

South Africa's Comorbidity: A Chronic Affliction of Intersecting Education, Economic and Health Inequalities

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Abstract

The analogy of South Africa as an ailing “organism” afflicted by chronic socio-economic inequality is apt as it captures the nation’s manifest endemic abrasions and frailties, especially as it relates to the lived experience of its most vulnerable citizens (the precariat). COVID-19 has accentuated the plight of the poor, yet political rhetoric professes that the pandemic does not discriminate. In this article I offer an analysis of the intricate relationship between politics, economics, and education in the South African context. I argue that these are indeed complexly connected social “phenomena” that have particular variant manifestations and implications for South African citizens. While I recognise that health is also implicated in this matrix, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine this crucial social provision in any detail. I contend that in attempting to understand how COVID-19 impacts South African society, it is important to firstly analyse the prevailing (pre-COVID) status quo, especially as it relates to socio-economic inequality, as the effects of the pandemic impact the lived experience of people on the indigent-affluent continuum in starkly distinct ways. The pandemic has brought into sharp purview the accentuated nature of human adversity in the South African context and the social justice peculiarities plaguing South African society. Methodologically, I attempt a Foucauldian analysis of the contemporary political-economy-education matrix to reveal how fundamental neoliberal tenets have fashioned South African society and its education system into a dualism in which poverty and affluence co-exist. I attempt to move beyond constructions of deprivation, strife and adversity to reflect on resistance and the resilience (technologies of the self) that human beings summon in the face of crisis. Secondly, I examine the impact of the pandemic at localised school level to reveal its material effects on poor schools.

Keywords: COVID-19; neoliberalism; precariat; education



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Introduction

COVID-19 has flared incandescent plumes on prejudice in South Africa. In this article, I invoke an intellectual activism through which I attempt to expose the raw underbelly of South African society in a manner that reflects sensitivity and care.

The South African socio-political-economic context remains plagued by residual racism, a serious social challenge facing the country. While one may argue that South Africa is in a “post-race” era, given the nation’s liberation from apartheid, racism has transmuted in the post-liberation era, with South Africans still trapped in “racial cages” (Pillay 2015). South Africa in the post-apartheid era has taken on a uniquely “nuanced” racism, one that is supported by fundamental neoliberal principles that have rendered the country inept at addressing the liberation movement’s promise of economic justice (Van Niekerk and Padayachee 2019).

South Africa, like all other nations of the world, has in the last year experienced the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economy shrunk by 7% in 2020, the worst performance since 1946 (Stats SA 2021). While COVID-19 might well be blamed for this economic contraction, arguably the pandemic simply exacerbated what was already a dire local economic outlook and endemic features of precarity (Satgar 2020). While the country is riding out the second wave of infections, many nations in the west are beginning to experience a third wave. That a third (or even a fourth) wave is a likely possibility for South Africa is without contention, and this is likely to further exacerbate the vulnerability of the precariat, those most vulnerable to the loss of income and employment (Shammi et al. 2020).

South Africa’s precariat is estimated at just over 20 million people, 10 million of whom are structurally (permanently) unemployed, about 1,9 million have (intermittent) short-term employment, three million engage in day-to-day survival “employment” in the informal sector, and approximately 5,5 million (domestic and construction workers) have relatively long-term, “stable” employment, but earn below R4,125 per month, and they do not enjoy health or unemployment benefits (see Satgar 2020). Satgar warns that the pandemic is likely to actuate the “socio-economic death” of the precariat (Satgar 2020, 174).

In attempting to analyse how this precarity has come to be, I appropriate key Foucauldian conceptual tools, the exposition of which follows below.

Biopower and Biopolitics

Foucault argues that in the transition from sovereign power, a deductive power that is exercised through the use of force (even death as exercised by the South African apartheid government) is gradually replaced by other, more subtle mechanisms of control through the manipulation of human bodies (power over death) (Foucault 1978). This is done by appropriating from biological sciences a basis for the political elite to

exercise power over the population. The concepts biopower and biopolitics have been subject to multiple interpretations in secondary Foucauldian literature (Kelly 2014). It is beyond the scope of this article to tease out these nuances; however, Kelly's account of Foucault's intent has appeal. He describes biopolitics as a shift in focus by the state from disciplinary power as it relates to individuals towards constituting disciplinary mechanisms for entire populations related to, among other phenomena, the control of pandemics, human reproduction and general human health (Kelly 2014). The control of individuals within a population is, however, necessary. This is done through a "combination" of biopolitics and anatomo-politics to produce what Foucault refers to as biopower (Foucault 1978), a mechanism or a technique for controlling populations in a way that renders them docile. Of note is that modern states employ variant proportions of sovereign power and biopower.

In the section that follows, I trace historical and contemporary developments as they relate to the South African socio-economic context.

The Pandemic and the Current South African Socio-Economic Context

Last year (2020) is likely to be remembered as the year in which "citizens" of South Africa (and the world) witnessed unprecedented disruption in almost every sphere of their existence brought about by the spread of COVID-19. The concept "citizen" has particular salience as it suggests a camaraderie of sorts, an egalitarianism that bestows dignity on all humanity, a compassion and genuine care for the suffering of others (Waghid 2004). It is not uncommon to hear leading politicians declare that the virus "does not discriminate"—that it affects and infects all with equal ferocity. I attempt to align with existing activist scholarship that argues the pandemic affects the affluent and the indigent in materially different ways. I begin with an analysis of how the highly unequal contemporary South African economic landscape has come to be and how it has systematically fashioned a bifurcated school education system (Spaull 2013). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the effects of the pandemic on asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa except to recognise that this demographic segment was quickly relegated to the bottom of the state's priority response initiatives, the consequences of which have indeed been dire for this vulnerable group, estimated to comprise at least two million people (Mukumbang, Ambe, and Adebisi 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, while devastating in its effects on the mortality rate of the poor (assumed to be plagued by "underlying conditions"), has drawn significantly more media attention to the plight of unemployed and destitute people. It has in fact summoned a very diluted welfare state-like reaction (Satgar 2020), which might be argued is post hoc (two decades in the making). The Institute for Economic Justice contends that despite the state's claim to increased expenditure in the direction of social redress, the 2021/2022 national budget reflects continued fiscal austerity and has remained silent on the president's earlier pledge of R500 billion towards COVID-19 relief (Choga 2021). Economic marginalisation/exclusion is an endemic condition in

South African society, which is fractious, uneven and hostile, as has become overt in the current crisis. As can be expected, the precariat (those who endure a precarious socio-economic life) are at great risk of having their already dire contexts exacerbated by the pandemic (Satgar 2020), which is likely to create further socio-economic disparities (Qian and Fan 2020).

While COVID-19 might not appear to present an existential threat, as a threat to the long-term potential of humanity, the global crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedented ramifications for all spheres of society (Yezli and Khan 2020). The pandemic's unprecedentedness has triggered widespread vertiginous and survivalist reactions instead of comprehensive, well-coordinated responses. At the time of finalising this article (17 March 2021), the number of corona virus infections in the world stood at just over 120 million, with 2,6 million recorded deaths. South Africa has recorded over 1,5 million infections and over 50,000 deaths (Worldometer 2021).

A defining characteristic of COVID-19 is its potential for rapid transmission by patients who display overt symptoms and people who may carry the virus but are asymptomatic. There is still uncertainty regarding incubation periods and recovery rates. While early results indicate that most patients do recover, the jury is still out as to what the recovery rate in developing contexts might be, especially given that the proverbial "second-wave" had not quite hit the developing world at the time this article was written. Recovery rates across developed and developing nations remain varied (Fanelli and Piazza 2020). In developing contexts, so called "underlying conditions" such as HIV and Aids, tuberculosis, hypertension, diabetes and other "preventable" ailments plague millions of people (Hogan et al. 2020). As such, the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be much more devastating, as preliminary demographic fatality patterns in the United States indicate. African American and poor Chicana communities have experienced significantly higher mortality rates than white people (Malhotra, Kamepalli, and Bamrah 2020). As can be expected, vaccination doses administered per 100 people in the total population vary significantly, with rich countries outperforming poorer nations in securing and administering this life-preserving antigen (Our World in Data 2021).

What is evident is that the carnage as it relates to human fatalities continues unabated, with only Australia and New Zealand (Edwards 2020) demonstrating the capability to arrest the spread of new infections. The proverbial "flattening of the curve" remains elusive for many countries of the world. Even leading nations with the most advanced healthcare systems continue to struggle to effectively treat the ever-growing numbers of newly infected patients. Daily fatality rates in these well-resourced nations continue to rise (Murray 2020). The United States has felt the crippling effects of the pandemic and continues to struggle with the tension between saving lives and securing livelihoods (Saad-Filho 2020). It held the unenviable position of also being the world epicentre of the virus, with over one million *new* weekly infections recorded in November 2020 and an average of 1,500 deaths per day during that month (Worldometer 2021). Timeous access to intensive care (including the application of specialist equipment such as

respirators) for serious, high-risk cases is a key determinant of a patient's survival, a predicament that developing nations face should they not be successful in curbing the rate of new transmissions (Ranney, Griffeth, and Jha 2020).

Developing nations such as South Africa, with notoriously high levels of economic inequality, unemployment and poverty (Satgar 2020), are beginning to feel the brunt of the pandemic. The fragility of the country's public healthcare system, which under "normal" circumstances strains to effectively provide and manage "conventional" healthcare, has come into sharp focus. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage an analysis of the nation's healthcare system, except to indicate that there are distinct parallel insights that can be drawn from an analysis of the nation's education system, the focus of this article. Of significance is that the systematic restrictions of state capacities across the world as a result of deliberate neoliberal policies have caused the current crisis in the public sector (Saad-Filho 2020), a phenomenon that is also evident in the South African context.

Sowing the Seeds of Neoliberal-Inspired Governance in South Africa: Some Unlikely Suspects!

Of particular concern is that the state of poverty in African countries is largely a function of the "nature of the global political economy" (Tikly 2013, 208), and a variant of Afro-neoliberalism (Satgar 2020). In fact, the seeds of a neoliberal ideology and the appeal for social restraint and patience can be traced back to the somewhat "noble" and all-embracing intent of former President Thabo Mbeki in his iconic statement, "I am an African", back in 1996. It is a useful way into the discussion of how patience as a virtue was marketed to the South African poor. Mbeki drew particularly on the Freedom Charter that declared that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. The emphasis here is on the word "*all*" as it is this particular principle that Mbeki's eloquent, poetic oration emphasised. The message at that time embraced the notion of nation-building and social cohesion, resonating with Archbishop Desmond Tutu's reference to the "Rainbow Nation", a biblical invocation of visions of peace, harmony and contentment akin to a kind of Foucauldian indulgent flattery, challenging rank-and-file citizens' abilities to discern the kind of truth-telling that these eloquent orators were expounding. It is important to note that colour (even in the rainbow) unwittingly depicts and reifies a powerful racial ideology, the hierarchies of which have remained largely intact (Pillay 2015).

In extrapolating this idea to our understanding of the imagined South African, we might infer that the imagined South African citizen would be any person currently residing in South Africa (SA), regardless of "race", class, country of birth or any other exclusionary label. This all-encompassing inclusionary construct has particular ideological power as it embraces an individual and collective sense of unconditional belonging, a permission-free, guilt-free belonging to a land, access to whose bounty is without exception. Of particular note is that it represented an attempt to address and diffuse years of racial

hatred. Such sentimental utterances at the time were indeed powerful as they served particular ideological purposes. In the first instance, its symbolic intent was to administer with a single sweep a revocation of the idea that “race” should remain a divisive factor—we were all equal no matter our “race”. At a more coercive level, it complimented the nation’s people on their ability to be peaceful and importantly to be “passively” patient regarding how and when the apartheid dividend was to be distributed, a case of flattery doing its most powerful work. These kinds of “sentiments”, public discourse by iconic leaders (including Nelson Mandela), marked the beginning of a new ideological control, whose objective was the control of the minds of the population to render a state of acquiescence. Zulu reminds us of the “post-apartheid persistence” of apartheid-era inequalities (Zulu 2013, 20), which begs the question as to how much longer the poor and indigent need to exercise patience and restraint. The education dividend for the imagined poor South African child remains a highly contentious matter and continues to play itself out in an unashamedly discriminatory and prejudicial fashion, a discussion of which follows later (with specific reference to the compounding effects of COVID-19).

While critics of affirmative action canvass for a sunset clause, data (Stats SA 2017) reveals that “race” and class are still strong defining indicators of success in contemporary South African society. Data from Statistics South Africa unequivocally indicates who the predominantly affected “race groups” are. Chetty reminds us of the complex relationship between “race” and class in South Africa and that schools and universities have been relatively unsuccessful in disrupting hegemonic social and economic power relations and that the black population continues to reflect the preponderance of the country’s most economically marginalised groups (Chetty 2014).

The 2017 report on the poverty gap showed a high of 32.5% for black South Africans, compared to 16.9% for Coloured people, 1.5% for Indian people and under 1% for white South Africans (Stats SA 2017). For black South Africans, this affected group comprised children, women and people living in rural areas. The data is indeed telling as it explicitly reveals the uneven terrain and chances for economic success that currently prevail for different “race groups”. Black South Africans continue to languish at the bottom end of the economic scale, with 64.2% of the population living below the poverty line (Stats SA 2017). Twenty-five years do not appear to be an adequate period for restorative justice to have done its work, especially for black South Africans.

Race-Infused Neoliberalism and South Africa’s Redistributive Paralysis

The post-apartheid South African context continues to suffer from lingering effects of apartheid South Africa. The ruling party (the African National Congress), while diverse in its “racial” composition, is a party led by indigenous black South Africans. Under apartheid, it was fairly obvious who the oppressor (both social and economic) was, given that racial oppression was legislated and legitimised by the ruling white government at the time. The new South Africa, however, presents a new economic and social power dynamic that requires considered analysis. The South African socio-

economic context is shaped by a peculiar *race-infused neoliberalism*. Of particular significance is that it is unashamedly supported by neoliberal-friendly economic policies, ironically constructed and applied by a black political elite (Satgar 2020), creating the conditions for the prosperity of a select few. There is much evidentiary literature that supports the argument that the post-apartheid state has been seduced by neoliberal policy imperatives (see Reddy 2015; Subreenduth 2013; Vally and Motala 2017). In their book titled *Shadow of Liberation*, Van Niekerk and Padayachee (2019) argue that the choice of neoliberal economic policy frameworks to advance the economic well-being of South African citizens is seriously flawed.

In fact, the flagrant self-enrichment and corrupt practices that manifest at all levels of government (from national to local municipal level) might well be a symptom of market-driven neoliberal policies—policies that created the ideal conditions for fraudulent conduct by the polity (Van Niekerk and Padayachee 2019). It follows that trust in the state to address the glaring racial asymmetry (a powerful white economic elite) becomes overshadowed by the emergence of a relatively small black economic elite—with both elites desperate to preserve the status quo. This might well explain the redistributive paralysis that plagues the post-apartheid state, that is, its ineptitude in appropriating private property for public redistribution initiatives. Racial capitalism and its association with white privilege and the exploitation of cheap black labour have lost traction as arguments to explain socio-economic strife in the post-apartheid era where colour-blind capitalism has taken root. The reality is “that the material-systemic conditions underlying the unethical practice of human exploitation in the past have remained intact as the enabling (structural) conditions for the (im)possibility of the ‘new’ South Africa” (Cloete 2014, 33). Robinson (2019) reminds us that racial capitalism is not necessarily a concept that applies to white capitalists. In the South African context, capitalists of all “races” extract economic value from the majority poor African population.

Of significance in attempting to understand the peculiar South African context is that a critique of neoliberalism outside a decolonial critique might be inadequate. In the language of decolonial scholarship (Grosfoguel 2013), a powerful white economic elite would be referred to as coloniser hegemonic capital. It sustains geographic territorial securitisation that has transmuted and acquired a legitimacy in the post-apartheid era. Thriving alongside a white economic elite is a small black political (and economic) elite. They are what Grosfoguel describes as the colonised now living and operating in the zone of being, a space removed from the realities of the poor who occupy the zone of non-being (the economically disenfranchised) (Grosfoguel 2013). The challenge to this kind of argument is that it might be labelled as unfounded, moralising, essentialist and an unnecessary return to identity politics, given that the country is now in a post-race era, and that there is no need for a complex neoliberalism-race layered analysis of the lay of the proverbial economic land. Advocates (usually white people) who urge that we perceive society as post-race believe that race is no longer a determining factor of socio-economic progress and success (Gallagher 2003). In the South African context,

such advocates would want us to believe that we are now in a colour-blind meritocracy and that racial hierarchies are a thing of the past.

In fact, COVID-19 presents as excellent distraction a time when we might be convinced to set aside these ideological debates in our quest to save lives. The irony though is that it is precisely these very race-infused neoliberal policies that have created the conditions for differentiation as it relates to social provisions such as education and health.

Neoliberalism as a socio-economic ideological practice is not a consistent, coherent, well-defined “movement”. If anything, the way neoliberalism has played out in various countries actually reflects its very “organic”, fluid, and opportunistic nature (Harvey 2007). There is, however, a substantial body of literature that points to a set of key principles that underpin neoliberal thinking. These include neoliberalism’s pre-occupation with gross domestic product (GDP) growth, individual freedom of choice and a minimalist role for the state in the economy (Kelly 2014). Of particular significance for post-apartheid South Africa is the principle of private property rights, which locks in generational wealth irrespective of how it has been acquired. Thomas Piketty’s work titled *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is a seminal study of wealth accumulation and economic inequality in more than 20 countries since the 18th century. His analysis reveals that the reason for extreme inequality is because the return on capital exceeds the rate of economic growth (Piketty 2014). Simply put, annually, a small, concentrated group of capital owners soak up or absorb an increasing proportion of a country’s gross national income. This means that while economies may actually grow, smaller portions of national income accrue to non-capital owners. Of importance is that this is not a natural occurrence of the modern world, but is the consequence of considered selective, human-inspired orchestration. It is vital to note that extreme wealth concentrations undermine democracy and have potential for volatile, explosive unravelling. Piketty also observes what he refers to as *patrimonial capitalism*, concentrated inherited wealth passed down to subsequent generations (Piketty 2014), a situation in which familial birth right supersedes acumen and competence, SA being a typical case in point. Piketty suggests that wilful political action can curb this dangerous and unhealthy trend and calls for a progressive global tax on capital (Piketty 2014). But for this to work requires all countries to act in concert, that there is no rogue or scab nation. This makes such a proposition an unrealistic and improbable dream. It has to do with the embedded nature of big business and government in both poor and wealthy democracies across the world. This concentrated wealth currently commands immense leverage and lobbying power for neoliberal policies so as to maintain current capital holders’ hegemony.

The South African state has “flirted” with the notion of exercising sovereign power by contesting the principle of private property rights. There is an obvious tension between ensuring private property rights and land expropriation and redistribution. What further complicates any decisive redistributive initiatives is that SA has a notorious history of sustained white economic and social affirmation (over 300 years). This has skewed

current ownership of both agricultural and industrial land *and* concentrated economic capital firmly in the hands of an exclusive, economically elite white citizenry, a case of Piketty's patrimonial capitalism (Piketty 2014) playing itself out in a predictable pattern.

Inequality in South Africa's Economic-Education Complex

The duality of the South African economy and high socio-economic inequality reveals its conspicuousness in the form and shape that the South African schooling system has taken. Neoliberal market differentiation as it relates to schooling as an economic good or commodity has become an irreversible feature of South Africa (Chetty 2014; Maistry and Afrika 2020; Vally and Motala 2014). The South African Schools Act makes provision for the existence of private schools, what might be termed semi-privatised (but public) schools that may charge school fees and public schools that are restricted from imposing fees on learners. In terms of the Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding, all public schools are classified according to a quintile ranking, with quintile 1 consisting of the poorest schools and quintile 5 the most affluent (DBE 2014). The poorest schools (quintiles 1–3) are by law not entitled to charge fees while schools in quintiles 4 and 5 are at liberty to set their own fee structures. Schools in quintiles 1–3 rely on a proportionate state funding for learners in different quintiles. Scholarship in this field indicates that these nominal values are inadequate and that classification and classification criteria are flawed (Van Dyk and White 2019). South Africa's no-fee policy and funding instruments have not had the desired effect of attaining education equity (Sayed and Motala 2012). The (un)witting outcome of this education policy initiative is that it has inscribed a market model for schooling in SA in which school education is packaged as a product for purchase. The effect of this is that affluent schools with greater access to financial resources generated from high school fees and their ability to leverage alumni and benefactor funding (Fiske and Ladd 2004) are able to offer education packages (curriculum, physical facilities, pedagogical resources, sport and extra-curricular activities) that are materially better than those of poor schools operating in financial survivalist mode (Maistry and Afrika 2020).

In a market working on the principles of supply and demand, parent consumers "buy" the package they can afford, an issue that is likely to exacerbate educational inequality (Ahmed and Sayed 2009). As such, wealthy schools experience a steady flow of funds, and work hard at refining the products they offer so as to maintain or increase their market share. The net effect of this in South Africa has been a flow of finances out of poor schools into richer schools as parents extend themselves financially in order to purchase the best possible educational product for their children (Msila 2005). This structural (economic) school differentiation has resulted in the rapid impoverishment of already poor schools (Maistry and Afrika 2020; Ndimande 2016). The effect of COVID-19 on such schools is discussed below. Of significance though is that this kind of state engineering of the schooling system is a deliberate act ensuring the hegemony that the affluent have over access to preferential education.

There is little contention that poor children of all “races” are a distinct feature of South African society, but it remains stubbornly more so among black South Africans (Khumalo 2013). Statistics SA points to a persistent mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and education. Individuals with little or no education usually head poor households (Stats SA 2017). The pattern of a generational knock-on effect is likely to be extremely difficult to disrupt. It is not unreasonable to assume that the over 60% of black South Africans who live below the poverty line more than likely live in poor, destitute areas. It is more than likely that their children attend schools that are dysfunctional and lack electricity, running water and functional ablution facilities (Spaull 2013), a phenomenon still prevalent in rural South African schools (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019). Many poor children rely on meals provided through school feeding programmes administered by provincial education departments, despite recent research that suggests awareness and attitudes towards food safety are a cause for particular concern (Sibanyoni and Tabit 2017).

The closure of schools during lockdown meant that food insecurity became an even more pronounced survival issue for poor children (see Van Lancker and Parolin 2020). The lockdown certainly increased the risk of extreme poverty for the precariat (Bargain and Aminjonov 2021). While the lockdown triggered by the pandemic drew attention to the disruption to school feeding programmes, it also brought into the public realm the extent of daily poverty struggles that many South African children experience. This reality demands a review of the neoliberal fiscal austerity measures that the Minister of Finance had begun to implement prior the lockdown (Choga 2021). The state’s response to the pandemic and to the plight of the precariat in particular has been subject to much criticism, with Satgar arguing that the state’s response has morphed into what might be described as an “epidemiological neo-liberalism to manage the desperation of the precariat” (Satgar 2020, 175), in which unemployment benefits, for example, only benefitted those already in formal employment. The permanently unemployed and destitute received a sub-poverty line social welfare grant of R350 per month for a short period of six months, a nominal amount that falls short of meeting both the hygiene and nutritional needs of the recipients (Satgar 2020). This is an instance of biopolitics at work, namely administrative actions of the state aimed at controlling the population disguised as attempts at sustaining the populace, and at the same time ensuring that social order is not disrupted. The criminalisation of poverty (Manderson and Levine 2020) and the deployment of the military have become common practices across the world (Gibson-Fall 2021), including South Africa. The techniques of biopolitics (the exercise of biopower), such as the physical restraining of the homeless (vagrants, street children) within barbed wire enclosures guarded by armed police during the hard lockdown, became an overt manifestation of supposedly justifiable state coercive power in the name of keeping the populace safe. What is clear is that the most destitute have little choice in how they practise self-protection from the virus such as sanitation, wearing of clean, safe face masks and maintaining social distancing.

What necessary intellectual conversations and social justice-inspired educational research does the pandemic provoke, at this time of existential crisis or “systemic shock” (Soudien 2020, 6)? There is a compelling imploration for researchers to leverage the “public spectacle” that COVID-19 has provided as it relates to the education of the poor. That middle-class schooling will weather this storm better than the poor is without contention. That the lack of running water will expose the poor to the vagaries of the pandemic is certainly not an argument that will draw contestation. It does beg the question though as to how such school communities (teachers and learners and other personnel) will experience the return to school programme that has commenced. Maldonado-Torres reminds us that epistemic delinking is about disruption and illumination; it “is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 262). We have to make visible the socio-economic prejudice that the neoliberal capitalist complex has fabricated, especially as it relates to the schooling of the poor during the pandemic, with a view to mounting a challenge to neoliberalism’s hegemony. In the discussion that follows, I examine specific school-related challenges that face the poor.

Physical Classroom Size and Learners Per Class: An Analysis of How Differently Endowed Schools Are Affected

All public schools in South Africa are entitled to a certain number of teachers who are remunerated by provincial governments. The official teacher-pupil ratio in South Africa is 35:1 in terms of the South African Schools Act (RSA 1996). The dual system of schooling in South Africa (as described above), however, means that richer schools are able to set their own school-fee structure that affords them the opportunity to spend on “luxuries” that poorer schools might not be able to afford (Spaull 2013). One affordance that high fee-paying schools enjoy is the ability to employ additional teachers and teacher assistants. Richer schools that often benefit from donations from wealthy alumni and benefactors with designated bursars (qualified accounting professionals) tasked with maintaining the financial viability of such schools have over the years expanded their infrastructure using “self-generated” funds. As such they are/were able to build more classrooms, science laboratories, libraries, common rooms, ablution facilities, and sports facilities such as swimming pools, gymnasiums, and indoor sports complexes. In essence then, rich schools have more physical space with which to create a safe environment for their learners. The existence of such schools in urban areas of South Africa is not uncommon. The disturbing reality in South Africa is that such “First World” schools often exist in fairly close proximity (sometimes within a radius of 5 kilometres) to very poor schools that service impoverished communities (Maistry and Afrika 2020). Of concern though is that the educational outcomes of affluent schools far outstrip those of their impoverished counterparts (Moses, Van Der Berg, and Rich 2017).

In richer schools, the number of school fee-funded teachers may equal or even exceed the number of state-paid teachers. The effect of this is that more affluent schools have

much smaller class sizes compared with poor schools that rely entirely on state funding. Given the risk for infection spread that COVID-19 presents, schools have had to apply proximity rules with regard to seating. The social distancing rule of a minimum of 1,5 metres presents challenges for all schools. The nature of the challenge though is distinctly different for schools across the rich-poor continuum (Spaull 2013).

The South African School Act stipulates that classrooms should have a floor space of a minimum of 60 square metres. According to the Post Provisioning Norms (PPN), class sizes should under normal conditions be limited to 35 learners per teacher. State-funded schools rarely meet these minimum stipulations. It is not uncommon to find across all geographical settings (rural, peri-urban areas and urban areas), especially in schools that rely entirely on state-funding, that class sizes exceed 35 learners and are in many instances over 50 learners per class (West and Meier 2020).

It becomes clear then that maintaining a safe social distance in class in these varied school contexts presents serious difficulties that are accentuated in poor school contexts. It is important to note that inhabiting a confined space (such as a closed classroom) for extended periods of time increases the risk of COVID-19 transmission. In poor schools, limited capacity to manipulate infrastructure means that they have to work with the already maximally utilised classrooms. A strategy that all schools have had to implement to varying degrees is to divide individual classes (learners) into class sizes that can safely be accommodated in classrooms. An average classroom that is 60 square metres in dimension means that it might be safe to accommodate between 15–20 learners at any one time. Poor schools that do not have the luxury of utilising school halls and other leisure spaces have had to reduce the “physical” in-class contact time for learners, with cohorts of children alternating attendance (Hoadley 2020). The effect of this is that many poor children are only able to attend school twice or three times a week instead of the daily attendance. Limited classrooms and the non-availability of leisure spaces are a structural fixity that poor schools and their teachers and learners have had to contend with. The effect of this is that poor children have less contact time with their teachers and fellow learners compared with learners who attend schools with more and safer physical infrastructure. In essence then, the poor have to make do with what is available. As such, their experience of education as a social good is significantly different from that of those who enjoy affluence. While it might be argued that this was a pre-existing condition anyway, an unequal education context that was already in place prior to COVID-19, I want to argue that the necessary safety measures (distancing) that the virus dictates have in fact exacerbated the plight of poor children in the South African school context. It becomes clear that pre-existing socio-economic imbalances are likely to affect the lived experiences of poor learners in materially different ways than they would the affluent (Du Plessis 2020). The argument by the Minister of Basic Education that we should view the economy, education, health and society as disparate “entities” reflects a somewhat naïve interpretation of the reality that prevails in their very interconnectedness (Black, Spreen, and Vally 2020).

It follows then that restricted space and reduced contact teaching time that children receive are likely to have certain effects, which I focus on in the section that follows.

Contact Teaching Time and Curriculum Coverage

As explained above, contact in-class teaching time has been reduced significantly, with learners attending school on every alternate school day. The effect of this is that in certain weeks some learners may only get to engage with their teachers twice a week (Hoadley 2020). As can be expected, new knowledge and skills have to be taught (and learnt) within shorter time frames. To its credit, the Department of Basic Education has mandated a reduction in the curriculum for all grades up to Grade 11 and has altered the formative and summative assessment protocols accordingly. While this curriculum reduction has been a necessary intervention, it might well be an “opportune” moment to review the South African curriculum given that many curriculum researchers have argued that it is content heavy, and while extensive in topic coverage, suffers from insufficient depth (Maistry 2020). The effect of the curriculum manipulations that occurred for the 2020 academic year is an area worthy of further investigation, as the pandemic has impacted education systems across the world (Vu et al. 2020) in peculiar ways.

It follows then that curriculum compression and reduced learner contact with teachers are likely to have certain generic negative consequences for all learners (Fitzgerald, Nunn, and Isaacs 2020). There are likely to be breaks in continuity and flow, disruptions to normal patterns of formative feedback, challenges for teachers related to tracking and monitoring the development of individual learners, and a reduction in teachers’ and learners’ development of intimate mutually beneficial social bonds that might have been possible during normal conditions. It is important to note though that the consequences for the poor and the affluent are significantly and materially different (Jæger and Blaabæk 2020).

As stated above, poorer schools with limited physical space are likely to have to further divide normal class groups to meet the social distancing minimum requirements. This means that the frequency of contact with learners (in-class teaching) is reduced. While no firm evidence of this is available at this point given the lack of physical access to schools by educational researchers, early research elsewhere (Fitzgerald, Nunn, and Isaacs 2020) suggests that there is likely to be a negative impact on educational outcomes. The likelihood that poor children in poor schools may actually see their teachers less often than children in richer schools that have the physical space to undertake manageable class splits is not an unrealistic probability in the South African context. Again, while this analysis might appear speculative, it may well be that given the absence of external supervision and control mechanisms (from the Department of Basic Education), schools may “tolerate” larger class sizes despite the threat that contagion presents. That parents who pay higher schools fees are likely to be more vigilant is a moot point. Middle-class schools are more likely to have well-functioning school governing bodies with parents (affluent, networked, middle-class professionals)

who are integral to the functioning of the schools (Maistry and Afrika 2020) their children attend and more scrupulous about hygiene and safety.

The absence of running water or the disruption to the supply of running water means that affected parents of learners in such schools face a double-edged sword; they keep their children out of school and run the risk of losing out on their children being taught and successfully completing the school year, or they send their children to water-deprived schools despite the clear and present danger to life that COVID-19 presents. The persuasive state though has been “temporarily” successful in coercing parents and learners to endure, to exercise restraint and to be patient. The Department of Education developed plans for the annual Grade 12 exit examination to be completed in the 2020 calendar year, despite its historical ineptness at securing the health and safety of the poor. Grade 12 learners have in the main had to rise to the challenges that COVID-19 has presented. National student organisations have been silent on how the pandemic affects especially the poor and appear to have resigned themselves to the (socio-economic) hand that they have been dealt, another instance of state machinery effectively suppressing conspicuous dissent, the kind that was the ethos of student leadership in the apartheid era. It begs the question as to what has become of social movements in the post-apartheid era.

In commenting on the nation’s suspended revolution, Habib (2013) reflects on how comrades in the apartheid struggle quickly transformed into state bureaucrats, occupying leadership positions in government. Similarly, the continuance of the tripartite alliance between the ruling African National Congress, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party strangles organised labour’s ability to effectively advocate for a social (justice) agenda. Zulu argues that “new” social movements and formations need to become more adept at holding the state machinery accountable especially to the poor, a citizen action to address the hangover from post-apartheid euphoria that the nation continues to suffer from (Jansen 2013). It must be noted though that higher education student fee protests in South Africa have resumed in 2021. The national lockdown has, however, had an effect on protesting students’ ability to sustain a desirable level of intensity.

Some Concluding Comments

This analysis is not meant to be a deficit construction of the poor and parents as incapable of overseeing the physical well-being of their children while at school. The stark reality though is that the South African poor have been fed a diet of discourses of social cohesion, patience and tolerance. In return they have experienced neglect, the manifestation of which was exposed when it came to water. Clean running *water*, a basic necessity for the hygiene that COVID-19 prevention requires, is still not a public good that many poor schools in peri-urban and rural schools enjoy. The rural poor, who are also bona fide citizens of the country, are still denied this necessity. It is important to note that when water became the focus of attention in implementing effective hygiene, it became evident that the Department of Basic Education had been well aware that

running water was an issue for hundreds of schools. What the authorities did not have any accurate record of was the extent of this deprivation, that is, the actual number of schools without water. It begs the question as to the extent to which the urban, peri-urban and rural poor can lobby for the provision of this basic necessity (water) or any other kind of service that they are entitled to, especially given that South Africa as a “liberated” state has been in existence for a quarter of a century.

The susceptibility of the disenfranchised poor (school learners) to the vagaries of the pandemic is distinct from that of the affluent. The disenfranchised poor have had limited capacity to have their needs taken seriously, an outcome of biopolitics effectively doing its work in creating a disciplined society, a kind of control and reform of the mind to make the body docile. Control becomes internalised so that parents and learners now control themselves. Clearly, COVID-19 “not only exacerbates pre-existing social inequalities but also creates new forms of disparities” (Qian and Fan 2020, 56).

In returning to a Foucauldian theoretical inspiration, we note that the citizenry has the capacity for what Foucault terms “counter-conducts”. At its most extreme, it might mean a revolutionary eschatology, namely, elimination of the state with civil society taking care of itself, or it could take the form of an insurrectionary counter-conduct in which citizens exercise “the absolute right to revolt” (Foucault 2007, 356). Service delivery protests (road blockades with rubble and burning tyres) have become a common phenomenon across South Africa in the post-apartheid era (Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Ngwane, Sinwell, and Ness 2017). Such civil unrest has earned the ire of the middle-class who are keen on getting to work every morning. It is important to note, however, that such protest action has not been sustained or coordinated in any effective way. As such they are “managed” by local law and order police enforcement. When civil unrest happens, as has been the case in South Africa on a more frequent basis, it means that state control is breaking down. The state then resorts to the use of (police) force to quell such uprisings.

Saad-Filho captures the essence of the response that is needed given the socio-economic crisis and the compounding effects of COVID-19:

Neoliberal capitalism has been exposed for its inhumanity and criminality, and COVID-19 has shown that there can be no health policy without solidarity, industrial policy and state capacity. This is a desperate fight. We must come out of this crisis with a better society. The left is needed like never before and it must rise up to the challenge. (Saad-Filho 2020, 482)

It becomes clear that the call to political action has to be civilian-driven, a form of sustained, collective social action the resurgence of which was witnessed with the Black Lives Matter movement and other anti-establishment coalitions. As can be expected, many governments are likely to use the contagion as an excuse to thwart social action.

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