



The NECT COVID-19 Response Initiative

Report on rapid
dialogues
with key education
stakeholders

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Ground Floor, Block D,
Lakefield Office Park,
272 West Avenue,
Centurion, 0163

PO Box 11150,
Die Hoewes,
0163

+ 27 (0)12 752 6200

info@nect.org.za

www.nect.org.za

 @TheNECT

 @The_NECT

 National Education Collaboration Trust

 National Education Collaboration Trust

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Abbreviations and acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CRI	COVID-19 Response Initiative
DSCs	District Steering Committees
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DIP	District Improvement Programme
FET	Further Education and Training
ICT	information and communications technology
NECT	National Education Collaboration Trust
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPE	personal protective equipment
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Initiative
QUAGOL	Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven
SGBs	school governing bodies

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Researchers: Hlengani Baloyi (lead researcher), Khuthadzo Magaza (research assistant) and Aluwani Mathoma (research assistant)

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic is by far the greatest shock schooling systems across the world have had to endure. There is evidence that schools have responded to COVID-19 in different ways (OECD, 2020a, 2020b; Sharp et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020), interpreting their own situations and defining appropriate courses of action independently. Education departments, including in South Africa, have been fairly accepting of these decisions and supported or at least condoned them in most cases.

The same pattern is emerging in how the South African education system is approaching the recovery process. Despite international recommendations providing guidance (United Nations, 2020; World Bank, 2021, schools in South Africa appear to be adopting varied approaches to re-opening and getting teachers and learners back to the classroom following the COVID-19 lockdowns. Because of space limitations (Motshekga, 2021; Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021), some schools continue to use the rotational schooling system (staggered attendance) despite the apparent loss of learning time (Di Pietro et al., 2021; Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021). And, once again, the Department of Education is reluctant to impose general rules on these schools, recognising the absence of suitable facilities to accommodate all learners safely.

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While the increase in school autonomy may be considered a progressive development, the situation does need greater direction to maintain the coherence of the system and build resilience (World Bank, 2020). The limitations on regular school attendance need to be identified, and creative approaches found to overcome them. The assumption is that most of the attendance limitations pertain to available teaching space, which affects smaller schools the most. Immediate solutions lie within the local community rather than the school, but recovery will have to happen under current COVID-19 conditions. For this reason, the United Nations advises that “to deal with the complex challenge of reopening, 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” (United Nations, 2020:3). The World Bank also emphasises the need to build better strategies, which 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” (World Bank, 2020:23).

In line with international development advice – and as part of its COVID-19 Response Initiative (CRI) and in support of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) – the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) initiated and conducted a dialogue process with key education stakeholders that include the District Steering Committees (DSCs),¹ school principals, district officials, school governing bodies and parents.

Because of space limitations, some schools continue to use the rotational schooling system despite the apparent loss of learning time

1.2 Aims and objectives of the dialogue process

The aims of the dialogue process were to:

- Investigate and gather insights about the challenges schools have faced in returning learners to schools;
- Understand and identify the challenges experienced by the parents and communities where learners continue to attend school on a rotational basis; and
- Use these insights to identify possible remedies and proposals on how schooling operations can be improved.

The key objectives were to:

- Determine how well schools have done getting schools back to full functionality;
- Establish whether all learners have returned to schools, or if there are more drop-outs than usual;
- Explore some of the factors contributing to the success of those schools that have returned to full functionality;
- Determine the barriers preventing schools still on rotation from returning to a regular programme;
- Explore creative ways to ensure all schools get back to a normal timetable;
- Ascertain the possibility of implementing household planners and trackers;
- Ascertain the possibility of introducing WhatsApp or digital storybooks for reading at home; and
- Explore the recommendations that education stakeholders can provide the DBE and the NECT.
- In short, the dialogue process seeks to find evidence-based ways to reboot and rebuild the South African education system following the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 The DSCs form a structure within the NECT that is mainly responsible for monitoring the District Improvement Programme (DIP).



REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Three key themes emerge from the literature reviewed for this dialogue project that focus on matters related to schooling systems' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, on returning schools to full functionality.

2.1 Successes and challenges returning schools to full functionality

Attempts to return schools to full functionality were carried out incrementally in many countries, with the adoption of a rotational system for those schools with insufficient classroom space (Sheikh et al., 2020). The rotational system uses staggered school schedules so that fewer learners attend school or are congregated in common areas at the same time (Melnick and Darling-Hammond, 2020). The World Bank (2021) refers to this approach, where face-to-face and remote learning co-exist, as blended learning, and claim it will become the new normal for many schooling systems into the foreseeable future. Indeed, the literature shows mixed outcomes across the world concerning attempts to return schools to full, in-person functionality.

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The World Bank (2021) contends that the COVID-19 pandemic could also be an opportunity for countries to transform their education systems and to develop new visions, where learning happens for everyone, including vulnerable children, everywhere. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a remarkable opportunity for change, including the leveraging of opportunities to use information and communications technology (ICT) (World Bank, 2021:12). Onyema et al. (2020) posit that the enthusiastic adoption of learning technologies that support remote or online learning was in itself a significant achievement in response to the pandemic and its impact on education; and Bubb and Jones (2020) argue that the COVID-19 crisis has become an opportunity for grassroots innovation. That being said, remote or digital learning should not be seen as a panacea for COVID-19-related schooling challenges. The literature shows that remote learning has its own drawbacks. For instance, teachers in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported an urgent need for training in the use of ICT, pointing out that COVID-19 struck when many education systems were not ready for digital or remote learning (OECD, 2020a).

Research shows that access to digital or learning technologies is still a challenge, especially for poor

and vulnerable learners. For instance, the World Bank (2021) estimates that, currently, less than 43% of primary schools and 62% of secondary schools in Latin America and the Caribbean have access to the internet for pedagogical purposes. Research also reveals that learners who have to learn remotely from home, especially learners from poor households, face disruptions and frustrations caused by poor ICT infrastructure, patchy network coverage, lack of access to devices, high data costs and poor digital skills (Onyema et al., 2020).

The World Bank (2021) emphasises the need for high-quality remote learning, combining both technological and pedagogical skills. However, for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds, barriers to adequate access to and use of digital technologies need to be addressed worldwide, including barriers such as learners' socio-economic status, geographical location, ethnicity, age, gender and whether they have a disability (World Bank, 2021). In contrast, a study conducted in Norway amongst learners and parents from a municipality well equipped with ICT infrastructure reveals how quickly they adapted to home-schooling, which was well received by both pupils and parents and led to more creative learning, better progress, more useful feedback and greater learner independence (Bubb and Jones, 2020).



Research shows that access to digital or learning technologies is still a challenge, especially for poor and vulnerable learners

2.2 Impact of COVID-19 on learner drop-out rates

The World Bank (2020) estimates that 6.8 million learners across the world will drop out of school due to the COVID-19 crisis. The World Bank (2021) also estimates that learner drop-out in Latin America and the Caribbean could increase by 15%.

A survey conducted by Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2021) reports that learners from approximately 10% of South African households dropped out of school and did not return for the 2021 academic year, and that this rate has doubled between November 2020 and May 2021. However, it is important to note that this is an estimated figure, calculated from data provided by parents and caregivers of learners aged between 7 and 17.

On the positive side, the same survey reports that the vast majority of surveyed households (about 99%) report that at least one learner (from each household) has returned to school in the 2021 academic year (Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021).

All things considered, it can be argued that a more accurate drop-out rate can only be calculated once learners have returned to fully functioning schools.





Returning schools to full functionality has to be balanced with the COVID-19 protocol of social distancing

2.3 Challenge of limited classroom space

Returning schools to full functionality – with in-person attendance by both teachers, learners and school support staff – has to be balanced with the COVID-19 protocol of social distancing. Creating enough social distancing space has meant reducing class size for many schools (Melnick and Darling-Hammond, 2020; OECD, 2020a). Limited classroom space emerged as one of the key challenges for schools worldwide, particularly in poor countries, thus leading to the rotational schooling system with staggered school schedules (Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021; Melnick and Darling-Hammond, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2020). In Denmark, for instance, several intervention strategies were developed to address the challenge of limited classroom space to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including 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).

While useful in contextualising the challenges of the pandemic in education, the body of literature reviewed above does not explicitly cover education recovery pertaining to the South African COVID-19 context. It does not deal with the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa and local attempts to return schools to full functionality. Importantly, the international literature does not provide solution-driven recommendations relevant to the South African context and its particular socio-economic dynamics. These are the gaps the NECT's dialogue process seeks to close.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report on the NECT dialogue process uses qualitative research methods, both in its data collection procedures 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, 2015:5). Qualitative research, by definition, seeks to gain insights into 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, 2015).

As set out in the Introduction, the research project seeks to gain insights into the challenges schools have faced in returning learners to schools, and to understand the challenges experienced by the parents and communities where learners continue to attend school on a rotational basis. The NECT project has also chosen this approach to contribute to the demystification of qualitative methods and indeed to complement quantitative methods, which are more frequently used in researching educational phenomena today. In our view, qualitative research methods meet the traditional standards of scientific rigour just as well as other, more common methods.

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3.1 Data collection

Three sets of dialogues were conducted to gather the data used to develop this report's findings. The first dialogue involved a discussion with members of the District Steering Committees (DSCs) and school principals; the second was a discussion with subject advisers and circuit managers; and the third set of dialogues involved a conversation with parents and members of school governing bodies (SGBs). The dialogues, their geographic locations and the dates they took place are listed in Annexure 2. All the participants were selected from the four poorest and largely rural provinces of South Africa, namely Limpopo, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used to target and select participants based on their specific roles within the Basic Education sector in South Africa. The targeted population (participants) was comprised of DSC members, school principals, subject advisers, circuit managers, parents and SGB members, as listed previously. In total, 190 participants participated in the dialogues. Parents and SGB members were in the majority at 138 participants, followed by subject advisers and circuit managers at 35, and members of DSCs and school principals at 17.

The narrative interview (dialogue) format was the main research method of data collection. Given the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions at the time, the interviews and dialogues were held and recorded using the Microsoft Teams application. The dialogues were facilitated by the NECT project management team and recorded and analysed by a research team from the University of Venda.

3.2 Data processing and analysis

The reporting uses a version of the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) (Casterle et al., 2021) which processes raw data in five different levels of abstraction (Khosa, 2021).² The abstraction was preceded by a systematic preparation of the data in which the interview recordings from the three sets of dialogues were transcribed manually into three sets of integrative transcripts. Five different languages were used in conversations with the participants: Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, isiXhosa and English. Dialogues conducted in Tshivenda, Sepedi, Xitsonga and isiXhosa were simultaneously transcribed and translated into English. Furthermore, the translated Tshivenda, Sepedi, Xitsonga and isiXhosa transcripts were read by first-language speakers to ensure they were translated correctly in line with the recordings.

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 three sets of interviews (dialogues) were tabulated into a database consisting of three datasets, namely the parents and SGBs dataset, the DSCs and principals dataset, and the subject advisers and circuit managers dataset. Next to each cell in the tabular database, an empty cell was created for comments and notes following any further processing of the data.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used to target and select participants based on their specific roles within the Basic Education sector in South Africa

² Khosa (2021) generated the five levels of data abstraction out of the ten QUAGOL stages of theory and practice-based data analysis developed by Casterle et al. (2012).



FINDINGS

This section presents a consolidated report on findings that cut across all three dialogue datasets and is presented in three parts. For simplicity and ease of reference, the first part presents the findings corresponding to each question asked during the dialogues, and for reporting purposes, the questions are converted into themes. The second part sums up the key challenges schools have faced getting learners back to schools as well as those experienced by the parents and communities where learners continue to attend school on a rotational basis, which are the central aims of the dialogue project. The last part of this section presents the participating education stakeholders' critical recommendations for the DBE and the NECT's consideration.

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4.1 Findings corresponding to the dialogue questions

4.1.1 How well the South African education system has done in getting schools back to full functionality

Analysis of the three datasets (i.e. the three sets of dialogues) shows that the process of getting South African public schools back to functionality was not straightforward. While all public schools resumed their academic programmes when schools officially re-opened on 2 August 2021 (after another lockdown) as directed by Minister of Basic Education Angie Mosthekga, not all of them returned to full functionality. A number of schools are still functioning partially, with learners attending classes on a staggered, rotational basis. Digging deeper, the data shows that it was easier for small and medium-sized schools to go back to full functionality. Schools with high enrolment, and which were already overcrowded before COVID-19, found this much more difficult. In the words of a participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue:



It has been a mixed reaction. 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 have got some schools with over 400 Grade 8 learners only.

And in the words of a parent:



I think the response of schools and SGBs to the COVID-19 pandemic was a good one ... we did not fold our arms and give up on our learners because of the pandemic, we observed all COVID-19 protocols while returning our schools to full functionality.

Analysis of the data also reveals various factors that contributed to whether schools were able to return to either full or partial functionality.

Factors contributing to full functionality

Key factors contributing to schools being able to return to full functionality:

- Availability of adequate classrooms;
- Feeding schemes or school nutrition programmes that motivated learners to return;
- A NECT support programme providing teaching materials to some schools (such as lesson plans and worksheets), which helped to focus teaching and learning;
- Timely supply of personal protective equipment (PPE);
- Strict adherence to COVID-19 health protocols, such as washing hands, social distancing, wearing masks and general sanitising;
- Appointment of teacher assistants through the government's Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI).

Factors contributing to partial functionality (rotational attendance)

A clear takeaway from the three dialogue datasets is that getting back to full functionality has been challenging for those schools implementing the rotational schooling system. Analysis of the data surfaced the following critical reasons for this.

Limited classroom space and/or shortage of classrooms

The challenge presented by limited classroom space or a shortage of classrooms emerged from all three sets of dialogues as the leading reason for the application of the rotational schooling system and staggered school attendance.

Large learner enrolments

The dialogues make clear that large learner enrolment, which directly affects space in classrooms, also contributed to some schools failing to return to full functionality, ultimately forcing them to implement the rotational schooling system.

Shortage of teachers

Data analysis identified the shortage of teachers as another key contributor to partial functionality, forcing the implementation of the rotational schooling system. Participant responses also indicate that teacher shortages were sometimes the result of splitting big classes into smaller groups to maintain social distancing.

Shortage of furniture

A shortage of furniture, such as chairs and desks, also emerged as a critical contributor to failing to return to full functionality as stipulated by the DBE.

Challenges implementing the rotational schooling system

In addition to the factors giving rise to staggered attendance, there were challenges implementing the rotational system itself. These include:

Lack of or poor internet connectivity

Poor internet connectivity in schools and homes, particularly the lack of data for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds, emerged as one of the main causes of frustration in implementing rotational attendance. The message that poor families do not have the resources for internet connectivity, such as devices and data, came out very clearly from the dialogues. As a result, it was difficult for some schools to implement the rotational system when learners with connectivity issues had to learn from home via online platforms. One of the participants in the DSCs and school principals dialogue described this challenge as follows:

The rotation becomes difficult, especially on the fact that some families do not have resources or equipment to assist learners with on the days they have to be at home. In other words, no meaningful learning takes place [in those families].



Abuse of the rotational schooling system:

The data also reveals that some schools give preference to learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) band at the expense of lower grades with respect to teaching and other general school procedures. It was also found that rotational attendance has been implemented by some schools that actually have sufficient classrooms and resources for full functionality.

Loss of teaching and learning time

There is evidence that the rotational system results in a severe loss of teaching and learning time. This is confirmed by the literature reviewed for this research project (Di Pietro et al., 2021; Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). In the words of a participant in the DSCs and school principals dialogue:



To be honest, the issue of rotation has resulted in a serious loss of time for the learners and the system itself.

A participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue echoed the same sentiments:



The gap of contact time between educators and learners due to the rotational teaching system is a major problem. Most of our learners spend more time outside schools, outside contact with their teachers except for a little time in a week.

Exacerbation of academic-achievement disparities

Furthermore, the data indicates that the rotational system appears to exacerbate the academic-achievement disparities between learners from poor and more wealthy socio-economic backgrounds. A participant in the DSCs and school principals dialogue sums up the challenges of the rotational schooling system as follows:



Rotation is just the last resort to make schools go on. But in reality, it is not really practical, especially with kids who are staying with people who are not educated and working away and never at home ... It becomes difficult and some of them don't even have the appropriate equipment that can help them when they are at home. It's just used as the last resort.

Added workloads for teachers

Added workloads for teachers also emerged as one of the challenges related to rotational attendance. This manifests when teachers have to offer lessons to two rotating groups of learners and also when they have to conduct online teaching on the days learners are at home, thus forcing teachers to multitask.

Disparities in the quantity and quality of teaching between rotating groups

Another trend that emerged suggests that rotational schooling has the potential to create disparities in the amount (quantity) and quality of teaching between the two rotating groups of learners. A participant in the parents and SGBs dialogue confirmed that:

The implementation of the rotational schooling system due to shortages of classrooms is a challenge because the amount and quality of teaching would definitely differ between the two groups of learners that are rotating.



4.1.2 Impact of COVID-19 on the learner drop-out rate

Participants describe the return of learners to schools after August 2021 as having unfolded in two ways. While most of the learners appear to have returned to schools, there are others who have either dropped out of the system and/or are constantly absent from school. The dataset shows that 90–100% of learners have returned to school, depending on the number of classrooms available, indicating that learner drop-out was not such a significant challenge in the 2021 academic year. Almost all participants from the selected provinces reported that all their learners returned to school when schools were fully re-opened on 2 August 2021. A participant in the parents and SGBs dialogue confirms this trend:

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 that has dropped out of school or who has died of COVID-19.



Also confirming the emerging trend of a low drop-out rate in the 2021 academic year, a participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue remarked that:

We don't experience drop-outs, especially with the aid of the feeding scheme. Most of our learners are in deep rural, where there is no employment. They enjoy coming to school just to get this lunch, so we don't experience drop-outs.



In line with this observation, another parent further indicated that:

In our case, we were very fortunate because there was no single learner from our school who dropped out of school.



Factors contributing to the lower learner drop-out rate

The following factors emerged from dialogue data as key contributors to the lower rate of learner drop-out in the 2021 academic year:

- Strict adherence to COVID-19 health protocols – learners are now used to social distancing and wearing masks;

- School nutrition programmes (feeding schemes), which draw learners to schools; and
- Learners' enjoyment of shared reading in class.

The data nevertheless indicates that there were a few cases of learners dropping out in some schools, mainly due to teenage pregnancy. One parent indicated, for instance, that about 20 Grade 8 learners dropped out of a school in the Man'ombe and Nkowankowa circuits in Limpopo province. And one parent did explicitly link learner drop-out to the introduction of the rotational schooling system:



This could be as a result of the introduction of the rotational schooling system which keeps learners away from school for some time, leading to some dropping out of the school.

Factors contributing to learner drop-out

The factors contributing to learner drop-out in 2021 include:

- Fear among some learners of contracting COVID-19;
- Pregnancies;
- An existing high rate of absenteeism in some schools, which ultimately leads to learners dropping out of the system;
- Increasing numbers of applications for home education; and
- Families impacted by COVID-19, some of whom are reported to be relocating while others report socio-economic problems.

4.1.3 Success factors contributing to a return to the normal timetable

The dialogue data identified the following factors as crucial for some schools successfully returning to the normal timetable:

- Adequate classroom space and/or sufficient classrooms;
- Cooperation amongst parents, SGB members and the community (which contributed significantly to learners returning to school);
- Using church buildings as additional classroom space;
- The recovery programme, enabling teachers to track their curriculum coverage;
- Installing Wi-Fi to ensure teachers have access to the internet;
- Use of social media such as WhatsApp and bulk SMSes to communicate with learners and facilitate their learning activities;
- Appointment of teacher assistants, who support learning and teaching;
- Use of interactive, 'smart' boards, enabling teachers to conduct lessons in different classes simultaneously;

- Smaller number of learners in classes in line with the COVID-19 health protocols, allowing teachers to pay individual attention to struggling learners;
- Strict observance of COVID-19 health protocols ensuring learners get back to schools, with learners feeling safer at school than at home;
- Provision of water in some schools for drinking, general sanitation and washing of hands;
- Prioritising Foundation Phase learners when returning schools to full functionality; and
- Organising extra classes, such as weekend classes, in some schools.

In confirmation of sufficient classrooms as a crucial success factor, a participant in the parents and SGBs dialogue said:

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. We also have enough PPEs and the support that we needed.



While the factors listed above contributed towards getting some schools back to a normal timetable, there were, however, other schools unable to do so. It is the concern for this set of schools that led to the conceptualisation and implementation of the current study. The barriers preventing some schools from getting back to a normal timetable are discussed next.

4.1.4 Barriers preventing schools on rotational attendance from returning to a regular programme

The data also revealed the following as some of the key barriers preventing schools still persisting with rotational school attendance from returning to a regular programme:

- Shortage of classrooms or limited classroom space, which emerged as the main reason behind the rotational schooling system;
- Poor management of the rotational schooling system, which is clearly not well coordinated, and implemented differently by different schools;
- Lack of or inadequate parental support for learning activities, especially in rural areas;
- Lack of teachers and administrative personnel;
- Lack of furniture (chairs, desks etc.);
- Large learner enrolments (overcrowding); and
- Under-utilisation of teacher assistants.

In reference to the under-utilisation of teacher assistants, a participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue remarked that:



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 under a tree, and they're called one by one to assist. We need to close that gap by training the management together with the teacher assistants. Their role is crucial. It can become one of the successes if we can use them correctly.

4.1.5 Creative ways to get schools back to a normal timetable

Also emerging from the dialogue data were suggestions by key education stakeholders on creative ways to return schools to a normal time-table:

- Provision and utilisation of temporary classrooms and additional classroom space using mobile or prefabricated units, community halls, churches and tents;
- Renovating old classrooms;
- Supplying adequate number of chairs and desks;
- Intensifying the vaccination of teachers (and qualifying learners) to reduce the rate of infection in schools;
- Appointing more teachers in schools experiencing teacher shortages and to teach in additional classroom spaces;
- Relieving teachers of administrative duties so that they can focus on teaching;
- Recruiting volunteers (pensioners, retirees and young people) to work as teacher assistants and assist with extra classes;
- Appointing better qualified young people as teacher assistants;
- Installing Wi-Fi in schools to ensure teachers and learners have access to the internet; and
- Creating social media groups on applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp so teachers can communicate with learners and facilitate their school work.

Again, the challenge of limited classroom space emerged from the dialogues as central to learners returning to schools, to the point where some parents (and SGB members) claimed that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for all schools to return to a normal timetable.



This won't be possible for us (returning to a normal timetable) 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.



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 timetable.

4.1.6 Education stakeholders' views on introducing household planners and trackers

The dialogue data also shows the participants' overwhelming support for implementing household planners and trackers. The following reasons were given in support of this idea. Household planners and trackers can:

- Assist with ensuring children's education and doing their homework;
- Facilitate and improve a working relationship between teachers and parents;
- Allow parents to keep track of the school work their children have done (or not), which can improve communication and cooperation between parents and teachers, and motivate learners; and
- Curb some learners' tendency to miss classes.

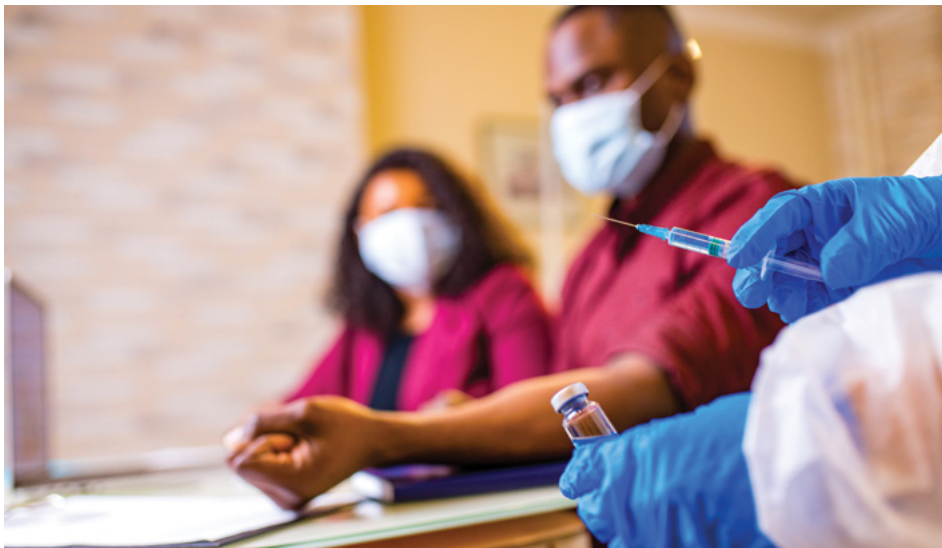
While the idea of household planners and trackers is overwhelmingly supported, some parents warned the researchers about the following considerations:

It is a good idea, but the fact that many parents or caregivers in rural areas are uneducated, some are not committed and responsible for the education of their children, which will make it difficult to implement the planners and trackers.

The introduction of the planners and trackers for households could be a problem for parents in deep rural areas who are less educated, unless if parents are trained on the use of them [the planners and trackers] so that they can have an understanding of how they are used.



A participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue suggested that the planners and trackers should be promoted to parents before they are handed out. It was also advised that the planners and trackers should also take multi-grade schools into account.



4.1.7 Education stakeholders' views on introducing WhatsApp or digital storybooks to be read at home

Similar to the support for introducing household planners and trackers discussed above, the dialogue data showed massive support for introducing WhatsApp or digital storybooks to be read at home. Here are some of the parents' reasons for their support of this idea:

- More teaching and learning activities are being done online now in any case;
- Digital devices will motivate learners since they like using them; and
- Digital storybooks and WhatsApp programmes for reading will also give learners access to online dictionaries.

In support of the idea, one parent said:



That should be appreciated given the fact that learners from poor schools are struggling to have access to the internet and data.

Echoing the same sentiments, another parent remarked that:



Our children like using digital devices such as smartphones and laptops anyway. So the introduction of WhatsApp and digital story books would be very welcome.

The support for the idea was also confirmed by a participant in the subject advisers and circuit managers dialogue:



That initiative is supported 100% if that can be done as quickly as possible. I think in my opinion that is going to have a breakthrough in our schools.

However, some parents pointed out: that parents would themselves need to have smartphones to be able to assist their children with school work; the DBE and NECT would need to provide learners with both data and devices (e.g. tablets); and monitoring learners' access to and the use of the internet would be crucial. In addition, one parent cautioned that:



The introduction of WhatsApp and digital storybooks would be a good idea, which can assist learners. However, poor network in deep rural areas will definitely become a problem or barrier to the implementation of such a good idea.

4.2 Summary of key challenges

4.2.1 Getting learners back to school

- Limited classroom space and shortage of classrooms;
- Large learner enrolments (overcrowding);
- Shortage of teachers;
- Shortage of furniture such as chairs and desks for learners;
- Rotational school attendance – mainly because of the shortage of classrooms;
- Fear among some learners of contracting COVID-19;
- Pregnancies, which result in some schoolgirls dropping out of school; and
- Dealing with learners from families impacted by COVID-19, some of whom are reported to be relocating while others report socio-economic problems at home.

4.2.2 Implementing the rotational schooling system

- Poor management – the rotational system is clearly not well coordinated and is implemented differently in different schools;
- Lack of or poor internet connectivity – particularly the lack of data for learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds – which makes online learning difficult;
- Abuse of the rotational schooling system;
- Loss of teaching and learning time;
- Added workloads for teachers, forcing them to multitask;
- Disparities in quantity and quality of teaching between rotating groups;
- A high rate of absenteeism in some schools; and
- Learner drop-out rates – although the data shows that this happened at a smaller scale in the 2021 academic year.

4.3 Education stakeholders' recommendations to the DBE and the NECT

In light of all the issues emerging from the dialogues described above, the education stakeholders who participated in the research project made the following recommendations to the DBE and the NECT:

- The DBE and the NECT should ensure that all remaining teachers (and learners who qualify) are vaccinated in order to lower the rates of infection among learners and teachers and make schools safe for returning to full functionality;
- The DBE and the NECT should provide temporary classrooms such as mobile or prefabricated units and tents as additional classroom space;
- The DBE should construct new classrooms to accommodate more learners and address future challenges of limited space or classroom shortages;
- Better qualified young people should be appointed as teacher assistants through the PYEI, and they should be given longer-term contracts (e.g. for 12 months) since they contribute immensely to learning and teaching;
- The DBE and the NECT should encourage schools to install Wi-Fi to ensure teachers (and learners) have access to the internet for online lessons;
- The DBE and the NECT should encourage teachers to create social media groups on applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with learners and facilitate their school work;
- The DBE should hire more teachers for schools with a severe teacher shortage, which, in some instances, is the cause of rotational attendance;
- Extra lessons should be implemented by the DBE for learners who are behind with their school work and as part of the recovery and catch-up programme;
- The DBE and the NECT should encourage cellphone service providers to install network towers in deep rural areas to improve network coverage;
- The DBE and the NECT should ensure that schools have enough clean drinking water;
- The DBE and the NECT should explore introducing motivational speakers in schools to encourage learners in light of the negative impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning across the schooling system;
- The DBE should ensure that the school nutrition programme is started earlier to ensure that learners who depend on it are not disadvantaged;
- The programme of distributing tablets/laptops and data to learners should be expanded to deep rural areas to serve learners from poor backgrounds; and
- The NECT should fast track the supply of learning and teaching support material, such as lesson plans and worksheets for Grade 8 and 9.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

05

The overall goal of the dialogue process was to investigate and gather insights about the challenges schools have faced in returning learners to school, and understanding the challenges experienced by the parents and communities where learners continue to attend school on a rotational basis; and to use the subsequent insights to identify possible evidence-based remedies and proposals on how schooling operations can be improved.

As shown in the previous section on findings, the analysed data from the dialogue process revealed, amongst others, factors contributing to: full functionality; partial functionality; (rotational attendance); challenges implementing the rotational schooling system; the impact of COVID-19 on the learner drop-out rate; schools returning successfully to a normal timetable; barriers preventing schools still on rotation from returning to a regular programme; and, most importantly, creative ways to ensure schools get back to a normal timetable. In addition, the data showed massive support from parents and SGBs for the NECT'S proposed introduction of household planners and trackers and WhatsApp or digital storybooks to be read at home. Given these important findings, what are their policy implications?

For South Africa to succeed in rebooting its education system and to maintain its coherence and rebuild resilience to withstand the current COVID-19 pandemic and any future disasters of similar proportions, decision- and policy-makers need to seriously consider the policy implications of this report's findings. These implications are discussed below.

5.1 Policy implications

5.1.1 Provide additional classroom spaces

Limited classroom space and insufficient classrooms emerged across all the datasets as one of the critical challenges faced by schools, which in turn gave rise to continuing rotational and staggered schooling in some schools. To this end, the provision of an adequate number of classrooms needs to be given priority by the government, in particular, the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Public Works and all municipalities nationwide. As suggested by the participants, this provision should include temporary classroom spaces such as church halls, community halls, tents, gyms, mobile classrooms, and outdoor learning environments.

5.1.2 Appoint better qualified temporary teachers

The shortage of teachers, which came about in some schools because of splitting classrooms to meet social distancing protocols, implies that the DBE needs to address the challenge urgently. Given that the government already has a teacher assistant programme in place, it should seriously consider the appointment of better-qualified teacher assistants on longer-term contracts to assist teachers in teaching additional classes such as those that could be accommodated in churches, community halls, tents, etc., as suggested above.

5.1.3 Intensify the vaccination of eligible learners

Suppression of the transmission of COVID-19 in schools is singled out as one of the most crucial steps that should be taken by education systems (United Nations, 2020). Given the fact that most eligible learners of ages between 12 and 17 years have not yet been vaccinated, the DBE, in collaboration with the Department of Health, needs to intensify the vaccination of this cohort of learners.

5.1.4 Better manage the rotational schooling system

The study's findings also showed that the rotational schooling system has more disadvantages than advantages. In addition, the data showed some evidence of abuse or misuse of the rotational schooling system itself. While it is obviously desirable for the Basic Education sector to do away with the rotational school attendance given its implementation challenges, the reality on the ground dictates that some schools have to continue with the system, as announced by the Minister of Basic Education in her 2022 school re-opening statement (Motshekga, 2022). This calls for better management and tighter regulation of the rotational system by the DBE in schools where it continues to be implemented. In addition, provincial education departments and education districts need to intensify their oversight of the system in order to ensure that critical instruction time is not unnecessarily lost in some schools owing to the abuse of the system.

The study's findings showed that the rotational schooling system has more disadvantages than advantages

5.1.5 Expand access to digital devices and internet connectivity for poor schools and learners from poor families

The continued low access to the internet by poor schools and learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds, as revealed by the findings, shows that there is a need for the DBE and partners, such as the NECT and mobile service providers, to ensure that internet access is expanded to such schools and learners. The DBE should also encourage poor schools to install Wi-Fi facilities to improve internet access for teachers and learners within the school vicinity. In addition, the DBE and partners should seriously consider providing data and digital equipment, such as laptops and tablets, primarily to learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds. This provision should include training to ensure learners have the competence to utilise the devices effectively, which is essential for remote learning. Countries such as Chile, Slovenia and Portugal, for example, with the support of private donors, have distributed thousands of computers with an internet connection to vulnerable children in order to support their online learning programmes (OECD, 2020b). This is crucial given that the negative affect of home-schooling and online learning on pupils and students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds has been confirmed by the literature (Di Pietro et al., 2020; ECDC, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2020).

5.1.6 Provide and maintain psycho-social support for vulnerable learners

The study's findings also reveal that persisting socio-economic factors have negatively impacted learners from child-headed and poor families during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a study conducted in the Netherlands revealed that during

school closures, learners from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds received more parental support and had access to more educational resources than learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Bol, 2020). The DBE, therefore, needs to provide psycho-social support to poor and vulnerable learners, including counselling and motivational speeches, and the timeous and consistent provision of nutritional programmes to ensure that learners who depend on these feeding schemes are not disadvantaged.

5.1.7 Implement the NECT's proposed support programmes

Given the massive support by parents and SGBs for the NECT'S proposed introduction of household planners and trackers and WhatsApp or digital story books to be read at home, the NECT needs to ensure that systems are put in place to proceed with the implementation of these proposed programmes.

5.2 Conclusion

As this report's findings show, the central aims and objectives of the NECT's dialogue-based study were achieved – despite the trying circumstances within which the dialogues were conducted. These included the fact that the dialogues were conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 fourth wave, and at a time when the education stakeholder participants were involved with examinations at the end of the academic year.

Despite these challenges, the key findings emerging from the dialogues, along with the education stakeholders' recommendations, provide adequate empirical evidence for the NECT to identify possible remedies and proposals on how schooling operations can be improved going forward.

There is a need to ensure that internet access is expanded to poor schools and learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds

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Annexures

Annexure 1: Key research questions

The main research question that the research project (dialogues) sought to answer was: What are some of the challenges schools have faced in returning learners to school, and what are the challenges experienced by the parents and communities where learners continue to attend school on a rotational basis? The following sub-questions were asked to unpack this consideration in more detail:

- How well have schools done in getting schools back to full functionality?
- Have all learners returned to schools, or are there higher than usual drop-outs?
- What have been the success factors in schools that have returned to full functionality?
- What has prevented schools still on rotation from returning to a regular programme?
- What are some of the creative ways that can be used to ensure that all schools are back to a normal timetable?
- What is the possibility of implementing household planners and trackers?
- What is the possibility of introducing WhatsApp or digital storybooks to be read at home?
- What are some of the recommendations that the education stakeholders can give to the Department of Basic Education and the NECT?

Annexure 2: List of dialogues, their geographic locations and dates

DIALOGUE	PROVINCE	CIRCUIT/DISTRICT	DATE
Dialogue 1: DSCs and school principals	Eastern cape	Alfred Nzo West, Buffalo City and OR Tambo Coastal	22/11/2021
	KwaZulu-Natal	Pinetown and King Cetshwayo	22/11/2021
	Limpopo	Capricorn North, Mopani, Sekhukhune, Vhembe and Waterburg	22/11/2021
	Northern Cape	John Taolo Gaetsewe, Pixley ka Seme and ZF Mgcawu	22/11/2021
	Mpumalanga	Bohlabela	22/11/2021
	North West	Bojanala	22/11/2021
Dialogue 2: School principals	Limpopo	Capricorn	01/12/2021
	Mpumalanga	Bushbuckridge	01/12/2021
	Eastern Cape	Amatole, Cacadu, Alfred Nzo, OR Tambo Coastal and Buffalo City	01/12/2021
	North West	Ngaka Modiri Molema, Bojanala	01/12/2021
Dialogue 3: Subject advisers and circuit managers	Limpopo, North West,	Mopani, Dr Kenneth Kaunda and Bojanala	03/12/2021
Dialogue 4: Parents and SGB members	Eastern Cape	Shinta	30/11/2021
		ORTC 2	01/12/2021
		Mkemane	01/12/2021
		ORTC 14	01/12/2021
		Zinyosini	02/12/2021
	Limpopo	Nkowankowa	02/12/2021
		Warmbaths and Naboom	02/12/2021
		Mahwelereng	03/12/2021
		Lulekani	03/12/2021
		Mabolane	03/12/2021
		Dzindi and Lwamondo	06/12/2021
		Namakgale	06/12/2021
		Thabina	06/12/2021
		Nkowankowa	06/12/2021
Total no. of dialogues	Total no. of provinces	Total no. of circuits/districts	Total no. of participants
3	4	18	190



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