

“Build Education Back Better”

Freedom Day 27 April 2020

Inequality remains pervasive in the South African education system. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only shown the fault lines, but is deepening them at an alarming rate, and in a manner that may take many more years to undo.

In this contribution, we talk to the need to provide basic rights, as set out in the Freedom Charter, such as health, safety and nutrition, while we cast the net wider to consider aspects of data privacy, online learning and governance. We argue that online learning is not an option for the majority of our learners, and an overemphasis on it at this time could further entrench inequalities. Critically, we ask the question, “Why are we not free on this Freedom Day?”

We draw on the emerging insights from a research bootcamp currently underway (see jet.org.za), overseen by JET Education Services (JET), with a range of like-minded partners and a group of more than 150 educational researchers comprising a combination of seasoned local and international experts, government and university representatives, and a pool of volunteers from all parts of South Africa as well as a few currently based abroad in countries such as China, the United States, Japan, Ethiopia, Hungary and the Netherlands. A capacity building element is also included to allow novice researchers from various backgrounds seeking experience in the educational research field to meaningfully contribute.

Our research leaders had the following to say about freedom in education at this time in the history of our young democracy:

Milisa Janda and Henre Benson, leading the topic on [Mindsets During Lockdown](#), note that with schooling having been disrupted, “there are a number of online, television and radio educational programmes available to assist learners during this lockdown period; however these resources are only accessible to those with the technology and data to make use of the online learning platforms and materials”. Janda is of the view that the lockdown period may widen the already existing inequality gap in the South African education system, given the fact that “only those with access are able to continue learning while those who do not have access are at a risk of falling behind”, and asks “How can we say we have freedom when we are not even able to provide education for the majority of South African learners?” As we contemplate the ‘new normal’ under the government’s anticipated risk adjusted strategy for reopening schools, the stark inequalities in the education system will have returning teachers facing vast numbers of children for whom learning has been paralysed during lockdown. Despite calls for learning to continue and well-meaning efforts to flood learners and parents with data free online learning opportunities, the lack of access and low levels of engagement evidenced in the research conducted will require curriculum adjustments, new thinking about assessment and some unpopular decisions about learner progression. “The harsh reality is that despite gains in meeting the



constitutional obligations of free basic education, this pandemic reminds us that free does not mean equal.”

Advancing freedom means that every child in South Africa has a knowledgeable, skilled and committed teacher. In the teacher education sector, it is paramount to ensure that the preparation of pre-service teachers is not compromised during this time. A group of teacher educators drawn from across the higher education sector and led by Lee Rusznyak, are developing an alternative, but nevertheless authentic, [Teaching Practicum](#) session that enriches and extends pre-service teachers’ normal practical learning. The sector carries the responsibility of ensuring that newly qualified teachers understand what they are doing in the classroom and can enable learning, from their very first day on the job.

Naziema Jappie, leading the group on [Governance and Management in Higher Education](#) institutions, argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has “forced universities around the world, including South Africa, to rethink their business models. Traditional forms of teaching, learning, assessment and graduations have been thrown out and the digital platform has come alive, exposing profound disparities and inequalities putting vulnerable students at risk.” Jappie is of the view that despite the concerns and opposition to on-line learning, it is “imperative that we focus on being inclusive and participatory so we can jointly embrace the digital platform”. She adds that the pandemic will test the spirit and ingenuity of the most experienced leaders and activists, and the time we are living through allows higher education to take up challenges, and turn them into opportunities for the future post COVID-19.

The research team on [Home Educational Experiences](#) of 16 South African families during the lockdown, led by Nick Taylor, concluded that:

- The three Model C and four high-fee independent schools are providing work for their learners, generally using a combination of internet- and print-based materials.
- Of the two low-fee independent schools, one is providing work for their learners.
- Of the seven public schools, only one is making an effort to keep their learners active during the lockdown.

According to the emerging research “these patterns clearly show how better-resourced schools attended by learners from more affluent families are keeping their learners busy, while learners from poorer families who attend public schools are mostly not doing school work during this time. Since a good education is the key tool for learners from poor families to escape the poverty trap, the findings of this study support the view that many public schools are not providing optimal conditions for learners to improve their life chances. In this way, schooling reproduces the stark inequalities which characterise South African society”.

“Building education back better” makes so much sense in our country. The phrase is borrowed from [Save The Children](#) and the [World Bank](#) who adopted the approach some 20 years ago; it has been taken up by Deva Govender and his team working on the topic of how various countries managed their education systems during disasters, the steps they took to re-establish normality and lessons for [Post](#)



Disaster Schooling. We are not free in South Africa now, and we were not free before the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is something happening now that has brought together education partners from all sectors in a way that is unprecedented. To quote Godwin Khosa, speaking during a radio interview on 23 April 2020, this coming together of government and civil society, including funders, is reminiscent of the founding of the Freedom Charter in 1955.

A question that this increase in online activity raises is “Who owns our data?” This is an increasingly fraught issue in the modern age. Barbara Dale-Jones, leading the theme on **Data Privacy**, argues that “the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to erode further the compromised privacy of citizens as governments monitor their movements. Testing regimes and contact-tracing are being carried out globally to ensure the safety of people. The good of the whole is being placed ahead of the rights of the individual.” This approach may be necessary in a pandemic. But what if the data, such as that collected through COVID-19 testing systems, is not only used by health officials but also by police or state agencies? The risk is that once mass surveillance of this kind has started, it will be impossible to control. To protect the rights of individuals to privacy, a trusted and human-centric approach is required.

All over the world human beings are under ‘lockdown’. They have willingly and unwillingly given up their daily freedoms hoping that this sacrifice, which for many comes at great cost, will contribute to the greater good of freedom from the threat of COVID-19. But lockdown is only a tactic, not a vaccine. We have learned that it is socially and economically unsustainable and cannot be as rapidly lifted as it was imposed. The challenge of opening up lockdown will be to govern the behaviour of COVID-19 in our schools and society. Government has demonstrated astute commitment. There is now a critical need for more quickly available, good quality data and information, while also avoiding the risks Dale-Jones points out. As noted by Andrew Paterson, leading the theme on **Governance Structures** that have enabled efficient crisis management across three distinct settings, “Decision makers need as much good information at their disposal as they can get - as well as vigilance and composure”.

As we take note of the emerging insights from Janda, Benson, Taylor, Jappie, Dale-Jones, Rusznyak and Paterson, it is clear that this is the time to be extremely aware about not deepening inequalities. Most obviously, online learning is not an option for the majority of our learners, and it is not a quick fix, while it can equally lead to a situation where data privacy is surrendered and not regained. Providing basic rights, as set out in the Freedom Charter, namely health, safety and nutrition, is most critical at this point.

As a community of educational researchers we trust that our findings, across all twelve topics, will assist in the many difficult decisions that need to be made - now, and in the coming months.

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