

# Rebooting the South African education system amidst Covid-19: Impediments and improvement strategies

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Given the substantial loss of teaching and learning time during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, the key pressure point for the South African education system and many other schooling systems across the world was to re-open schooling. Drawing on data from key education stakeholders in South Africa, this article uses qualitative research methods to identify some of the success and impeding factors experienced by the South African education system in its quest to return all schools to full functionality during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, we suggest some of the strategies that can assist schools to return to full functionality and to build the resilience of schooling systems after the Covid-19 pandemic and before future pandemics. This article finds that there were both success and impeding factors that schools experienced in the task of returning to full functionality. Success factors included the availability of adequate classrooms, strict adherence to Covid-19 health protocols, a smaller number of learners in classes, and cooperation between parents, members of school governing bodies and the community. Impeding factors included limited classroom space, large enrolments, and a shortage of teachers.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is by far the greatest shock suffered recently by school systems across the world. As was to be expected, education systems the world over engaged in varied practices in response to the pandemic (Osman & Keevey, 2021). These included setting up systems, where possible and safer, to navigate through the pandemic to continue teaching and learning processes and also recover lost teaching and learning time. Re-opening schools during the pandemic was one of those processes. Just like other education systems facing the substantial loss of teaching and learning time during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns (Di Pietro et al., 2021; Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021), the South African education system also set recovery processes in motion.

Schools in South Africa were first closed on 18 March 2020 as part of the hard lockdown announced by the state president to limit the spread of the coronavirus. This was followed by a phased-in re-opening of schools between June and August 2020 (Motshekga, 2020). Finally, on 2 August 2021, the South African schooling system was officially re-opened for all learners to go back to school following yet another Covid-19 lockdown (Government of South Africa, 2021; Motshekga, 2021). This article, therefore, uses qualitative research methods to identify some of the success and impeding factors experienced by the South African education system in its quest to return all schools to full functionality during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, it suggests some of the strategies that can be used to

assist schools in returning to full functionality and building the resilience of schooling systems during the Covid-19 pandemic and other future pandemics.

The main question that this article answers is: what are some of the success and impeding factors experienced by South African schools in their quest to return to full functionality amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and what improvement strategies are required to fast track the return to full functionality? Our ultimate aim in this article is to fill what we have observed as a current gap – the absence of an article that analyses what schools have experienced in trying to return to a normal time-table amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the key benefits of this article is that it provides key improvement strategies that can assist schools and schooling systems in minimising teaching and learning disruptions and building adequate resilience in future pandemics.

## **Literature review**

The body of literature reviewed for the purpose of this article focuses specifically on matters related to the response of schooling systems to the Covid-19 pandemic and, in particular, attempts to return schooling to full functionality. The literature review section is divided into three subsections, namely; the description of education during the Covid-19 pandemic: successes and challenges; opportunities for educational transformation created by the Covid-19 pandemic; suggested improvement solutions and a synthesis of the reviewed body of literature. These are discussed in detail below.

### **Education during the Covid-19 pandemic: Successes and challenges**

Amidst the devastations and frustrations that some education systems experienced, others managed to achieve some notable successes as they navigated through the Covid-19 turbulences. UNESCO (2020) identified the use of distance or online learning, additional funding for schools, social distancing and adequate classroom spaces or smaller classes as some of the successes that some education systems have recorded in their effort to return schooling to normality. Gray and Jourdan (2021) added partnerships between schools, families and local authorities; consistent guidance and enough time and resources for implementation to the list of factors that led to successful school re-opening in some education systems.

Whereas one part of the reviewed literature showed that the shortage of classroom space was a challenge to some schooling systems, another part of the literature indicated that it was an opportunity for some schooling systems to flex their innovative skills. For instance, the Danish education system developed strategies to address the challenge of limited classroom space, such as outdoor learning, using gyms as additional classroom spaces, and adjusting staffing to accommodate the small number of employees who stayed home for medical reasons (Sheikh et al., 2020). Robosa et al. (2021) also contended that despite the challenge of lack of resources, and stress and burnout caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers gained positive experiences. They argued that this is largely due to their passion, relationships built with other stakeholders, and the fulfilment of their duty (Robosa et al., 2021).

The literature also reveals several barriers or challenges that the education systems experienced as they attempted to return schooling back to normal during Covid-19. Hargreaves (2020:1) characterised these challenges:

We're in a long, dark tunnel at the moment. When we emerge, our challenge will be not to proceed exactly as before, but to reflect deeply on what we have experienced, and take a sharp turn in education and society for the better.

Azorin (2020) identified the key barriers experienced by the Spanish education system in its effort to return schooling to normal during Covid-19 as including high rates of school drop-outs and academic failure; poor culture of networking and collaboration; overcrowded classrooms that hindered quality education; an obsolete curriculum; and the consideration of education as a political currency. Robosa et al. (2021) added teacher workload to the list of challenges that some schools had to deal with, which they argued contributed to stress and burnout amongst teachers.

On the other hand, Wakui et al. (2021) found that in-person education during the Covid-19 pandemic has caused teachers to experience infection-related anxiety. The factors that contributed to this anxiety included the fact that teachers were unable to ensure their safety and that of their families, particularly at the early stages when the vaccine roll-out programs had just begun (Wakui et al., 2021). The challenge of fear of infection amongst learners and staff members in some schools was also raised by Gray and Jourdan (2021), who argued that this fear led to a rise in absenteeism rates amongst both learners and staff members.

The literature also shows that some schooling systems were forced to adopt a rotational system for schools without enough classroom space (Sheikh et al., 2020). This involved using staggered school schedules so that fewer learners were attending school at the same time or were congregated in common areas at one time (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). The World Bank (2021) referred to it as staggered schedules or attending school according to alternating shifts or days. The literature also showed that in addition to staggered schedules, some schools used blended learning, which involved the use of both remote and in-person learning (World Bank, 2021).

While the rotational schooling system can be both an advantage and a disadvantage, the reviewed literature suggests that the disadvantages exceeded the advantages. Some of the disadvantages or frustrations related to implementing rotational schooling included lack of Internet connectivity, particularly lack of data, especially for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds; added workloads for teachers because of having to teach two or more groups of rotating learners; disparities in quantity and quality of teaching between rotating groups of learners and loss of teaching and learning time (Di Pietro et al., 2021; Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021).

Limited classroom space emerged from literature as one of the key challenges for many schools, particularly in poor countries, consequently forcing some schools to implement rotational school attendance (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2020;

UNESCO, 2020; Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021). Lack of information and communication technology (ICT) resources and poor Internet connectivity also came out of the reviewed literature as challenges that some education systems and schools grappled with (Robosa et al., 2021).

### **Opportunities for educational transformation created by the pandemic**

The World Bank (2021) contended that the Covid-19 pandemic could also be an opportunity for countries to transform their education systems and develop new visions where learning happens for everyone, including vulnerable children, everywhere. In addition, the pandemic triggered a remarkable opportunity for change, including leveraging information and communication technology opportunities (World Bank, 2021:12). This is in line with the argument by Bubb and Jones (2020:209) that the Covid-19 "... crisis has become an opportunity for grassroots innovation". Muhigana (2022) also argued that the Covid-19 experience should be used to build a schooling system that better prepares learners for an increasingly digital and tech-driven world. Onyema et al. (2020) posited that the adoption and embracing of learning technologies which support remote or online learning was a significant success in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on education.

That being said, the literature also shows that remote or digital learning is not a panacea for Covid-19 related schooling challenges in that remote learning has its own challenges (OECD, 2020). For instance, some teachers in the OECD countries reported a high need for training in the use of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, Covid-19 struck when many education systems were not ready for the world of digital or remote learning (OECD, 2020). DUBY (2022) argued that digital learning during the Covid-19 pandemic created a digital divide in that poor learners, amongst others, had limited access to the Internet and suitable devices, which made digital learning difficult for them and thus disrupted their education. Muhigana (2022) posited that the most vulnerable children who lack digital devices and data are left behind.

### **Suggested solutions emanating from the literature**

While the re-opening of all schools and the return to full functionality are of paramount importance, the United Nations (2020:3) advised that "it is important to be guided by the following parameters: ensure the safety of all; plan for inclusive re-opening; listen to the voices of all concerned; and coordinate with key actors, including the health community". Despite the great disruptions caused by this crisis in the schooling sector, the Covid-19 pandemic also offered an opportunity for education systems to rethink their response strategies to future crises (UNESCO, 2020). The World Bank (2021:23) also emphasised the need to build better strategies that include developing more equitable and resilient post-Covid education systems capable of ensuring that children learn continuously without any disruptions both in schools and at home.

Garcia and Weiss (2020) proposed a three-pronged plan that consists of the three Rs, namely; relief for schools (immediate), recovery (short-term), and rebuilding for schools (long-term) and the education system as a whole.

## **Synthesis**

An overview reflection on the reviewed body of literature indicates some similarities or convergences as well as some differences in relation to the success factors, impeding factors or challenges and suggested improvement solutions. This is in relation to the experiences of the education systems in their efforts to return to full functionality amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The similarities in success factors include the use of distance or online learning, adequate classroom spaces, teachers' innovative skills, and relationships built by schools with other stakeholders. These are advocated by scholars or organisations such as Gray and Jourdan (2021), Robosa et al. (2021), Onyema et al. (2020) and UNESCO (2020).

The similarities in impeding factors or challenges include limited classroom space, added teacher workloads, high rates of school drop-outs, lack of information and communication technology resources, poor Internet connectivity, and anxiety and fear of infection amongst teachers. These are identified by scholars and organisations such as Robosa et al. (2021), Wakui et al. (2021), UNESCO (2020), Di Pietro et al. (2021) and Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021). Similarities in suggested solutions included the need to build better strategies, such as developing 'more equitable and resilient post-Covid-19 education systems, creating adequate classroom space and inclusive consultation with all education stakeholders. These are suggested by scholars and organisations such as the United Nations (2020:3), Garcia and Weiss (2020) and the World Bank (2021).

There were no significant differences or contradictions from the reviewed body of literature regarding the success and impeding factors as well as some of the suggested improvement solutions discussed above. While useful in contextualising the challenges of the pandemic in education, the body of literature reviewed above does not explicitly cover issues of Covid-19 education recovery pertaining to the South African context. Little is known about some of the success and impending factors experienced by South African schools as they make an effort to return schooling to a normal timetable during the Covid-19 pandemic. The literature also does not provide solution-driven recommendations relevant to the South African context and its socio-economic dynamics. These are the gaps that this article seeks to fill.

## **Methods**

The article draws its data from the dialogue (interviews) processes that we conducted with key education stakeholders in South Africa. The stakeholders included school principals, district officials, school governing bodies (SGBs), and parents. In total, 173 participants were interviewed. Parents and SGB members were in the majority at 138, followed by subject advisers and circuit managers at 35. The dialogue process sought to gather insights

about the challenges and successes that schools have faced in returning all the learners to schools amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. These insights assist in identifying possible remedies and developing strategies that can be used to improve schooling operations in future pandemics. In short, the dialogue process sought to find evidence-based ways that can be used to reboot and return the South African education system to normal or full functionality following the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that it has suffered.

The study used qualitative research methods both in its data collection processes and analysis. Qualitative research methods enable effective examination of “the way people make sense out of their own concrete, real-life experiences in their own minds and in their own words” (Cropley, 2021:5). Qualitative research, by its nature, seeks to gain insights into the constructions of reality, to tease out the nature of the world as it is experienced, structured, and interpreted by people in the course of their everyday lives (Cropley, 2021). Qualitative research methods were also chosen to contribute to the demystification of qualitative methods and indeed, to complement quantitative methods, which are more frequently used in researching educational phenomena today. Qualitative research methods, just like other types of research methods, do meet the traditional standards of scientific rigour (Maher et al., 2018).

### **Data collection**

Two sets of narrative interviews or dialogues were conducted to gather the data used to develop this article. The first set of interviews involved a discussion with subject advisers and circuit managers, and the second set of interviews involved a conversation with parents and members of the school governing bodies. Three key semi-structured interview questions were asked for the purpose of this article (Appendix 1). All the participants were selected from the two largely rural and poorest provinces of South Africa, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. Their circumstances, and by extension the circumstances of their schools, were characterised by high reliance on social distancing, relatively little help from vaccination programs, poor assistance from telecommunications infrastructure, poor parental support, poor access to digital devices such as smartphones and tablets, and poor access to data, running water and food supplies. The data presented above reveal some of these circumstances.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants in this research project because all participants were selected and targeted based on the specific roles that they play in the basic education sector in South Africa. Given the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in South Africa at the time, the interviews were held via Microsoft Teams and teleconferencing. Microsoft Teams’ self-recording system and voice recorders were used to record the interviews conducted via the two platforms, respectively.

### **Data processing and analysis**

The recordings from the two sets of interviews held with the selected stakeholders were transcribed manually into two sets of integrative transcripts. Five different languages that are mainly spoken in the two selected provinces were used in the conversation with the

participants, these being Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, isiXhosa and English. The recordings of dialogues conducted in Tshivenda, Sepedi, Xitsonga and isiXhosa were simultaneously transcribed and then translated into English by the research team.

All the transcripts were further cleaned for clarity and language correctness. In this regard, repetitions, irrelevant or misplaced responses, interrupting voices and other noises were discarded and grammatical errors were corrected. The responses generated out of the two sets of interviews were tabulated into a dataset consisting of two parts, the subject advisers and circuit managers dataset and the parents and members of the school governing bodies' dataset.

### The five levels of data abstraction

The article uses an adapted version of the *Five Levels of Data Abstraction* for data analysis, as outlined in Figure 1. These levels are generated from execution and in-depth engagement with the *Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven* (QUAGOL) developed by Casterle et al. (2012). QUAGOL is a theory and practice-based guide that supports and facilitates a comprehensive process of analysis of qualitative data. It proposes the utilisation of ten stages for qualitative data processing and analysis. It is from the ten stages of QUAGOL that the *Five Levels of Data Abstraction* were generated. In simpler terms, the five levels of data abstraction involve the extraction of meaning by processing raw data in five different levels.

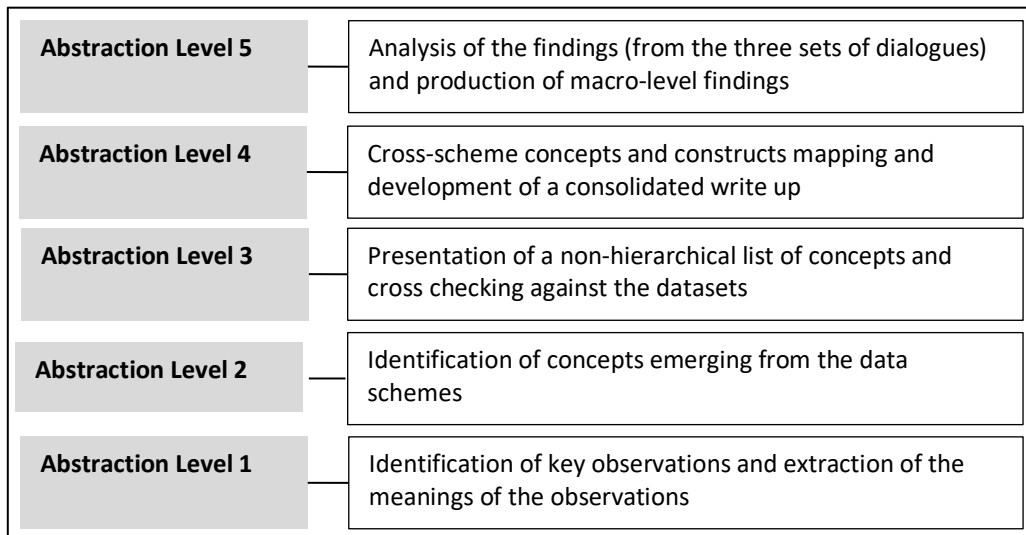


Figure 1: The five levels of data abstraction (adapted from Casterle et al., 2012)

*Abstraction Level 1* involved us rereading the transcripts for the purpose of identifying and writing up the key observations emerging from the datasets and extracting the meanings of the observations (*data schemes*). In this context, the *data schemes* refer to templates that contain processed data that cover the following aspects: reference to the group of

interviewees (datasets), the questions the interviewees were answering, key messages emerging from the responses, meanings and quotations linked to the emerging meanings. This is all done as depicted in the datasets.

In *Abstraction Level 2*, we identified and listed the concepts that emerged from the data schemes. The abstraction level further entailed iterative processes (backward and forward movements) of identifying concepts and confirming them against the database. The iterative processes led to some concepts being added, removed or reframed in preparation for the development of a comprehensive list of concepts, which is dealt with in the next abstraction level.

*Abstraction Level 3* entailed the presentation of the list of identified concepts in a non-hierarchical manner. The concepts were then analysed and used to build constructs where possible. The relation between the concepts and constructs was also cross-checked against the datasets resulting in some concepts being added, removed or reframed based on the repeated assessments of the datasets.

In *Abstraction Level 4*, we integrated all these concepts into a meaningful conceptual framework or storyline in response to the research questions. It is at this level that the findings begin to take up some shape, with the extraction of messages and trends that emerge from the two datasets, linking them up to the relevant quotations for confirmation and substantiation purposes.

*Abstraction Level 5* involved the analysis and consolidation of the findings from the two datasets and the production of macro-level findings that cut across all the research questions of the sets of interviews from which this article draws. Significant and powerful quotes were added where necessary and relevant to substantiate the emerging findings of the study. These are discussed in detail in the next section.

## Results

Our main research question sought to investigate some of the success and impeding factors experienced by South African schools in their quest to return to full functionality amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. This section provides answers to this question as explained below.

### The successes

The first key sub-questions that we asked in this study investigated some of the success factors that contributed to some schools returning to full functionality. The trends that emerged from the analysis of both datasets revealed the following as some of the key success factors that contributed to some schools returning to full functionality.

#### *The availability of adequate classrooms*

Consensus emerged across the two datasets that indicated that the availability of adequate classrooms in some schools was one of the main contributing factors to some schools



returning to full functionality in South Africa after the formal re-opening of schools in August 2021. One parent who participated in the interviews argued that:

One of the reasons all our learners returned to school was the fact that we have enough classrooms and a manageable number of learners, which made it easy for all of them to attend school.

*The use of church buildings as additional classroom space*

The use of church buildings as additional classroom space by some schools also emerged strongly from the data as a success factor. That way, these schools were able to fast-track their return to full functionality whilst complying with the Covid-19 social distancing protocol.

*Strict adherence to Covid-19 health protocols*

There was also some consensus amongst the participants that the strict manner in which the Covid-19 protocols were adhered to contributed to the return of some schools to full functionality. These included washing hands regularly, keeping social distance, sanitising and wearing masks.

Most importantly, the data indicates that learners felt safer at school than at home, which contributed in ensuring that more learners got back to school. In the words of one member of a school governing body interviewed, “learners felt safer at schools”, largely due to the strict adherence to the Covid-19 health protocols in some schools. This trend is clearly reflected in the response provided by one parent from one of the schools that returned to full functionality:

In our school, all Covid-19 health protocols were strictly adhered to. All learners are learning and coming to school on time. There is no learner who has dropped out of school or who has died of Covid-19.

*The administration of the school nutrition program*

Data also showed that the school feeding scheme contributed to getting learners, especially those from poor families, back to school and prevented some from dropping out of the school system. This finding is corroborated by the findings of a study conducted by DUBY (2022), which, amongst others, showed that girl learners from the poorest families, who were orphaned or who had experienced hunger, were most likely to experience educational disruption.

*The appointment and effective utilisation of teacher assistants*

Another strong trend that emerged from the data showed that the appointment and utilisation of teacher assistants did fast-track the return of some schools to full functionality. These were teacher assistants appointed by the Government of South Africa through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI). According to one of the interviewed subject advisers:

Education assistants have closed the gap that the education system had previously. Because they are working well on the reading programs which is playing a big role in our learner's vocabulary and phonics.

*The smaller number of learners in classes*

Data also revealed the smaller number of learners in some schools as a contributing factor to their return to full functionality. This was only possible for schools with enough classroom spaces, as argued by one of the circuit managers:

For the small and medium schools, it was easy for them to go back to full functionality. But not for the big enrolment schools that already had overcrowding even before Covid-19. We've got some schools with over 400 Grade 8 learners only ...

Data also showed that teachers were glad to have small numbers of learners as required for social distancing purposes. In addition to that, as observed by one interviewed subject adviser: "teachers were in a position to pay individual attention to learners who struggled with their learning activities".

*Cooperation between parents, School Governing Body members and the community*

Another factor that contributed to some schools succeeding in returning to full functionality was the cooperation between parents, school governing body members and the community at large.

*The use of smart boards by some schools*

The use of smart or interactive boards for teaching purposes also emerged very strongly from data as having contributed significantly to the return to full functionality by some schools. In the words of one subject adviser who participated in the study:

The use of white boards has been very beneficial to schools because now one teacher is able to teach one subject to different classes at the same time while sitting in one classroom, where the system is implemented or installed.

## **The impediments**

The next key sub-question that we asked examined some of the impeding factors or barriers that contributed to some schools failing to return to full functionality. Data revealed the following as some of the key factors.

*Limited classroom space*

Limited or shortage of classroom space became the dominant impeding factor from the responses provided by the participants in the study. One of the members of the school governing body illustrated the gravity of the challenge of limited classroom space very clearly:

Returning to full functionality won't be possible for us because of shortage of classrooms. For instance, we have two Grade 8 groups of learners that have to rotate in attending school; if both groups were to come to school together, the school would become overcrowded.

One of the parents shared the same sentiments:

As parents, we all wish that our children can all go back to school, but as long as classroom shortages remain in place; there is no way that all schools can go back to a normal time-table.

*Large learner enrolments*

Data shows that large learner enrolments or overcrowding, which has a direct causal effect on the classroom space, also contributed to some schools failing to return to full functionality and ultimately forcing them to implement the rotational schooling system.

*Shortage of teachers*

Participants also linked the shortage of teachers as another factor that hindered some schools from returning to full functionality. Furthermore, data revealed that some schools were experiencing shortages of teachers because of additional classes that came about as a result of splitting bigger classes into smaller classes for the purpose of keeping social distancing amongst learners.

*Shortage of furniture*

Shortage of furniture, such as chairs and desks for learners, also emerged as a challenge that led to the failure of some schools in the two selected provinces to return to full functionality.

*Learner drop-outs due to teenage pregnancies*

Data also indicated that there were a few cases of learner drop-outs in some schools, mainly due to teenage pregnancy amongst school girls. One parent indicated, for instance, that about 20 Grade 8 learners dropped out of a school in one circuit area in Limpopo Province. This is corroborated by the findings of the study conducted by Duby (2022) which indicated, amongst others, that those most likely to drop out of school were female, from poor households and attending poorly resourced schools with low academic performance.

*Under-utilisation of teacher assistants*

Data also revealed that some schools under-utilised the teacher assistants appointed through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. This led to those schools failing to reach optimum functionality in their operations. Thus, leading to some teaching and learning activities being done partially. In the words of one of the subject advisers who participated in the interviews:

Out of 100 schools, you find that 60% are using teacher assistants correctly and 40% are not. When you visit a school, you find them sitting under a tree, where they're called one by one to assist with some tasks. We need to close that gap by training school management teams together with the teacher assistants on how teacher assistants can be used optimally. Their role is crucial. It can become one of the successes if we can use them correctly.

## Improvement strategies

In addition to investigating the success and impeding factors that impacted schools' quest to return to full functionality amidst the pandemic, the study also investigated creative ways or strategies that can be employed to fast-track the return of schools to full functionality. In response, the following key improvement strategies were suggested by participants.

### *Creation of additional classroom space*

The participants suggested the utilisation of community halls, churches, tents and mobile classrooms as additional classroom space to address the challenge of limited classroom space.

### *Recruitment of volunteers*

Another key suggestion that emerged strongly from the data was that pensioners or retirees and young people should be recruited to work as teacher assistants, to assist with extra classes in community halls, churches, tents and mobile classrooms.

### *Expansion of vaccination of teachers and learners*

The participants also suggested the expansion and intensification of the vaccination of teachers, support staff and eligible learners to reduce the rate of infection in schools.

### *Appointment of more teachers*

The need to appoint more teachers for schools that are experiencing teacher shortages also came out very strongly from the data. According to one parent, "this should be prioritised particularly for schools that have created additional classroom spaces such as church and community halls and mobile classrooms".

### *Appointing qualified teacher assistants*

Data also showed the need to appoint better-qualified young people as teacher assistants. The reasoning behind this suggestion, according to one of the subject advisers, was that "better-qualified teacher assistants would assist the teachers with some teaching activities such as reading as well as to relieve them of administrative tasks".

## Discussion

As outlined in the opening section of the article, the main question of the current study was: what are some of the success and impeding factors experienced by South African schools in their quest to return to full functionality amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and what improvement strategies are required to fast track the return to full functionality? The results presented above address both the purpose and the main question of the study. The results suggest that two scenarios have occurred in actions to reboot the South African education system amidst the pandemic. The first scenario comprised small and medium schools that included affluent schools, formerly known as Model C schools in South Africa. These schools were able to return to full functionality with relative ease largely because of their good socio-economic position. This included the availability of adequate

classroom space, a smaller number of learners in classrooms and the use of smart boards for teaching purposes (Stanistreet et al., 2020).

The second scenario comprised high enrolment schools that serve learners who are mainly poor. These are schools that had overcrowding even before the Covid-19 pandemic started. These schools were unable to return to full functionality largely because of their poor socio-economic circumstances. These included limited classroom space, high enrolments, shortage of teachers and shortage of school furniture such as desks and chairs. Consequently, these schools were forced to implement rotational school attendance, which further exacerbated learning inequalities between learners from good socio-economic backgrounds and learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Stanistreet et al., 2020).

Of particular importance in this study is the fact that we did something that is not often done in educational research. We created a space for the participants themselves, who were directly involved and affected by these matters, to suggest what they viewed as the most suitable intervention strategies required to fast-track the return of schools to full functionality during the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown by the results above, relevant and implementable improvement strategies were suggested. These included the creation or construction of additional classroom space, expansion of vaccination of teachers and learners and the appointment of more teachers.

The study reveals some of the key success factors that contributed to some schools returning to full functionality. These success factors are consistent with the results that emerged from some of the recent studies that have focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, the administration of the school nutrition program as a factor that contributed to some schools returning to full functionality accords with Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021), assessing the impact of Covid-19 on education. The finding that points to the need by the South African education system to create additional classroom spaces in response to the splitting and reduction of class sizes is in line with the study conducted by Sheikh et al. (2020), which suggested the use of gyms as additional classroom spaces, amongst other actions.

The impeding factors that prevented some schools, especially poor schools, from returning to full functionality also confirms findings from the reviewed literature. Onyema et al. (2020), for instance, asserted that the pandemic disrupted educational activities and tended to reduce educational opportunities for disadvantaged people, and that it created multiple barriers to teaching and learning activities. The finding that shows a limited classroom space as an impeding factor to some schools returning to full functionality is consistent with the results of studies conducted by Melnick and Darling-Hammond (2020); Sheikh et al. (2020), and Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021).

Although we are positive that these results have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the field of education, there are, however, some limitations to consider in relation to this study. The first one relates to the small sample of the study, which is limited to only two of the nine provinces of South Africa; the findings cannot be

generalised to the entire population of South Africa. Nevertheless, the power of *purposive sampling*, used for the selection of participants in this study, lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Benoot et al., 2016). The second limitation relates to the fact that teachers and learners who are at the centre of the teaching and learning activities were not amongst the selected participants in this study. Future research should therefore include teachers and learners as key participants so that their views and experiences on efforts to re-open and reboot schooling post-pandemic are also taken into account.

## Implications

The persistent resource gap between affluent and poor schools in South Africa implies that the pro-poor funding policies implemented by the African National Congress Government since the dawn of democracy in 1994 do not seem to be succeeding in closing the gap between the two types of schools (Nortje, 2017). There is, therefore, a need for the South African Government to intensify efforts to close the resource gap between the affluent and the poor schools so that when they respond to pandemics, they do it on an equal footing. Empirical evidence suggests that the difference in resource allocation between schools also tends to result in differences in the academic performance of learners, with learners from poorly resourced schools suffering the brunt (Della Sala, Knoepfel & Marion, 2017).

There is also an urgent need for South Africa to create additional classroom spaces, especially for poor schools. This will create adequate classroom spaces needed for social distancing purposes as well as avoid rotational attendance. The provision of mobile classrooms to schools with classroom shortages that has been going on doesn't seem to be adequate enough. The short-term strategy would be to facilitate and formalise the utilisation of community halls and church buildings during the pandemics such as Covid-19. Given the usual limited financial resources, the long-term strategy would be to build additional classrooms in schools where they are needed most. Additional classrooms would definitely require the appointment of additional teachers and the South African Government would need to seriously consider making that provision as well.

The results also imply that South Africa needs to expand the roll-out of Internet connectivity to all schools and the distribution of tablets to learners, especially in poor areas. Statistics South Africa (2017) estimated the number of learners without Internet access in South African schools to be between 14.2 million and 15 million. As part of a long-term strategy mentioned above, the South African Government should also consider expanding the provision of smart boards, as these have proved to be effective in teaching multiple classes simultaneously during the Covid-19 pandemic. Last but not least, the mass vaccination of citizens has proved to be effective in the containment of the spread of Covid-19 (World Health Organisation, 2022). To that end, South Africa will need to intensify the vaccination of teachers, support staff and eligible learners to reduce rates of infection in schools.

## Conclusion

The article sought to identify some of the success and impeding factors experienced by the South African education system in its quest to return all schools to full functionality during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, it sought to suggest some of the strategies that can be used to assist schools in returning to full functionality and to build the resilience of schooling systems in a better way during the Covid-19 pandemic and other, future pandemics. The results of the study indicate that indeed this article has identified such key successes and impeding factors. Over and above that, the article provides suitable strategies that have the potential to assist schools in returning to a normal timetable much quicker and thus contribute in rebooting the South African schooling system in the midst of Covid-19 and other pandemics in future. While the quicker return to full functionality by affluent schools is commendable and worthy to sustain, there is an urgent need by the South African government to intervene and ensure that poor schools are not left behind. This will ensure that we don't only build back better (Zhao, 2021), but we build back better together.

As shown by the results in this article, despite the democratic government of South Africa's pro-poor funding policies, which it adopted when it came into power in 1994 (Motala & Carel, 2019), poor schools continue to lag behind affluent schools, particularly as it relates to their response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A further study is therefore needed to investigate and make sense of the apparent persistent disparities between the two school types.

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## Appendix: Interview questions

1. What are some of the success factors experienced by the South African education system in its quest to return all schools to full functionality during the COVID-19 pandemic South?
2. What are some of the impeding factors (impediments) experienced by the South African education system in its quest to return all schools to full functionality during the COVID-19 pandemic South?
3. What are some of the improvement strategies that can be used to assist schools in returning to full functionality and building the resilience of schooling systems during the COVID-19 pandemic and other future pandemics?

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