

Deepening class inequalities: Minister Motshekga's hidden agenda to open public schools!

The battle to reopen schools conceals the real struggle of an alliance of the ruling class and their supporters (economists, scientists, media) to re-open the economy to Level 1. The South African government's reopening of schools on 8 June 2020 is a clear indication of their support for the ruling class, and capitalist class rule. The reopening of schools comes in the midst of an escalating international coronavirus pandemic that is yet to peak in the country. The virus has already claimed 466 000 lives and 8,89 million infected. Internationally. In South Africa the virus has claimed 1 930 lives and has infected 97 302. Countries like China and New Zealand have managed the pandemic much better by implementing a lockdown that included keeping children at home. Although in general children do not get hospitalised because of the virus, these countries, especially China, have taken a very cautious approach to opening schools, and have closed schools whenever infections began to rise. Most South African political parties (in parliament) have rallied behind the ANC government. While five education trade unions have called on their members to support government's reopening of schools, many grassroots teachers have indicated their dissatisfaction to Khanya College and other organisations.

One week after schools reopened, the situation in schools is unstable with many schools (over 60), closing because of learners and especially teachers, testing positive. This casts a grave shadow on Government's plans to open schools, even though the government claimed that schools that opened on 8 June (95% of all schools) complied with safety regulations to combat Covid-19. The Western Cape rushed to reopen schools on 1 June, but says it won't provide a list of schools that have closed since that time. While some schools are still closed and non-compliant, there is pressure to keep schools open, even though many schools ran out of PPEs (masks) in the first week. These pressures will mount and will deepen struggles to close schools.

Lines are already being drawn as many communities respond to government's uncompromising attitude to reopen schools in the face of the pandemic. In a statement, the Bayview Communities in Kwazulu Natal called for the closure of schools; and working class organisations like Bishop Lavis Action Community and the Covid-19 Working Class Campaign have called for the closure and the cancellation of the academic year for public and private schools. This week the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in the Free State, Gauteng and Western Cape moved to close all schools and demanded that all learners be tested. This is the first call in democratic South Africa for a national boycott of schools, and the outcome of this struggle is by no means settled given precarious conditions in schools, and rising infections in South Africa.

1. Minister Motshekga's case for opening schools

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) confirms that schools were reopened only after extensive consultation with the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) made up of health experts, the National Command Council and the SA Cabinet. Minister Motshekga indicated in her briefing on 1 June that schools needed to open because of her concern for children's loss of learning. She said poor children had lost learning time and needed to catch up.

In April the MAC chairperson, Prof Karim, explained to the nation that lockdowns help prevent and control the spread of the virus. According to Prof Karim, “when people move, the virus moves”, and he used this to justify the lockdown. In early May, as pressure to reopen the economy increased, the science began to change, even as the virus began to spread. In an interview with SABC television, Professor Karim now advised that there was no good reason for children not to return to school, and that the country should expect ‘small outbreaks in schools’. This about turn was supported by Professor Glenda Gray, another member of the MAC, who said that children and young people under 30 were not vulnerable to the coronavirus, and advocated reopening the economy to Level 1.

In the Western Cape the MEC for Education, Debbie Shafer, referred to the South African Paediatric Association’s (SAPA) support for children to return to school immediately. In a craftily worded statement the SAPA supports the immediate re-opening of schools despite acknowledging a number of important problems with reopening schools. These include that it is winter; that the quality of the evidence about Covid-19 and children is “relatively scant and weak... particularly from resource-poor settings”; that the government won’t resolve school infrastructure problems; and the increased risk of Covid-19 infections once children return to school. Although they list these problems, they argue that “...the consequence for children will be milder compared to adults. Paediatric Kawasaki-like multi-system inflammatory syndrome [PIMS] is rare.”

In *Scientists against Science: The campaign to open “the economy” in the time of Covid 19*, Oupa Lehulere dispels the cavalier statements of Karim, Gray and others, highlighting the historical social inequality that has led to low resistance against disease among working people, and therefore against the coronavirus. He argues that these ‘social determinants of health’ are key to understanding the “colliding and concurrent” epidemics that ravage the country’s poor – tuberculosis, diabetes, cardio vascular, Hiv/Aids, influenza, pneumonia and chronic lower respiratory illness, and that these diseases affect all age groups. This is cause for grave concern as *we do not know* how children and adults with these illnesses will react to the coronavirus. In South Africa, 250 000 children live with Hiv/Aids. While common sense logically dictates caution for how the country proceeds with the reopening of schools, scientists should also be focusing on increased surveillance of how these diseases will impact on coronavirus’ mortality. In the context of rising infections in townships, workplaces and schools, one cannot just provide children with masks and sanitisers, but there is a need to focus on children’s wellbeing holistically – including their living conditions and psycho-social wellbeing. While the starting point should be no tolerance of any number of deaths, what emerges from the SAPA statement is that: “Schools reopening will increase parents and care-givers ability to work.” The SAPA’s approach gives a sense that the lives of working class children are dispensable and only the opening of the economy matters.

2. Structural barriers to opening schools under Covid-19

Covid 19 and the government’s compulsion to reopen public schools has again put the poor conditions of schools in the spotlight. In a flurry of activities, the government is seemingly striving to respond to schools’ infrastructural needs that stretch back decades. Minister Motshekga thanked the intervention of the SANDF, Rand Water and Mvula Trust for support, but this support will not be able to meet the infrastructure backlog of the schools.

On 1 June the DBE was forced to postpone the re-opening of schools based on three reports from government-related entities that confirmed the lack of school-readiness: the National Education Collaboration Trust, Rand Water and a technical report from the Heads of Education Departments Committees. The validity of the reports was also confirmed by the Principals' Associations and NGOS. A survey by teacher unions and the DBE, leaked to a local newspaper, similarly concluded on the common challenges in six of the country's nine provinces:

- inadequate water for Covid-19 requirements in 6 provinces,
- water tanks that are required and not yet delivered in 6 provinces,
- insufficient masks delivered (two per person) in 8 provinces.

At the Briefing, the DG of DBE, Mr. Zweli, discussed the PPEs delays to schools (up to 3 weeks) as a result of conflicts over tenders, and the dominance of certain large companies.

As if by a miracle, these major infrastructural needs in 6 out of 9 provinces were accomplished in the space of one week! But this media performance is not sustainable. It is public knowledge that government has been unresponsive to the schools' infrastructure needs for many years: poor or no sanitation, broken windows, broken doors, broken roofs and floors, etc. The list continues. A case in point is Phororong Primary School in Khutsong on the West Rand. The school was condemned by Health inspectors from Merafong City Local Municipality in 2016 because the building was a danger to learners and ventilation was poor. Up until the lockdown on 18 March 2020, the school remained open, and in use, despite the danger to learners. (At the time of writing the school had reopened without being repaired, and learners indicated that they felt unsafe.) The vandalism at 1577 schools during the lockdown has also exacerbated this problem.

The state of schools' infrastructure is a result of government's neoliberal policies that have enriched elites (both white and black elites). Despite the pandemic, government remains committed to neoliberalism. The structural barriers to opening schools under Covid19 cannot be eradicated within the neoliberal framework. Getting the schools 'ready' to combat Covid 19, and maintaining this, will require alternatives to neoliberalism like increased government funding, regulation of prices of essential items including building materials and food, and serious anti-corruption strategies. This will bring the ANC government into conflict with white monopoly capital (WMC), a difficult challenge for the ANC government. Under conditions of Covid19, however, the government has the best chance of changing the economic direction of the last 25 years.

Besides the need to rebuild existing infrastructure, the Regulations for Covid-19 compliance place onerous responsibilities on schools. In terms of safety and physical distancing of 1.5m per child, only 50% of learners are allowed to be at school at any one time. This means the DBE will need to double the number of its existing class rooms (that is, double the current 26 000 schools), an impossible task. Even now, it's a struggle for schools to comply. For instance, if a school has four Grade 7 classes of 45 learners each, the school will need 12 classrooms to accommodate 15 learners in each class, to comply with physical distancing. This plan can only work if the DBE cancels all the other grades for the year. The options of phasing in all other grade learners to participate in platoons or shift systems or rotation are

impractical because of the general state and extent of the infrastructure, and the shortage of teachers, textbooks etc. The DBE's planned phasing in of other grades of learners in July and August is impossible.

The Regulations are silent on the general shortage of textbooks (and other educational materials), how will 'sharing textbooks' take place under Covid 19 in public schools? The shortage of learning materials is one of the long-standing problems of the education system in South Africa. This is not only because of corruption, which affects the supply of educational materials, but is also partly a result of the underfunding of the education system. In the context of Covid-19 this problem will be more acute because classes will be broken up, and learners will come to school at different times. This will make the sharing of learning materials even more difficult.

Instead of pushing ahead with an impossible plan, this is an opportunity for government to upgrade and fix all schools; and communities to monitor and hold the DBE accountable for decent schools. This course of action is the most sensible one given that the government has in fact cancelled the academic year for public schools.

3. Minister cancels academic year for public schools!

The government is fully aware of the structural barriers to education in general, and especially under Covid-19, and that it will be impossible to sustain the reopening of schools. The structural barriers to education make it almost impossible to comply with health and educational conditions under Covid-19. Hence Minister Angie Motshekga announced at a media briefing on 1 June that:

“The May/June 2020 examination for candidates, who registered for the Senior Certificate and the National Senior Certificate (NSC), will be administered in November/December 2020, unless unforeseen circumstances occur, in which instance, I, as the Minister shall make the necessary determination.”

According to the Minister, after many “enquiries” and “anxieties” about the matric examinations, “...we had to gazette it as well, since it is also an extremely sensitive matter in the basic education system.” The Government Gazette (No. 43372) was passed on Friday, 29 May 2020.

The government's decision to postpone the June exams to December, and the silence about when the December exam is going to be held, is an admission that given the Covid-19 conditions it will be impossible for public schools to recover the time lost in 2020. By December matric learners can only cover work up to the June syllabus. It is unlikely that any concessions will be made for matrics for this loss of time. Umalusi, the body that ensures consistent standards for matric exams, indicated that the 2020 class would need to be tested on the whole curriculum. Umalusi Council chairperson, John Volmink, confirmed that the matric exams needed to be credible. Therefore, if the June exam is written in December, this postpones the November/ December exams to an unspecified time in 2021, and will affect many matrics' prospects of going to university in 2021. In 2019 a total 790 000 matrics, including candidates from correctional facilities, wrote the NSC examinations compared to about 11 500 private school learners who wrote the IEB exams. With the lost

academic years this means that public school matrics who are eligible will only attend university in 2022. Motshekga's decision effectively also cancels the academic year for all learners in public schools, (who are being phased-in in July and August).

Since the media briefing the minister has made no public announcement or formal notification to learners and parents that government has cancelled the academic year. This would enable parents, currently in a dilemma as they value education, to make informed decisions about the value of children returning to school in a pandemic when the academic year has already been cancelled. This is particularly problematic as government threatened parents about children's right to schooling. The government threatened that children who do not attend school will be deregistered, and has imposed an impractical alternative of home-schooling. Further, threats were issued against parents who may campaign to close schools.

The government desperately needs public schools to be opened (and science and SAPA have played a role), and argues that school closure impacts negatively on poor learners. The government's decision to reopen public schools even though it cancelled the academic year is a calculated political consideration to prevent a furore from erupting within the working class and the country. The government is banking on the pandemic to 'resolve' the issue of the academic year and exams: as the pandemic reaches its peak, it will be impossible for learners to attend school and write exams, and then government will 'postpone the exams'. In this way government will avoid telling parents the truth of the matter. The ANC government has historically been good with manipulating the truth and avoiding political fallouts.

In the run-up to this decision, Minister Motshekga consulted widely with private and independent schools and their associations, principals' associations, and NGOs and unions. Parents and communities were only consulted via School Governing Bodies, and this did not filter down to parents in communities. In general, the government has an arrogant approach to the working class, as it moves ahead to implement its ruling class interests. President Ramaphosa, similarly, only consulted White Monopoly Capital (WMC), (big business and the banks), before he announced the National State of Disaster and the lockdown to the nation, the vast majority of the electorate. It is also not surprising that Motshekga's sleight of hand and its implications for the working class have not been engaged by the media, the teacher unions or academics.

4. What are the implications of reopening schools on the learning environment?

The government's Regulations focus on the control of working class bodies, and fundamentally impose a 'new normal' for learners and teachers at schools. While aspects of this 'new normal' are important in light of Covid-19, the DBE ignores the overall wellbeing of the learners, parents and teachers, their material conditions of living and their psycho-social wellbeing. Learners who spoke to Khanya College on the first days the schools reopened, remarked that the day was 'difficult', 'traumatic' and 'strenuous'. The Regulations fundamentally alter learners' familiar sense of schooling, the routines, the absence of friends and learners in other grades, and will require readjustment and adaptation. The approach is cold and alienating and reflects the government's underlying educational philosophy and its concomitant homage to neoliberalism and the need to produce a low-

paid, docile workforce. In the context of no meaningful and caring consultation with learners, teachers and parents, the Regulations are authoritarian, and will alienate young working class learners, and will also put them at risk of death. The conditions under which the schools are being opened shows the state's attitude to the working class, especially as the state effectively cancelled the academic year. Below we explore some of the implications of this decision for the learning environment.

i. Lack of learner and teacher preparation for Covid-19 conditions

Despite the government having early warning of the pandemic since January 2020, little to no preparation was done to raise awareness about Covid-19 amongst learners and teachers (and the public). The DBE's 12.4 million learners and teachers (and their households) went into the lockdown without basic information of any kind (including flyers) about the pandemic and how to protect themselves against coronavirus. Most learners didn't receive educational and/or reading material, nor interacted with teachers on Covid-19 before and during the lockdown. This was a wasted opportunity as it would have raised awareness that the country can beat coronavirus, save lives, and create a learning ambience within the education sector and society that would also have created a basis for continuity for when the lockdown was lifted. This demonstrates government and the DBE's general attitude and lack of investment in the wellbeing of the working class and the public; and its narrow serving capitalist ruling class interests. Hence, without an awareness raising campaign, the state resorted to the army and police to brutally keep people under lockdown, and promoted violence in society that could easily have been avoided.

Since the lockdown, there has been little support to public school learners. The DBE-SABC learning provisions which began on 9 April was not part of a broader-based, purposeful campaign to mobilise and promote learning. The lessons on SABC were set at unearthly hours of 5am and 6am in the morning on different channels, to avoid disrupting the daily soaps, and marginalised learning.

ii. Impact of the physical rearrangement of the school

Based on the Regulations the schools have been reorganized, and this is changing the experience of schooling for learners in public schools. The Grade 7s and 12s are the first to experience this. The school is relatively 'empty', with only a fraction of the total school body present. There are no familiar faces of friends in other grades, to reassure and help learners to cope, especially needed in a pandemic. In addition, the Grade 7 and 12's classes have been reduced in numbers to meet physical distance requirements and the learners have been spread across a number of classes. In the winter Highveld cold, there are 15 learners in one class, classrooms are airy, very different to the usual overcrowding that occurs in public schools. School is different, and will take getting used to.

Already, in the first week of schools reopening, learners had to stay indoors for lunch to ensure safety and physical distancing. For teachers, given their fears and workload, it is also easier to control learners in a classroom. For the learners, this will mean being cooped up in a class for the duration of the time at school, about 5 hours a day. This situation is not conducive to learning or to learners and teachers wellbeing; and will induce anxiety.

iii. Learning times

The DBE's schools are too small to provide the space for physical distancing for all learners. The reorganization of schools includes different timetables to phase in and accommodate all learners to access some learning into the platoon or shift system, or bi-weekly and weekly rotational systems. This will mean that the learners have different learning times and don't all attend school at once, to ensure that only 50% of all learners are at school. So at any point, half the school's learners are at home. With the platoon system, some will attend school in the morning, and others will start in the afternoon. Other options include learners rotating their attendance on different days and or weeks. The different learning times will fragment the learning process, and disrupt the social stability necessary for learning. Learners will focus on the need to remember complex timetables, when to attend and which classrooms to use on what days. This will also disrupt social relationships amongst learners and friends, and impact negatively on learning.

iv. Impact on learning methodologies

The physical distancing in classrooms and general spatial limitations at public schools hinders interactive forms of learning like creative group work and 'hands on' approaches. This has a negative impact on learning which takes place best collectively, in relation to others, especially during schooling. The context limits variations on learning methodologies and lends itself to rote or mechanistic learning. The DBE has also postponed any enrichment projects at the school to focus mainly on 'catching up' on the curriculum, providing little alternative outlet for learners and teachers. Rote learning tends to alienate both learners and teachers. In addition, teachers will have to teach the same subject to reduced classes of the same grade four or five times a day. For learners at the receiving end, this will be far from stimulating, and it will demotivate learners and teachers, and diminish learning.

v. Psychological stress on learners and teachers

The pandemic has created stress, fear and anxiety amongst everyone in society, and anxiety will rise as the number of deaths and infections increase. The reopening of schools comes as the pandemic is rising, under severe government Regulations. Since the schools 'reopened', more than 60 schools have closed due to learners and especially teachers, testing positive. The DBE has not formally disclosed the number of schools that have closed nationally, as this will impact on the government's project to reopen schools. The uncertainty of schools opening and closing is traumatic for learners and teachers. As the pandemic spreads and death due to coronavirus increases in families and townships, fears, anxieties and trauma will increase. This is detrimental to learners (and teachers) psycho-social wellbeing. Besides putting children unnecessarily at risk of contracting Covid-19, the schools are not conducive to learning on so many levels; and is potentially harmful to learners and teachers mental health and sense of security.

There is also uncertainty amongst learners, especially matrics, about the integration of the 2020 academic year, and beyond. What will happen to university education in 2021? Many matrics, like so many others are not aware that government has cancelled the academic year and they are desperate to try and 'catch up' on the curriculum, attend school on Saturdays and school holidays. This is causing unnecessary stress in young people, in the midst of a pandemic.

vi. Increased teaching loads

The DBE's Regulations place enormous pressure on teachers, increasing their workload as the reorganization of school increases the number of classes in different grades. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing challenges, and government's scurry to reopen schools has highlighted teacher shortages, poorly trained teachers and low teacher morale. We discussed above how 3 classes of 45 Grade 7s will require 12 classes now and this increases the workload of teachers, as instead of teaching 3 classes of a particular subject to Grade 7s, they now have to teach 12 classes. This is exhausting for teachers, especially as most teachers teach more than one subject. To compensate for teacher shortages, in many schools, teachers are being allocated to assist with teaching Grade 7s and 12 who have returned to school. Khanya College found that teachers were dissatisfied with the fact that they are expected to teach grades for which they are not equipped. The increased workload on teachers will impact on the quality of the teaching and the learning process; and will potentially increase teachers' feelings of alienation. The situation is bound to get worse when the rest of the grades return to school. Minister Motshekga is aware of this and indicated at the Briefing that despite the DBE's receipt of applications from teachers over the past 3 years, "We will need to speak to Treasury about employing more teachers." The DBE has reopened schools but by 8 June had not dealt with crucial issue of teacher shortages.

vii. New roles for teachers

The public schools are underfunded and under-resourced and there are few specialized and ancillary staff such as educational psychologists and counsellors, especially at township schools. Now under conditions of pandemic, these needs are amplified. Now, government is calling on teachers to take on 'new' additional roles in schools, and compensate for government's lack of preparation and general neglect over more than two decades. In many of these additional roles teachers have had little or inadequate training. For instance, on the basis of 'training' before the schools reopened, the teachers were expected to train learners about Covid-19 protocols.

Additional responsibilities on teachers include supervising learners on physical distancing, providing counselling support where necessary, monitor the wellbeing of learners, ensure that screening happens several times a day, and constantly monitor that learners observe health and hygiene protocols. They must ensure that classes and the school is in general "Covid-19 compliant". Many of these 'new' roles are important in the context of a pandemic, and compete with teacher's teaching time and the quality of their teaching.

viii. The school as a social space and impact on learning.

The reorganization of schools will impact on learning ability, and the quality of learning. Classmates and friendships have been broken up, there is uncertainty, and no one knows for how long. Learners will have very little space for spontaneous discussion, and the molecular yet substantial forms of learning that takes place informally on a daily basis between learners has been disrupted. The DBE's solution to reopening schools in a pandemic are draconian and will not promote learning, and are more likely to impact negatively on learning, and disrupt the concept of school being 'a social space'.

5. Private schools – the real reason for the back-to-school decision

During her press briefing the Minister indicated that she had extensive consultations with independent and private schools (amongst others), sometimes even twice weekly. These are representatives of the powerful class interests the government represents. On the very day the minister announced the cancellation of the academic year for public schools, on 1 June, an amendment to the government's Regulations that had been issued on 29 May was gazetted. This amendment made it possible for private schools to be exempted from key regulations that apply to public schools. This paved the way for the resumption of private schooling for matrics and all other learners; and enabled all learners in private schools to write their exams. Based on the impact of government's differentiated class-based decisions, working class learners will lose at least a year of schooling; whereas private school learners, protected by the SA government, will continue in their cocooned elite schooling and will not lose a year. This decision deeply embeds the ruling class' interests and deepens social inequality.

In a hidden reference to private schools, the revised regulations said that "schools with large enough facilities to comply with health, safety and social distancing requirements ...are exempted" from the provision that they can only have 50% of their learners at school, and "they do not have to change their traditional and daily timetable models, and may continue to operate in accordance with those timetable models". Private schools have no problems in providing full PPEs to learners. Given the general size of the facilities in private schools, they will experience little social upheaval and disruption as they comply easily with physical distancing and are not limited to having only 50% of their total learners at school. No learners will need to be 'phased in', and no re-organisation of the school and its timetables are necessary. Similarly, the curriculum will continue untouched. These developments will only exacerbate historical social inequalities in South Africa, and deepen social instability.

Private schools during lockdown

The majority if not all private schools have had a relatively unbroken learning experience, will write all their exams, and will not lose the academic year. With the transition from in-class to remote and e-learning, reports indicate that this was generally smooth. This illustrates the deep class divide and deepening social inequalities within South Africa, along the lines of class and colour. While the pandemic will no doubt impact on anxiety levels, learning at private schools will not be subjected to social upheaval as at public schools.

At the beginning of this article we noted that the schools were being reopened to open the economy. This is true not just in general. In the education sector, the school is the 'economy', a source of many tenders in public schools (textbooks, to infrastructure, water tanks, and now PPEs); and a lucrative economy in independent and private schools. To reopen the schools, is to reopen the economy.

In this article while we do not intend to focus on the 'public education' economy, we can note that besides salaries all the procurement of goods and services by the DBE is from private service providers. Between the 2021 and the 2023 the DBE Budget, excluding salaries, rises from R80billion to R140billion. There are many commercial interests tied to

continuing expenditure in education, and these also represent a pressure on the DBE to open schools.

Private education

In contrast to the vast numbers in public schools, South Africa's expensive *independent and private education* provides education to the children of the country's ruling elites, about 500 000 learners (just over 3% of all learners) in 2000 schools. The sector includes some of the country's old 'traditional' private education institutions such as Bishops Boys School (1849), Hilton College (1872), St. Johns (1898) and Roedean (1903); and Herschel Girls (1922) and MichaelHouse (1896). Some of these schools like Herschel and MichaelHouse, operate as "non-profit organisations", but fees remain exorbitant with an exclusive clientele.

In a survey by a local newspaper on the most expensive private schools, in 2014, only one school (Hilton College) was priced over R200 000 for boarding and tuition. By 2019, the costs of private education had escalated to include more than 20 schools in that range. Costs of private education, including boarding and tuition for the top 10 schools in the country are as follows:

- Hilton College - R298 000,
- Michaelhouse - R284 000,
- St. Andrews (Grahamstown) - R272 000,
- Roedean School for Girls - R270 000,
- St. John's College - R265 000,
- Bishops Boys - R259 620,
- Kearsney College - R259 600,
- St. Mary's Waverley - R254 000,
- St. Andrews School for Girls - R250 220 and
- St. Stithians - R247 765

While Hilton College (R300 000 pa) is the most expensive boarding and tuition school, Kearsney College (R180 000) is the most expensive day school in the country. Many of these schools charge over R100 000 a year for tuition only. The difference, however, is still significant with an average private school cost of R136 000 and a public fee-paying schools cost of R35 000 per year.

The costs of private school fees are exorbitant and to get a sense of the class differences or the different 'worlds' the classes inhabit: Community Health Workers on the frontline of the coronavirus pandemic in communities, earn a stipend of R3 500 per month or R42 000 per year. Similarly, if the government were to provide the Relief Grant (R350) to people over 18, in need, for 12 months (instead of the planned 6 months), this amounts to R4 200 per person for one year. This is obscene inequality by any measure.

The privatisation of education has grown substantially to include schools and tertiary education for the middle classes for much less than the 'real' private schools of Hilton and Kearnsey, and now covers upper sections of the working class. The growth of the two private education groups, ADvTEch, formed in 1978 and Curro formed in 1993, provide an insight into the sector. Both companies are listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

ADvTECH has 19 different education brands, mainly in South Africa, but also Botswana and Kenya. The ADvTech's group includes the Crawford Schools, Rosebank College, Abbotts College, and Oxbridge. Curro has 175 schools and 57 000 learners, mainly in South Africa and Southern Africa. Both groups have diverse 'educational' packages, to appeal to the needs of different clients. What we see is the privatisation and commercialisation of education.

The dysfunctional DBE has provided the basis for the development and growth of independent schools for parents in the upper working class and lower middle class. The costs for some of the smaller independent schools range from R1000 per month depending on the grade, and increasing to matric. Curro, as result of economic pressures also diversified from its higher-fee structure and provides a range of private schools with fee costs ranging from R2 000 to R10 000 a month. Schools in the Curro group have also achieved university exemption pass rates above 80% for both the NSC and IEB exams; and present a lucrative and viable model for growth in private education amongst many parents disillusioned with the DBE.

Economic crisis, Covid 19 and School fees

During the coronavirus lockdown most of the independent and private schools shifted from in-class learning to online, remote and e-learning. The lockdown has affected the economy significantly, this has already raised unemployment with further retrenchments looming, and the middle classes will especially be affected. This has impacted on parents' ability to pay private school fees and will affect schools as a survey of responses by one local newspaper indicates. At Bishops Boys, some parents requested deferred payments or a payment plan, according to the principal Guy Pearson. Hilton College indicated a commitment not to lose any learner as a result of the impact of the pandemic on fees, and the school offered a 12.5% fee remission for Term 2 to parents. MichaelHouse indicated that they were considering a fee freeze until the economy improves; the management was considering 'salary sacrifices' and Board members and Trustees committed to match all donations to the school's Covid Support Fund of up to R1million. Both Roedean and Herschel Girls indicated that they were responding to parents' needs on a 'case by case basis', and were also considering a general fees rebate. During Covid 19 Curro set aside R50million to assist parents with their school fees. Similarly, ADvTech set aside R24 million in financial support to 5 300 families; and has considered curtailing operation costs. There is therefore enormous pressure from private schools to open the economy: parents need to get back to work and school fees need to be paid.

Even before Covid 19, over the past few years private schools were affected by the country's economic decline. In 2015 Curro experienced an increase in bad debts, with the non-payment of school fees, due to economic decline and migration. In 2015 the total bad debts were R1.5 billion and this increased to R3.5 billion in 2019, especially in the higher fee range. By 2019 Curro faced a steep decline in earnings. In order to respond to these economic pressures Curro shifted to a lower fee structure in townships, and restructured its fees and education products to range from R1900 a month. Curro also spread its schools nationally to facilitate the movement of 'clients' nationally.

Protecting private schools from Covid-19 economic pressures

The turnover of both companies indicates the extent of the education business in South Africa. Curro's turnover in 2018 was R2.5 billion, and the first six months of 2019 it was R1.5 billion. ADvTech has increased its growth by 16 % and profits are up by 18% to R468 million in 2019. Due to the Coronavirus and economic uncertainty, the group was also holding off on paying dividends to shareholders until its board meeting in May. In 2019 ADvTECH's turnover was R5.1 billion. There is much at stake, and these stake-holders reflect powerful interests. The continued closure of schools has a direct impact on capital accumulation, and the dividends to share-holders. With the economic pressures already facing these companies, a lost academic year will be catastrophic. There is no way the pandemic will be allowed to slow down accumulation if the ruling class can help it.

Therefore, the source of the pressure on Government is directly from independent and private schools (amongst others), to reopen schools, and their very life-blood depends on reopening the economy so that parents' livelihoods are secured. By reopening private schools, capital accumulation can continue. The shares of Curro and ADvTech have declined, and they will go to any lengths to protect capital accumulation, profits, even if this means sacrificing the lives of working class children in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic.

The ANC government has always been subservient to white monopoly capitalist (WMC) and corporate interests. We saw this at Marikana. Now, in the midst of a pandemic that will mean the unnecessary deaths of thousands, we see the ANC capitulate once again: to enable private schools to complete their year and write their exams, to sell and realise the profits of their privatised education products. This explains the surge in energy that we have never seen from the DBE before and explains the minister's passing comment at the briefing, that private schools are a 'business'. The aim of reopening the schools is to advance corporate interests and maintain profitability of the corporates. Further, it also makes possible the 'opening of the economy' that WMC and other capitalist groups have campaigned for. The reopening of public schools has nothing to do with education or learning, but has everything to do with capital accumulation at the expense of the working class.

6. Two-tiered education & the political economy of cheap black labour

South Africa's deep-seated and historical class divisions are perpetuated by the ANC government's subservient to WMC and neoliberalism. Like healthcare, class inequalities are sharply expressed in the country's two-tiered education system: expensive private education for wealthy elites and run-down and neglected public schools for 12.4 million poor, working class learners. While 98% of those enrolled in private schools complete matric, in public schools this amounts to only 48%. In an Institute of Race Relations study, only 13% of the Grade 1 class of 2006 achieved university entry when they wrote matric in 2017.

This is not surprising given the overall conditions of public schools and the working class. Few schools (29%) have libraries, and science laboratories (18%); and more than 50% of learners drop out of the total learners who enter schools due to poverty-related reasons (unemployment, teenage pregnancy and school fees). Social determinants - poor nutrition, lack of housing and water, and food insecurity - impact on children's learning abilities.

Research indicates that working class children's learning abilities already lag behind their wealthier counterparts by 3 years, and the gap tends to increase as the schooling years advance. Tenders and corruption have impacted negatively on the provision of textbooks and school infrastructure. Besides its overall impact on education, budget considerations influenced the closure of teacher training colleges and impacted on staff training and shortages. Children still cross rivers and walk kilometers to get to school. The death of Michael Komape in 2014, and 3 other children because of unsafe schools, are stark reminders of the daily betrayal of the working class.

The Covid-19 pandemic and government's differentiated handling of private and public schooling will deepen existing social inequalities. The problem with the way the DBE minister has conducted the crisis in education, and the possibilities for rebuilding anew is that no proactive consultation and planning can (or has) take(n) place with all learners and all parents in the interests of the country for 2021 and beyond. The chaos in public schools will only worsen and deepen social inequalities in society. The Government's policies and prejudices against the working class contribute to impoverishment and inequality.

During the lockdown private schools proceeded with schooling through e-learning platforms, with access to food security, laptops, electricity, and WIFI – in contrast to their public sector counterparts. Curro Holdings has indicated that it will provide all learners with a full year's schooling. Curro Online was launched recently, the groups home-schooling programme, where parents take responsibility for teaching and supervising their children's learning. The bottom line is that learners at public schools will lose an academic year because of the many school days lost; and the inability of government to provide viable alternatives (including e-learning) as a result of its commitment to neoliberalism and WMC.

Conclusion

In South Africa as elsewhere, education is a powerful instrument which reproduces poverty and inequality in society. Education closes doors to some, and opens doors to others. Besides reproducing capitalist class rule, education allows the victims to be blamed for not 'progressing', and the victims also blame themselves for not 'succeeding' in their lives. Minister Motshekga's decision to open schools sets in motion the process through which the "victims" - working class learners who will lose an academic year - will blame themselves and the pandemic for not succeeding in life. Minister Motshekga has set up the conditions for the failure and the death of working class children, and she has hidden the fact that she has cancelled the academic year. She has forced working class learners into schools that she knows will have to close as they do not have the facilities to succeed; and also exposes learners to a dangerous pandemic. She does all this under the cover of 'helping working class learners'. But this is the power of class-based education – the victims are encouraged to blame themselves.

On the other side of the coin, Minister Motshekga has enabled all the conditions that will make it possible for the children of the capitalist class and elites to complete the academic year and to succeed. Again, the elites and their children are taught that they are successful people by birth, that they deserve to succeed; and more importantly, that they are entitled to rule, and to the wealth they accumulate as owners of property.

But the working class doesn't always accept self-blame. More than 40 years ago a generation of students who were being prepared for cheap labour, just like the one today, refused to accept that they were responsible for the failures of a society that impoverished their communities and condemned them to a life of poverty, cheap labour and unemployment. In 1976, students in the country rose in revolt, a revolt that inspired generations, students in schools and universities, and people in communities, to change society. Like the 1976 generation, students, parents, teachers and communities have begun to resist. Workers in factories, are voicing their resistance to the opening of schools. Students, workers and communities have begun to understand that only when they organize can they defend themselves against Covid 19 and a callous neoliberal government. This is an important step in the long journey to fundamental social change, and a society that will not condemn learners to a system that feeds on cheap black labour.

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