shift further requires a fundamental focus on what learning is most worthwhile for school education that will respond to the immediate challenges of the people of South Africa and its relationship with the global world.

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