

The Pandemic as a Portal for Change: Pushing against the Limits of “Normal Schooling” in South Africa

Pam Christie

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-3733>

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Pam.Christie@uct.ac.za

Abstract

Starting from the position that inequalities in schooling in South Africa are well known, this article suggests pausing the impulse to “return to normal” in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and instead questioning the operations, assumptions and effects of what is considered “normal”. It uses Michel Foucault’s concepts of governmentality and *dispositif* to argue that the pandemic not only exposes the structural inequalities in schooling; it also exposes the confusing enmeshment of governmental processes and logics that produce and normalise these. Given the complex social and economic inequalities in South Africa, the article questions the limits of governmental capacity to meet its own stated aims of equal provisioning of schooling for all, using the provision of water to schools as an illustrative case. The article concludes by arguing for the importance of pressing against the assumptions of “normal schooling” with its embedded inequalities, and it sets out the ethical challenge for working for change.

Keywords: inequality in schooling; South African schooling; COVID-19; Foucault; governmentality; normalisation; school infrastructure provision; ethics of care

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As the COVID-19 pandemic took its grip across the world, Arundathi Roy (2020) set out a challenging invitation: that the pandemic be viewed as a “portal”, a place of rupture between the past and an uncertain future, where different choices might be made, and different possibilities imagined. In this article, I take up Roy’s challenge by seeking to pause and reconsider the call to “return to normal” in schooling in South Africa, and to propose a different ethical approach to meet the challenges of current times.

Across the world, the ravages of COVID-19 have exposed existing inequalities in societies and their education systems. In Roy’s (2020) metaphor, the pandemic has shown these inequalities in the penetrating way that an x-ray would show bones beneath the skin. In the case of South Africa, special visual technologies such as x-rays are not necessary to detect inequalities, since they are all too evident on the social surface. It is well documented that South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with very high unemployment and poverty levels even before the impact of COVID-19, and it has a poorly performing education system. I take Roy’s image of an x-ray as an invitation to examine more closely what is less visible on the social surface. Focusing on a single thread of provisioning, namely the provisioning of water to schools during 2020, my intention is to illustrate *how* inequalities in schooling are systemically embedded in the micro processes and logics of government and how failure is normalised.

With regard to COVID-19, this article begins by exploring what a “return to normal” would mean in schooling in South Africa. It uses Foucault’s notions of governmentality and *dispositif* to illustrate governmental processes and ways of thinking at the micro level of school provisioning that produce and rationalise inequalities alongside the more visible macro levels of policy activity. Then, taking up Roy’s activist challenge for the pandemic to serve as a portal to imagine different possibilities, I consider Foucault’s (1994) notion of “limit thinking”, which argues for the importance of pressing against the limits of what seems to be necessary and obligatory, to find the places where change is possible and desirable. I then suggest an ethics of care to inform changes in schooling.

“Returning to Normal” as a Response to the Pandemic

By now, much has been written about the impact of COVID-19 on Western schooling systems, which is not necessary to repeat in detail here. At the time of writing in 2020, there are special issues of journals such as *Education Philosophy and Theory* and *Southern African Review of Education*, responses from international organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank (2020), and the published research of RESEP at Stellenbosch University showing the disruptions to South African schools in terms of numbers and plans. These publications raise issues about the broader social consequences of school closures, pointing also to the differential impact this has across different contexts. As I shall expand on later, South Africa’s current Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Basic Education (PCBE) clearly states that existing inequalities are likely to be exacerbated:

[I]f performance challenges and uneven access to school infrastructure and other educational inputs are not addressed, the wide disparities in educational outcomes between rural and urban provinces and between less affluent and more affluent schools will persist. Covid-19 has served to further highlight these existing inequalities in access to quality education where we saw learners from private schools able to continue learning under lockdown through online classes whereas learners from poorer schools were not able to do so. (PCBE 2020c)

It is important to note here that these “wide disparities” in schooling existed well before COVID-19. Arguably, “returning to normal” pre-COVID-19 conditions would mean returning to these familiar—even if undesirable—disparities. This article aims to show, through the period of the pandemic, how inequalities in schooling have taken on the status of “normal”.

Foucault’s notions of governmentality and *dispositif* provide useful tools to illuminate the workings of government. Foucault is concerned with the “how” of power—the processes and logics by which we allow ourselves to be governed. In an often-quoted phrase, he refers to the exercise of power as “the conduct of conduct” (1982, 22–21), or “actions on the actions of others” (1994, 341). The notion of governmentality has two dimensions: both the practices by which modern governments exercise control over their populations, and the rationalities by which these practices appear “normal”. The focus of governmentality is not so much on larger institutions of the state, but on the minor processes by which the conduct of populations is shaped and the rules of knowledge by which this is understood. This focus includes

the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that make possible the exercise of this power that has as its principal target the population, as its major savoir [knowledge] political economy, and its essential technical instrument the *dispositifs* of security. (Foucault 2009, 111)

Foucault (1980) uses the term *dispositif* to refer to a shifting and fluid assemblage of discourses, institutions, regulations, as well as the relationships between these, said and unsaid. Through the shifts and modifications of these elements of the *dispositif*, problems are identified and solutions sought. The assemblage of the *dispositif* forms a background common sense of how things work, and the “normal” that must be “returned to” at times of challenge.

Important in Foucault’s work is his insistence that power be understood as relational, not static. He states that “there is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (1988, 84). Change is always possible. As he notes, institutions are full of “cracks, silent shocks, malfunctionings” (1988, 56), and the challenge is always to work against seeming inevitabilities and monolithic manifestations, as points of departure for alternative action, and as places for reworking matrices and strategies of power.

In using the tools of governmentality and *dispositif* to explore how inequalities are normalised in South African schooling, it is necessary to begin with several caveats. First, Foucault's work on governmentality is part of bigger projects on power, knowledge and subjectivity, and as I have argued elsewhere (Christie 2006), governmentality provides a set of tools rather than a fully fledged theory. It is also work that is deeply grounded in Western knowledge and experience, and recognising this is important, particularly in current South Africa where theories of coloniality are questioning the universalism of the Western episteme. Foucault's concern is with the *how* of government, how conduct is shaped, how governing happens, and how it is thought in the modern state (see Foucault 1994; Sokhi-Bulley 2014). Governmentality does not provide a theory of the state, nor does it replace the historical analyses of political economy. It cannot be used, particularly as a "grand narrative", to explain education policy settlements and practices, or the role of civil society in educational change. Such matters are addressed by other conceptual frameworks, and there is a substantial existing literature on South Africa's education policies. Rather, what governmentality offers is a particular analysis that probes the strategies of governmental power in its micro forms rather than obvious manifestations, together with the accompanying rationalities that normalise these acts of power. It provides a different way of seeing—a different lens—to magnify the complex and entangled elements and processes of government, and how problems are constituted and addressed in micro enactments of power.

Government and Governmentality in South Africa

Using the tools of governmentality, I argue that the negotiated settlement of 1994 brought a discernibly modernist *dispositif* to governmental processes and rationalities in South Africa. The shift from liberation movement to government required that the African National Congress (ANC) thinks and acts like a (Western) government, and embraces the institutions and rationalities of modernist governmentality as symbolic evidence of its legitimacy to rule. The new government was structured as a constitutional democracy, with guidelines for "the conduct of conduct" provided by the Constitution of 1996. There is a formal separation of powers (legislative, executive and judiciary); a parliament, which displays the traditions of democratic government in ritual forms, with its "honourable members" engaging in formal debates in particular format; an executive formed by the state president and inner and outer ministries, also in particular format; and a judiciary that blends old and new laws to give effect to the Constitution in legal protocols.

On a more granular level, the work of government is carried out through a plethora of institutions and regulations, with their specialist knowledges and rationalities—a complex network of practices and rationalities where the micro powers of governmentality are exercised. These include, for example, the different departmental bureaucracies with their allocated functions and detailed regulations, officials with their key performance indicators and targets, advisors and consultants who are used for

expertise and knowledge gathering, and particular practices for budgeting, financial allocations and auditing. There are special committees of various sorts including parliamentary portfolio committees; commissions of enquiry, White Papers, laws, gazettes and regulations; the drafting and award of tenders with specifications and reporting procedures. There is a list of conventions and procedures, regulations and monitoring measures, allocations and resource shifting, that make up the micro processes of government and how it is understood to operate. These multiple micro processes give an appearance of conformity, but within and between them are gaps and fissures, omissions and mistakes, discretionary judgements and calculations, resistances and neglect, malfunctioning and corruption—as well as compliance. It is these micro practices that are magnified by the focus of governmentality.

Government in South Africa faces complex social and economic inequalities that must be managed even in “normal” times. The negotiated settlement was not a “state takeover”, and resulted in a hybrid bureaucracy with apartheid-era officials (who knew the rules of the game) alongside new political appointees (who often had little experience in government). The divisions of power between different levels of government (national, provincial, and local) and a multiple array of implementing agencies have brought complexities of their own, as have limited capacity and expertise at all levels. Though the negotiated settlement brought equal rights and constitutional democracy, political changes were not matched by economic and social shifts on the same scale (see Christie 2020). Indeed, the inequalities of apartheid’s legacy have been amplified rather than remediated by the global ascendancy of neoliberalism, which the South African government endorsed through its Growth, Employment and Reconstruction (GEAR) policies (see Maistry 2021). It is sobering to recognise that before the ravages of COVID-19, inequality in South Africa was growing; poverty displayed structural features of “race”, gender and locality; and the labour market could not absorb school-leavers in the necessary numbers to reduce high levels of unemployment (see Alvaredo et al. 2018; Sulla and Zikhali 2018). Indeed, South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, as measured by its Gini coefficient; poverty is widespread, and the unemployment level in 2021 was 36.2%, with youth unemployment at 63.6%. The introduction of pro-poor grants and subsidies has ameliorated conditions to some extent for the very poor, but these do not provide a means for wealth to shift, and the same is true for Black Economic Empowerment measures, which do not fundamentally shift the allocation regime.

The structural tensions between political freedoms on the one hand and economic limits on the other have presented considerable challenges for governments to manage, as have the complex operations of governing. These conditions have generated various forms of social and economic instability. At local government level, where schools are physically located, resources and capacity are often stretched beyond their limits, with the majority of municipalities struggling to fulfil their developmental mandates or receive unqualified audits. As a result, there is considerable instability at the local level, where grassroots struggles and service delivery protests are often joined by black elites seeking

corrupt access to state institutions and resources for personal gain, as is shown in the work of Ivor Chipkin (2003) and Karl von Holdt (2013). These conditions frame the resourcing of schools in rural areas where local governments are often weak or dysfunctional and provincial departments are not always aligned with national departments.

In overall terms, I argue that the governmental assemblage in South Africa operates in conditions of structural inequality, which it cannot remediate and must accommodate (Christie 2020). Though problems are framed and addressed in terms of the discourses, institutions and logics of a modern state, there are limits to what can be achieved to bring improvements or change, given the current economic and political arrangements and capacity limits. In the logics of the current *dispositif*, corruption and dysfunction—which are rife—are identified as problems to be solved, but they continue apace and seemingly cannot be easily remedied. It is as if the identification of these as problems or threats to the social order, accompanied by expressions of outrage at particularly egregious conduct or malfunction, are the most that can be achieved under the current governmental arrangements. It could be argued, ironically, that these responses become a recursive way—a process that can be repeated indefinitely—of accommodating the continuing presence of what is unwanted and unacceptable within conditions of “normality” in South Africa. The same applies to the poor performance of the schooling system with its differentiated provisioning and predictable patterns of performance, which I turn to in the next section.

“Normal Schooling” in South Africa

In schooling, the *dispositif* of a modernist state is clearly evident in the way policies to change the apartheid system were designed and put in place. Instead of drawing on the civil society participation that had driven the anti-apartheid struggle (see Chisholm and Fuller 1996; De Clercq 1997), new policies were developed through a range of governmental instruments. New departmental structures and bureaucracies were responsible for drawing up White Papers, establishing commissions of enquiry, appointing consultants, and producing regulations. New legislation was drawn up through formal parliamentary processes, with parliamentary portfolio committees established to receive reports from departments. For example, for policies on school governance and funding, a committee was first established to set out alternatives, international experts were appointed as advisors, and parliamentary debates were held as the basis for the detailed legislation of the South African Schools Act (DBE 1996). A different process was followed for the new curriculum, Curriculum 2005, which was developed under the aegis of the Department of Education and Training and was later changed through review committees. Language policy was developed in a separate process again, even though it was of central concern to curriculum. As discourses, “a single system of education for all”, “sameness” and “education of equal quality” are part of the assemblage, and targets and performance indicators are presented as drivers of change. Much has been written about this policy settlement and the challenges of

change (see De Clercq 2020, for a valuable overview), and this literature is taken as read.

Despite the activities of this governmental assemblage, it has not been possible to iron out apartheid’s legacy of differential provision or to equalise schooling achievements (see Allais, Cooper, and Shalem 2019; Black, Vally, and Spreen 2020; Christie 2020; Visagie, Black, and Guzula 2020). Not only does the South African schooling system perform poorly, it is also the case that performance patterns are bimodal, with distinctively different results for students attending different schools. Significantly, these bimodal results reflect the poverty quintiles of schools and their former apartheid departments. In the bimodal results, nearly 80% of students attend the poorly functioning part of the system, with a small minority (8%) attending the fee-paying schools (mostly desegregated) that achieve good results (see Amnesty International 2020; Mlachila and Moeletsi 2019). Almost all the poorly performing schools are black schools in rural areas and townships. In the pattern of their distribution, it is easy to see the palimpsest of the former apartheid Bantustans. Suffice it to say the new policies have better suited adequately resourced and former white schools, rather than the schools serving the majority of the population. No matter how the elements of the *dispositif* are arranged and rearranged, deep inequalities in schooling remain; they are remarked upon, lamented, but not significantly shifted (see Christie 2020). This raises a key question: how does the assemblage of governmental processes and logics work across these known inequalities to render them as the “normal” to which schooling should “return” after COVID-19?

In addressing this question, I narrow the focus to the provisioning of infrastructure, where differences between schools are clear and apartheid inequalities are still evident. In 2013, under pressure from civil society groups such as Equal Education and Section27, and in the face of public outcry over deaths in pit latrines and the (non) supply of textbooks, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) committed itself to a set of Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure. To date, eight years later, the government has not met its own targets. The following extract from Amnesty International’s (2020) report, *Broken and Unequal*, provides a snapshot of the infrastructural shortfalls in South Africa’s schools—a snapshot of the inequalities that are so entrenched over time as to be part of what is “normal” in the schooling system:

According to the government’s own statistics for 2018, out of 23,471 public schools 19% only had illegal pit latrines for sanitation with another 37 schools having no sanitation facilities at all; 86% had no laboratory; 77% had no library; 72% had no internet access and 42% had no sports facilities. 239 schools lacked any electricity. 56% of South African head teachers report that a shortage of physical infrastructure (compared to an OECD average of 26%) is hindering their school’s capacity to provide quality instruction. 70% report a shortage of library materials compared to an OECD average of 16%.

Many of the shortcomings are in breach of not just the government's international human rights obligations but its own Minimum Norms and Standards for educational facilities. In 2013 the government enacted these binding regulations requiring the government to ensure that by November 2016 all schools have access to water, sanitation and electricity; all plain (unimproved and unventilated) pit latrines are replaced with safe and adequate sanitation; and schools built from inappropriate materials, such as mud and asbestos, are to be replaced. Yet as the government's own statistics show it has not met these targets. (Amnesty International 2020, 4)

As background information on this, further details are useful. School infrastructure is funded in two ways: through Treasury grants to provinces, and through two conditional grants given by Treasury to the DBE to allocate to provinces. Of these, the Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG) is intended to supplement provincial funding for accelerating the construction, maintenance, upgrading and rehabilitation of infrastructure. The Accelerated School Infrastructure Development Initiative (ASIDI)—previously the Schools Infrastructure Backlog Grant—was introduced in 2011 as a high impact intervention to eliminate backlogs and upgrade schools to meet the 2013 Norms and Standards for Provisioning. At the time of COVID-19, these funding measures had not been sufficient for the government to meet its own 2013 requirements for the Norms and Standards of infrastructure (as shown by the extract above from Amnesty International's report).

Recorded debates of parliament's Portfolio Committee on Basic Education show that in the 2019/2020 budget period—before the crisis of COVID-19—the infrastructure service delivery for both of the DBE-administered grants was running behind schedule. ASIDI had spent only 70% of its allocated funding in 2019/2020, and in terms of water supply, only 89 schools had been supplied out of a target of 225 quarterly. The EIG had made only 62% progress towards its targets (PCBE 2020c). Moreover, the DBE began 2020 on the back foot financially. The January 2020/2021 Medium Term Expenditure Framework cut nearly R135 billion from education, including a cut of R1.9 billion from the EIG, and in June, Treasury redirected a further R2 billion from the EIG to meet the requirements of COVID-19 relief—cuts that are estimated to have affected nearly 2000 other projects (Mthethwa 2020). In effect, any measures taken for COVID-19 relief would be provided at the expense of other necessary infrastructure improvement, without additional funds being provided.

In the next section, I trace the issue of water supply to schools to illustrate the processes and rationalities of governmentality, as addressed in the detailed minutes of the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education. This is a committee of parliament chaired by the ruling party and made up of representatives of other parties, to which the Department of Basic Education submits reports on a regular schedule through the year. During the course of 2020, these reports addressed the COVID-19 crisis in schooling. By taking a narrow focus on PCBE meetings for 2020, and within this a focus on the theme of water supply, I aim to provide a snapshot of governmentality in operation and the recursive moves of the *dispositif* as it confronts problems it cannot resolve. In taking this single example,

my aim is not only to illustrate how inequalities are normalised, but also to illustrate the complex, enmeshed, and multi-agency processes that government entails. In this, I deliberately do not address the corruption and malfeasance that have come to light.

In presenting this picture, it is not my intention to minimise the enormous disruptions and suffering that COVID-19 has brought, particularly to poorer communities; nor is it my intention to diminish the concerns of governments and education departments attempting to meet the new circumstances of the crisis as best they can; nor do I set aside the worries of teachers, parents and students themselves facing the uncertainties of the pandemic and its impact on their futures. Rather, my intention is to show the immense difficulties—if not impossibility—of addressing inequalities through current structures and processes, as well as the entangled and messy arrangements governments must make for the provisioning of schools across different departments and entities. My aim is to pause the impulse to “return to normal” in schooling and provide a space to question the operations, assumptions and effects of what is considered “normal” with a view to pressing for change.

Meeting the Challenges of COVID-19?

In early March 2020, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a State of Disaster due to COVID-19, and strict lockdown requirements were imposed across the country. Schools were closed from 18 March and in the following months, the DBE issued numerous regulations relating to closures and conditions for re-opening. It also submitted a number of reports to the PCBE for consideration and debate. In what follows, I use excerpts from minutes of a selection of three COVID meetings held by the DBE to show the recursive processes through which problems were framed but not resolved.

PCBE Meeting, 29 April 2020: COVID-19 Plan

At the end of April, the Director General (DG) of the DBE presented the COVID-19 Basic Education Sector Plan to the PCBE. The presentation began with a brief survey of international responses to the pandemic, discursively locating South Africa’s response alongside those of other governments. This was followed by the presentation of a set of statistics on South Africa’s schools (more than 12 million students and 400,000 teachers in 23,076 public schools), discursively providing evidence to convey knowledge of the scale of the problem on which the plan was based. The Plan confidently outlined the issues to be addressed before schools would be safe to reopen, with the implication being that the requirements could be met across all the country’s differently resourced schools. These included instructions on hygiene and guidelines for risk reduction, an amended school calendar and curriculum recovery programme, implications for examinations, the importance of “ICT as the New Normal”, procedures for the procurement of PPE (personal protective equipment), and a set of non-negotiable preconditions to be in place for each school before reopening. The non-negotiables are set out as follows:

Non-Negotiables (Preconditions) for the Re-opening of Schools

1. COVID 19 essentials (Basic Sanitation and Hygiene Package [including cleaning and disinfection materials, PPE, sanitisers, handwashing soap, gloves, cloth masks and thermometers])
2. Water and Sanitation (Mobile facilities to replace pit latrines)
3. Cleaners (Extended Public Works Programme)
4. Screeners (Extended Public Works Programme) [parents are encouraged to screen their children at home using a thermometer]
5. Additional teaching posts to deal with overcrowding (No class should have more than 40 learners)
6. Additional substitute posts to replace staff due to long illness
7. Provision of mobile classrooms to deal with overcrowding as temporary measure
8. Incubation Camps for progressed and weaker learners (Grade 12) to succeed academically. (PCBE 2020a)

In other words, to open safely, schools would need, among other things, to make provision for wearing of cloth masks, hand washing with soap and water, hand sanitisers of a stipulated quality, and social distancing of at least 1.5 metres per person with no more than two students per desk. Clearly, hand washing would require water supply, and the DBE noted that it would be taking emergency measures to ensure sufficient water and sanitation for all schools. It committed itself to providing two cloth masks to each learner in school quintiles 1 to 3, with provincial education departments responsible for other PPE provisioning.

The Plan presented the situation in schools as a crisis that would be brought under control by a set of co-ordinated measures, aligned with international experience. In the official discourse of the presentation and accompanying regulations and gazettes, the implicit assumption was that all provincial departments and schools would have the capacity and necessary budget to meet a set of standardised requirements. Couched in the procedures and rationalities of modern governmentality, the presentation conveyed the impression that the crisis was under control. Yet, when the well-known deep inequalities of the system are taken into consideration, the feasibility and sufficiency of these measures do not hold up. Given the backlogs in meeting its own targets for Minimum Norms and Standards for educational facilities, how would the department fund these COVID-19 non-negotiables and how would they be put in place in different provinces and schools where there were already infrastructural backlogs? And following the theme of water supply, how would the DBE ensure that the infrastructure would be in place in all schools for handwashing with soap and water?

The DBE's gazetted Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (2013) stipulate in some detail the requirements for water supply at schools. Among these details, Section 11(1) clearly states:

All schools must have a sufficient water supply which complies with all relevant laws and which is available at all times for drinking, personal hygiene and, where appropriate, for food preparation. (DBE 2013)

Remarkably, at the same time as including “water and sanitation” in the list of “non-negotiables for school re-opening”, the DBE’s presentation to the PCBE provided information about the number and location of schools in need of emergency water, with an accompanying map as illustration. The Director General noted that 3,475 schools needed emergency water support—this, more than seven years after gazetting the Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (2013) and 25 years after the official end of apartheid. That the government was able to breach its own regulations as well as constitutional rights without comment or explanation illustrates the extent to which inequalities in infrastructure had been normalised within the governmental *dispositif*. With reference to Figure 1 below, what is visually striking is not only the numbers of schools without adequate water supply, but also their dispersal in a very similar (if not identical) pattern to the former apartheid Bantustans.

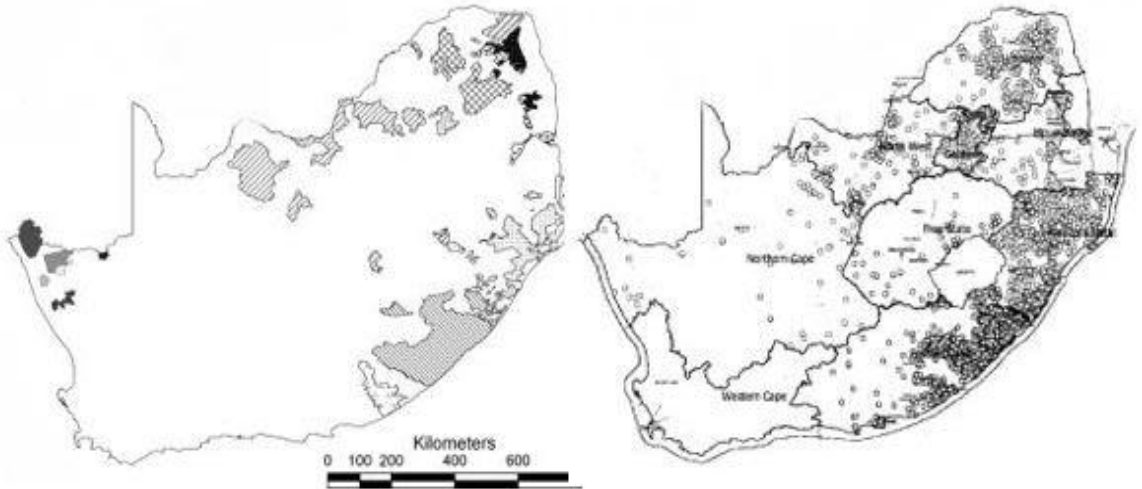


Figure 1: Distribution of previous apartheid Bantustans compared with schools lacking water supply

The DBE’s plan to provide emergency water supply to these schools was ambitious and ultimately unrealistic: it involved working with the Department of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation (DHSWS) to deliver over 7,000 tanks in a period of two weeks, with Rand Water as the implementing agent. A comment at the meeting by Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Reginah Mhaule, expanded on this as follows:

On water and sanitation: Both are a big challenge for the Department, because “most of the rural schools do not have water, especially in the Eastern Cape where there is literally no water”. Water is also a challenge in other rural provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. DBE is working with the Department of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation. DHSWS is making use of existing boreholes; where

there are no boreholes, then it puts in boreholes. In some instances, there is a borehole, but there is no water. In that case, water tankers will be used. DHSWS will provide water, and DBE is working with DHSWS to provide water. DHSWS knows the needs of each school per province and per district. DBE submits the needs of the schools to DHSWS, so that when the latter works on its budget, it knows the schools that must be catered for. The Deputy Minister said that we believe that on the 18 May when learners come to school, every school will have water. (PCBE 2020a)

In other words, the DBE put forward a set of proposals around hand washing and water supply that clearly could not be enacted. It proposed that the crisis be solved through shifting and reassembling elements in the *dispositif*, when this assemblage was already behind schedule in its ordinary operations and was facing budget cuts. Under the oversight of the PCBE, the DBE sidestepped known underperformance by simply ignoring it—a remarkable instance of normalisation.

PCBE Meeting, 30 June: Progress Report

Two months later, in June 2020, the DBE presented its Progress Report to the PCBE on the State of Readiness for the Reopening of Schools. The record of the meeting includes a vigorous discussion on a range of topics, among them emergency water supply. The Deputy Minister reported that although 95% of schools had been ready to open in early June, some were not able to because of vandalism and COVID-19 essentials not being in place—an acknowledgement that the ambitious goals set out in the April plan were already slipping.

With regard to emergency water supply, the DG reported on supply to 3,350 schools (excluding Gauteng, Northern Cape and Western Cape which had indicated they had sufficient capacity) and noted that R400 million had been set aside for this from the EIG allocation. Rand Water was undertaking temporary installation of at least one tank to all schools on the list. The DG noted:

There were challenges with water and sanitation in Limpopo, where water tankers on the way to delivering water to schools were stopped because communities said that they needed it more than schools. In other instances, communities went to schools and used the water that was provided to schools. DBE has seen such things happening in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. (PCBE 2020b)

The DG also noted that longer-term solutions needed to be addressed and proposed an “operational level” team including various local government bodies to ensure that municipalities as water authorities would take over the responsibility of providing water from the DBE (again, demonstrating a reassembling of elements in the *dispositif* to find a solution to the crisis, and the multiple agencies involved). At the same time, however, the DBE noted that some municipalities had collapsed due to revenue from communities not coming in, and it “had encouraged its schools to pay for municipal services and bills, so that schools get a regular supply of water” (PCBE 2020b). Clearly, emergency water supply was much more complex than the DBE had anticipated, a realisation that also

indicates the DBE was far from actually addressing this problem in normal times, in spite of its Norms and Standards commitments. The following comment from the minutes gives an even more revealing statement of this:

On the capacity of municipalities: The DG did not know the magnitude of the water and sanitation problem. He had “woken up to that reality” and his view was that it was a serious problem. (PCBE 2020b)

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that ASIDI and the EIG were not meeting their targets, and that there were schools without water supply prior to COVID-19. Such slippages were normalised as the *dispositif* was adapted as if it would be possible to overlook the deep inequalities in school provisioning and their unequal contexts.

The following somewhat lengthy extract provides interesting details on the actual measures and associated costs that emergency water supply had entailed:

Mr Dawid van der Westhijzen, DBE Deputy Director-General, replied [to member enquiries] about the water tanks. The 3 335 schools consist of 711 schools with existing tanks and 2 624 schools need new tanks. Under the Rand Water contract, DBE had to supply those tanks. To supply the 5 000-litre tanks to the 2 624 schools, Rand Water procured these tanks from 40 different suppliers. The average price DBE paid for those tanks was R519.72. That adds up to approximately R13 million. Those tanks are then available at the supplier depot and one needs to transport the tanks via truck. Some tanks travel hundreds of kilometres from the depot. DBE then spent a further R8 million on transporting tanks to schools. That takes the cost to about R21 million. Initially DBE planned to have proper tank stands but it ran out of time. The agreement was that DBE split this into phases, where the rest is a temporary stand at ground level, which is very basic. A tank with a basic stand costs about R3 300. That brings the cost to about R30 million for the whole installation, including transport.

The missing part of the calculation by the Member [who queried the costs] is the cost of the water and its delivery. The 3 335 schools represent about 1.5 million learners. If one works on 5 litres per person per day that is bought from municipalities at about R20 per kilolitre, that adds another R6 million to the cost over a two-month period. The delivery of the water is “the big bucks”. Putting water on a truck and driving it to a destination instead of delivering water through a pipeline is very expensive. R96 million allocated to water delivery. That gives a total of R131 million. Rand Water is paid an implementing agent fee of 5%. Rand Water appointed service providers for local content, local economic development and local labour. These social facilitators get paid a fee of 3.5% and then DBE made allowance for disbursements of 1.5%. That brings the total to R145 million. On top of that, *due to uncertainties about data accuracy, access routes, and availability of materials, DBE allowed a 20% contingency* but that contingency remains under DBE control. There is a R29 million contingency, which takes the total to R174 million. If one puts VAT [value-added tax] on top of that, one comes to R200 million. It is the only money that is currently being dealt with. The R400 million is untouched; it has not been transferred to anybody. DBE will wrap up phase 1 before it implements phase 2. (PCBE 2020b; emphasis added)

In this context, the question about sustainability raised by one of the PCBE members from Limpopo is particularly pressing:

Will water still be supplied to those schools post-COVID-19? COVID-19 will pass but the challenges at schools will remain. Who will continue putting water into those JoJo tanks? The answer is questionable; it is a problem. (PCBE 2020b)

The back story to this—mentioned briefly in the meeting and touched on earlier in this article—is the absence of infrastructure and the collapse of many local government structures, where poverty and general lack of revenue are compounded by corruption and weak administration. All schools are “local”, grounded in specific places, and when they fall within dysfunctional municipalities and/or have histories of inadequate provisioning from township and Bantustan legacies, then remedying their conditions lies beyond the reach of education departments’ “normal” arrangements. It is at this level—where the processes and logics of government are exposed—that it appears as if the “normality” of the modernist *dispositif* cannot hold. And yet it does.

PCBE Meeting, 3 November: Presentations from FFC and AGSA

Four months later, in November 2020, the PCBE (including the DBE and ministry representatives) was briefed by the Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) on expenditure patterns of conditional grants and equity in education, and by the office of the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) on audit outcomes. What emerges strongly in both the FFC and AGSA reports is the slow progress in infrastructure improvement across the provinces, as well as underspending by poorer provinces on the minimum Norms and Standards and gazetted levels of equity funding levels for quintiles, with the Eastern Cape and Limpopo “disproportionately and consistently disadvantaged” (PCBE 2020c). The meeting records the following:

The FFC noted that the status quo for delivering most provincial infrastructure projects separated the planning, budgeting and implementation functions between sector departments and implementing agents, thus distorting incentives and weakening the accountability chain, e.g., projects were often over budget and time overruns were frequent because public works and other implementing agents appointed consultants to design and oversee infrastructure projects, but were not incentivized to properly manage them as the Auditor General does not hold implementing agents accountable for infrastructure spending. (PCBE 2020e)

In particular, the FFC identified problems with the long and complex supply chain management for projects, which increased the risk of irregularities. Using an example from ASIDI, it noted that the DBE appointed the Development Bank of South Africa and Eskom as implementing agents for ASIDI, and the “DBSA in turn utilises subcontractors who in turn rely on numerous small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) to roll out the school building project—this arrangement complicates and weakens the accountability chain—strong oversight required” (2020e). The FFC was particularly critical of implementing agents appointing consultants to design and

oversee infrastructure projects—people who are “not incentivized to properly manage them” and are not held “accountable for infrastructure spending” (2020e).

In the words of the FFC report, “it is time to reconsider this delivery model which relies heavily on implementing agents” (PCBE 2020e).

Other setbacks identified by the FFC included the 1557 schools that were vandalised during the lockdown period, with items such as ICT equipment, kitchen supplies and school furniture stolen.

PCBE, 10 November: DBE 2019/2020 Annual Report and Quarter 1 Performance 2020/2021

The following two extracts from the PCBE minutes require no further comment:

The Department reported an underperformance in the building and completion of new schools through the Accelerate School Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI). ... Gross underperformance was acknowledged concerning water and sanitation in schools. Further underperformance was identified in monitoring underperforming schools. The DBE recommended that internal controls be strengthened through evidence and monitoring in 2020/21.

The Department acknowledged the weaknesses in financial controls where irregular expenditure almost doubled. This occurred in supply chains carried out by implementing agents without considering the relevant instructions from National Treasury, which occurred in many forms of expenses. The DBE is following a matter of R500 million in irregular expenditure which is under review and to be regained through remedial action. (PCBE 2020d)

Thus, as 2020 ended, the underperformance of the DBE and instances of lack of accountability were noted and in effect absorbed into the normal operations of government. Remedies would be found through existing processes and, if necessary, a realignment of existing elements in the *dispositif*. No fundamental changes were envisaged.

Pausing the “Normal” and Pushing against Its Limits

My purpose in this article has been to pause the impulse to “return to normal” as a response to the pandemic and, using Arundhati Roy’s (2020) metaphor of an x-ray, to illustrate how the systematic inequalities and failures in South African schooling are normalised in governmental processes. The article traces a single thread of provisioning—sustainable water supply to schools—to illustrate the “how” of government, and how the shifting assemblage of the *dispositif* absorbs and normalises the government’s inability to meet the requirements it sets for itself. This is not to elevate the importance of water supply over other dimensions of schooling and in particular the classroom practices where teaching and learning are crucial activities.

Rather, it is to use an available example to illustrate the entangled micro-level processes and logics within governmental activities and how these normalise existing inequalities.

The crisis of COVID-19 raises serious questions about the viability of “normal schooling” in South Africa and the limits to the processes and logics that the system pivots upon. Schooling in its current form is one of the most rigid institutions of modernity (and colonialism) and it is very difficult to change. The South African schooling system presents two faces: one functional and the other dysfunctional. Much as these might appear as if they are two separate systems, it needs to be recognised that they are *one* system, and I would go so far as to suggest that the two parts are co-constitutive. They are manifestations of a policy settlement that has not adequately remediated apartheid inequalities, but operates as if it has. The assemblages of governmentality present inequalities as either short-term problems to be solved in the future within the limits of the existing system, or as unfortunate but inevitable features that have no alternatives. In whatever ways the *dispositif* addresses these inequalities, they are somehow accommodated as the “normal” to which we should “return” after a major disruption.

Arundhati Roy’s (2020) invitation is to view the pandemic as a place of rupture between the known past and an uncertain future, an invitation to make different choices and imagine different possibilities about the “normal”. I interpret this as a call to challenge the embedded inequalities that are taken for granted in common sense thinking about South African schooling, expressed in terms such as “there is no alternative” and “we are improving, even if slowly”.

A possible response to Roy’s challenge might be to approach the current situation with what Foucault calls an ethos of “limit-attitude” in his 1994 analysis of the Enlightenment and humanism. Rather than seeking an ambitious rupture of what exists, Foucault proposes a form of criticism that goes beyond a simple “gesture of rejection”, and instead, presses against the limits of what is possible. The work of critical analysis, he suggests, is to separate what is contingent and arbitrary from what appears to be necessary and obligatory. “The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over” (Foucault 1994, 315). The purpose of undertaking careful critical analysis with an ethos of limit-attitude is “to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (316). For Foucault, freedom is never a completed achievement.

Proceeding along Foucault’s suggested lines, the task required is a careful analysis of what is necessary and what is contingent in current schooling arrangements, so as to press against the limits of what exists, to define what is acceptable, and to push against what is not. Foucault does not favour what he calls “empty dreaming”, and instead calls for careful analysis of conditions of existence and the forms of thinking that sustain

them, towards finding more “admissible and acceptable forms of existence” (Foucault 1996, 433).

As mentioned earlier in this article, Foucault’s work on power, knowledge and subjectivity, which includes governmentality, is firmly grounded in the Western episteme to which he has made major contributions. Highly significant though his work is, it is important also to recognise its location in a particular geopolitics of knowledge and its assumed universalism of “Enlightenment Man”. As coloniality theorist Walter D. Mignolo (2011) wryly notes, “what Foucault did not have was the colonial experience and political interest propelled by the colonial wound” (2011, 133). Debates have opened in South Africa on what delinking from the coloniality of this episteme in education would entail (see Christie and McKinney 2017). Though these debates lie beyond the scope of this article, I raise them here in order to press against the seeming inevitability of the Western episteme, and to recognise that “limit-thinking” may have its own limits. While governmentality enables an analysis of power as exercised and rationalised in modern state formations (the form that South Africa has adopted), it remains a set of tools rather than a theory of change, and its telos—its ultimate aim—does not address conditions outside Western governmental forms.

Arundhati Roy’s invitation to explore the space of rupture invites us to imagine different possibilities beyond what currently exists. It invites ethical reconsideration of how we as equal human beings might best live with others in our daily sociality, in the economies by which we secure our livelihoods, in the social institutions by which we shape and give meaning to our shared lives, in our schools with their central mandates of passing valued knowledge on to young people, building social cohesion and promoting forms of human flourishing. With what telos or ethical framework would we push against what exists towards something different?

Beyond issues of COVID-19 and schooling, there is a pressing need to build a stronger ethical concern for how we might best live with greater consciousness of, and care for, all other beings, and the earth itself. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fact that we as human beings are biological entities susceptible to disease, frailty, and mortality, just like other living entities, and our survival on the earth is vulnerable and interdependent. Shifts taking place in the earth’s climate and ecosystem challenge us to acknowledge the powers of the earth—geopower—and also the damage done by the current extractive and exploitative economic system, which renders enormous distortions in wealth distribution and erodes the conditions of life for humans and other living beings. The ethical task of care means accepting our responsibilities as conscious, embodied beings who have emotions and aspirations and finite lives on an earth we share and must take care of.

Taking up Roy’s invitation, I suggest that a pressing ethical and analytical task for us as educators is to shift our gaze from the privileged centre with its well-resourced schools and students, to the marginal spaces and places where the majority of South Africa’s

people live. The scars of history, not least apartheid history, need to be acknowledged (rather than set aside as they currently are) in the serious work of reparation and repair. Then, pushing against seeming inevitabilities and limits with an ethics and politics of engagement, the task is to explore what else we might do, or what we might do differently, to build shared public institutions that provide acceptable conditions for all in the name of justice and equal dignity.

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