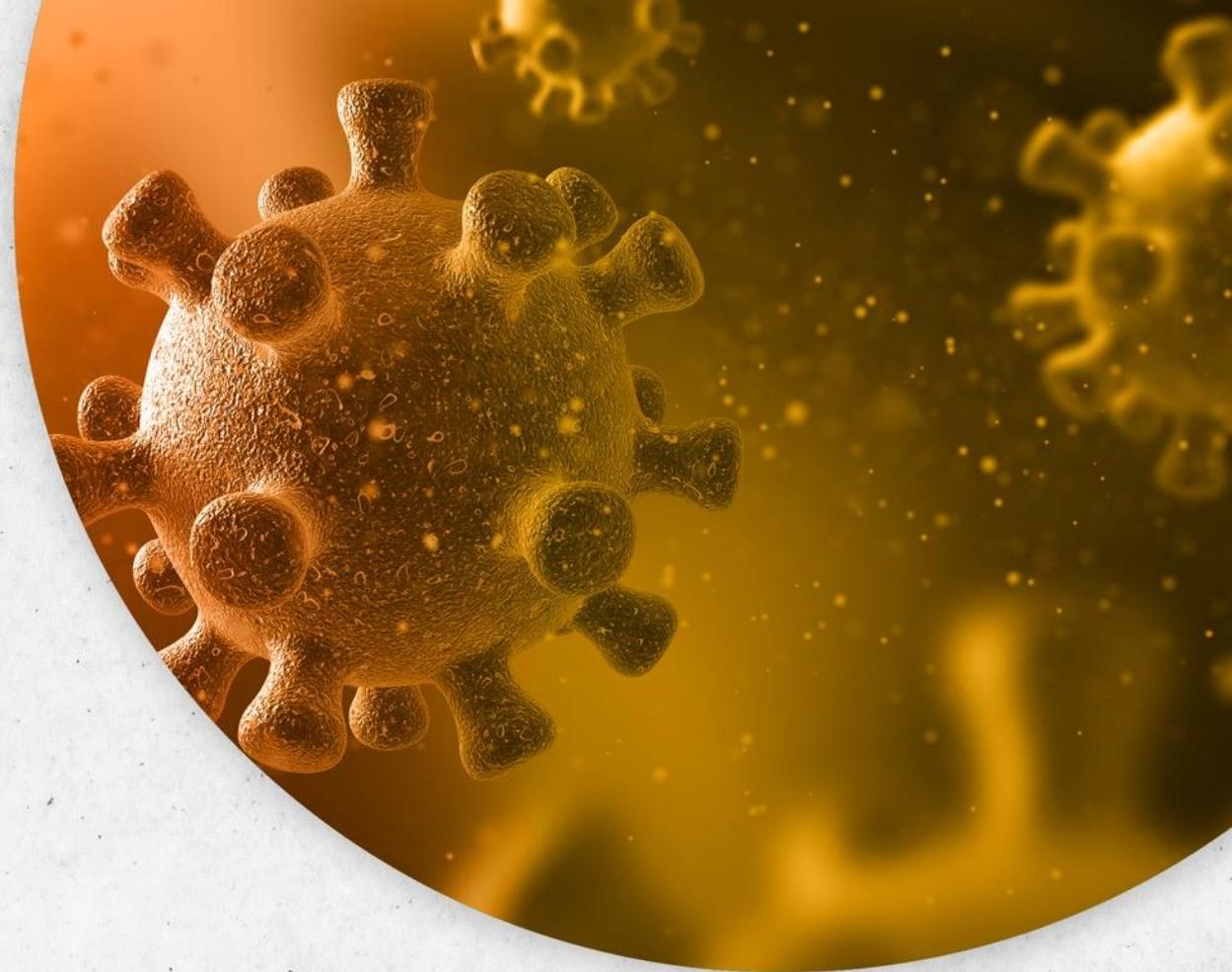


South African government education sector responses to Covid-19

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Introduction

School and university closures have been among the most shocking signs of Covid-19's power to drive a global shutdown.

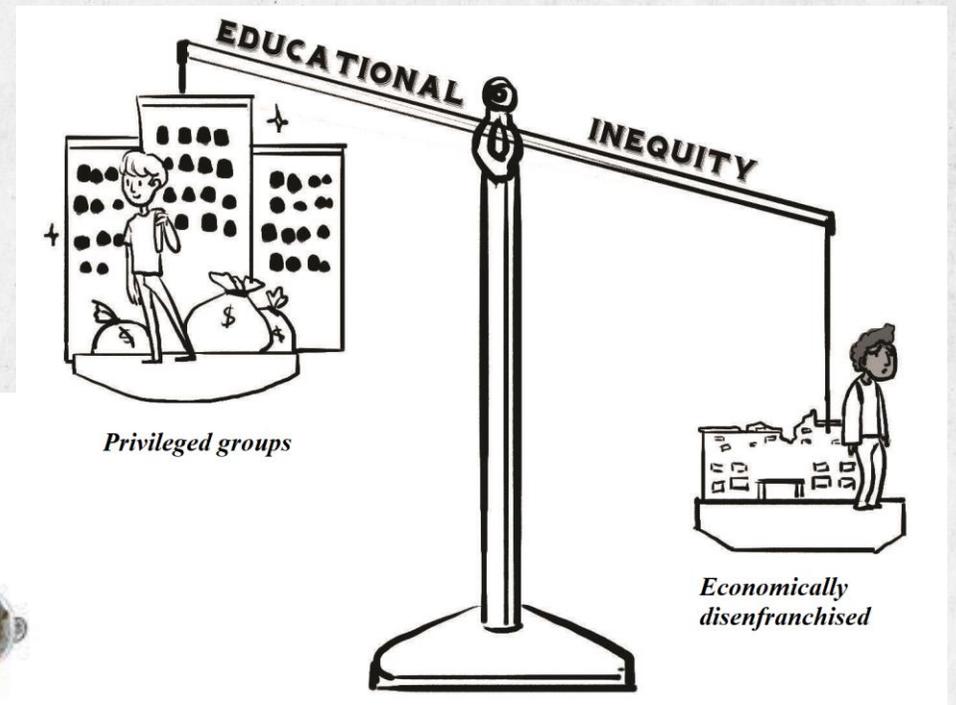
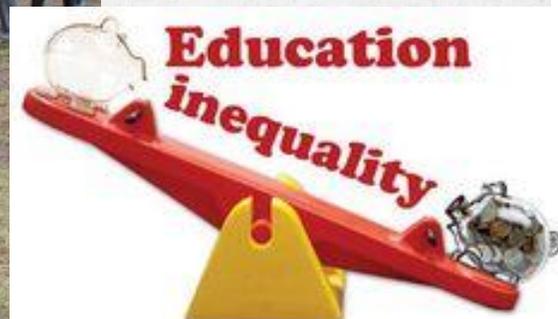
The effects of Covid-19 on education will be felt for many years to come.

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less - Marie Curie



Introduction

Amid competing voices from many stakeholders, the ministries had to make unprecedented, complex policy decisions, including the closure of schools and the move to online learning. But such decisions brought existing educational inequity and inequality into sharp focus.



The cost of the pandemic on education

While cost of the pandemic in terms of human lives has been catastrophic, the havoc it is wreaking on education may be felt for many years to come. For example:

- The pandemic has severely tested the already stressed *funding for education*.
- The *months of tuition* lost may never be recouped.
- It has *exacerbated inequalities in education*.



Covid-19's effect on children and young adults

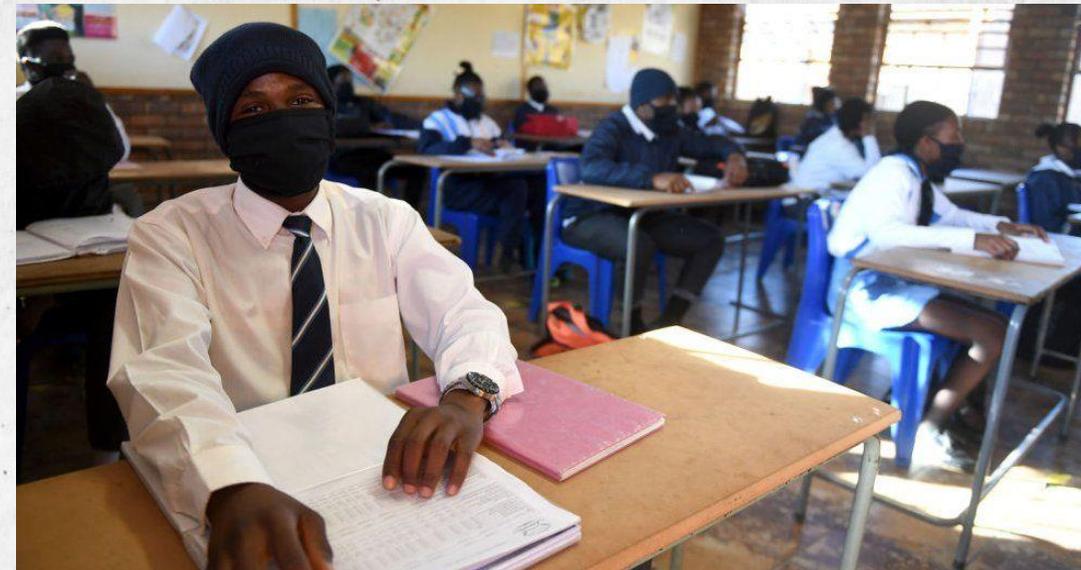
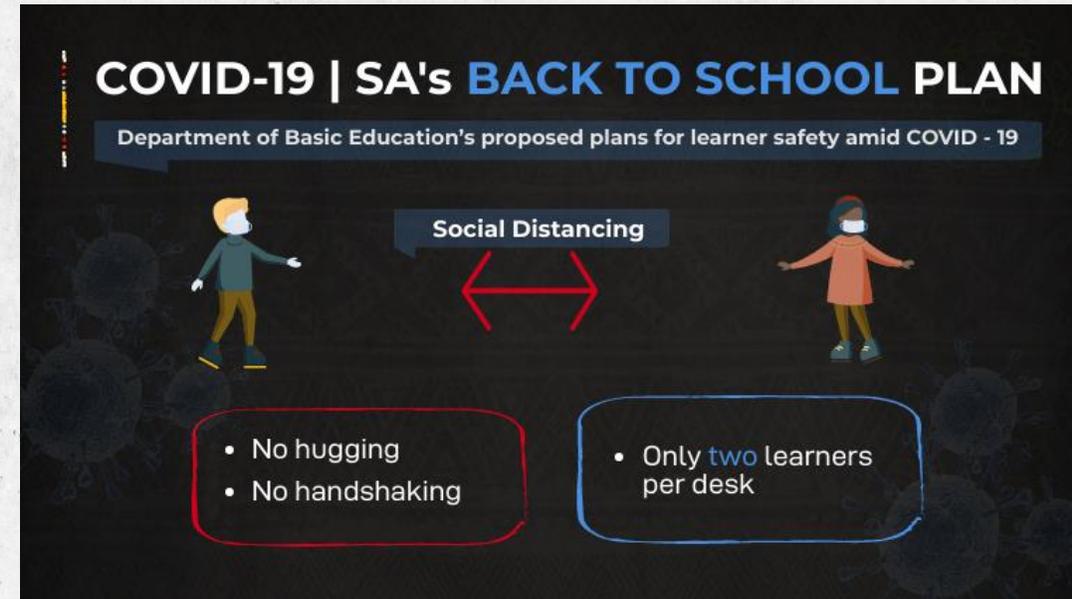
1. Covid-19 is disrupting children's education, learning and wellbeing in substantial ways.
2. The United Nations (2020:4–5) distinguishes three channels through which these effects may manifest:
 - *Infection*
 - *Socio-economic effects of the virus and related measures*
 - *Longer-term efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*
3. We can conclude from the evidence available that “a low number of infections occur in schools.



SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

The education sector has achieved some significant successes in implementing mitigation measures during the pandemic. Highlights include:

1. The relative ease with which some schools and post school institutions transitioned into online and blended learning modes.
2. The close collaboration between the PSET sector and Higher Health, and at school level, between the DBE and the Department of Health.
3. The education sector adopted a Risk Adjusted Differentiated Phased return of students and learners in reopening educational institutions.
4. The curriculum trimming and the reorganisation of the timetables.



SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

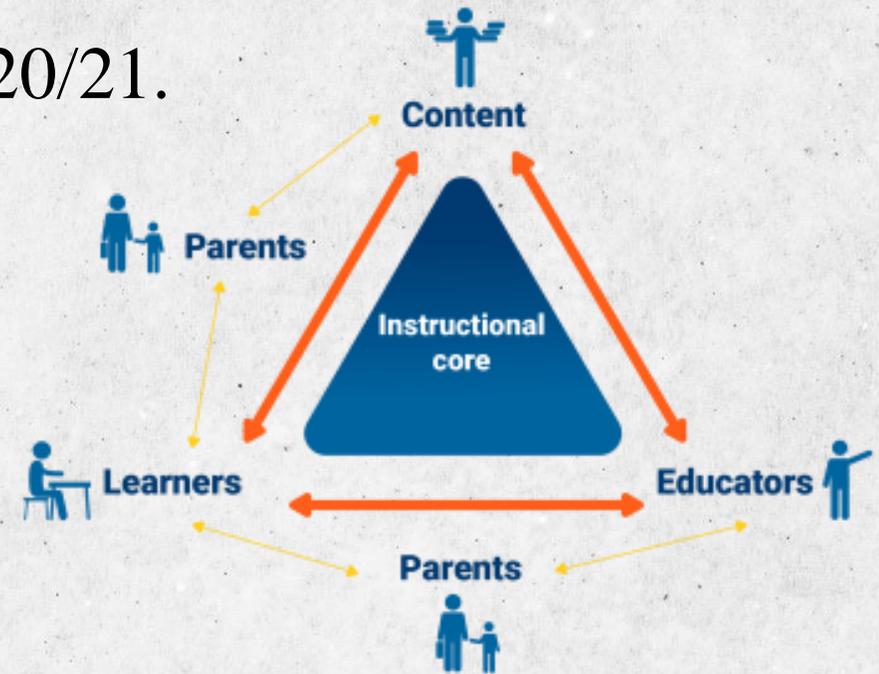
6. Onsite visits to educational institutions to inform future decisions.
7. Provision of data and devices.
8. Supporting and training staff and students to adapt to different modes of teaching and learning.
9. The successful completion of most first semester sessions in most PSET institutions, albeit using online technology for teaching and assessment.
10. No large-scale infections reported in educational institutions in general.



SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

However, the implementation process also resulted in challenges:

1. Vulnerable, children and students from low-income families were most affected.
2. Reprioritizing of state funds for Covid-19 for 2020/21.
3. Most parents are not trained to teach.
4. Social distancing with large classes.
5. Unavailability of PPE.
6. Teacher and Lecturer burnout.
7. Private school closures.
8. Communication between the departments of education and institutions, learners/students, parents, and staff were not always adequate or effective.



PRELIMINARY LESSONS LEARNED

Even at this stage of the pandemic, several preliminary lessons can already be identified.

DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

1. School infrastructure must be upgraded.
2. ICT infrastructure in schools need to be upgraded.
3. Connectivity.
4. Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots should be established in villages, towns and cities, so that students can access information without travelling great distances.
5. Health Education
6. Community centres and libraries must be upgraded
7. Continuous teacher professional development
8. Improved Communication among stakeholders.



Preliminary lessons learned

DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Based on the DHET's Covid-19 Pre-Disaster and Disaster Management Phase Report of 28 April 2020, the following observations can be made:

1. Coordination, communication, planning, teamwork and swift implementation of the Covid-19 measures were critical elements of the DHET's response and remain vital during the pandemic.
2. The DHET has made significant strides in safeguarding students while also saving the academic year.
3. The capacity and capability of educational institutions are uneven.
4. The DHET noted the number of foreign students who returned to their home countries at the start of the lockdown and the need to deal with the modalities of their return.



Some late developments

Return to ECD centres after the Level 5 lockdown was slow. By August 2020 only 13% of children aged 0-6 years returned to ECD centres. The reasons: Many ECD centres could not comply with Covid-19 regulations and therefore did not reopen. Many parents believed that most of the year had passed and elected to retain their children at home. Some parents expressed anxiety about their children's health during the pandemic and kept their children at home. Several ECD centres had to retrench staff or close completely as a result of low return of learners.

In 2021, it was reported that the Early Childhood Development Employment Stimulus Relief Fund was created to sustain employment in the ECD sector.

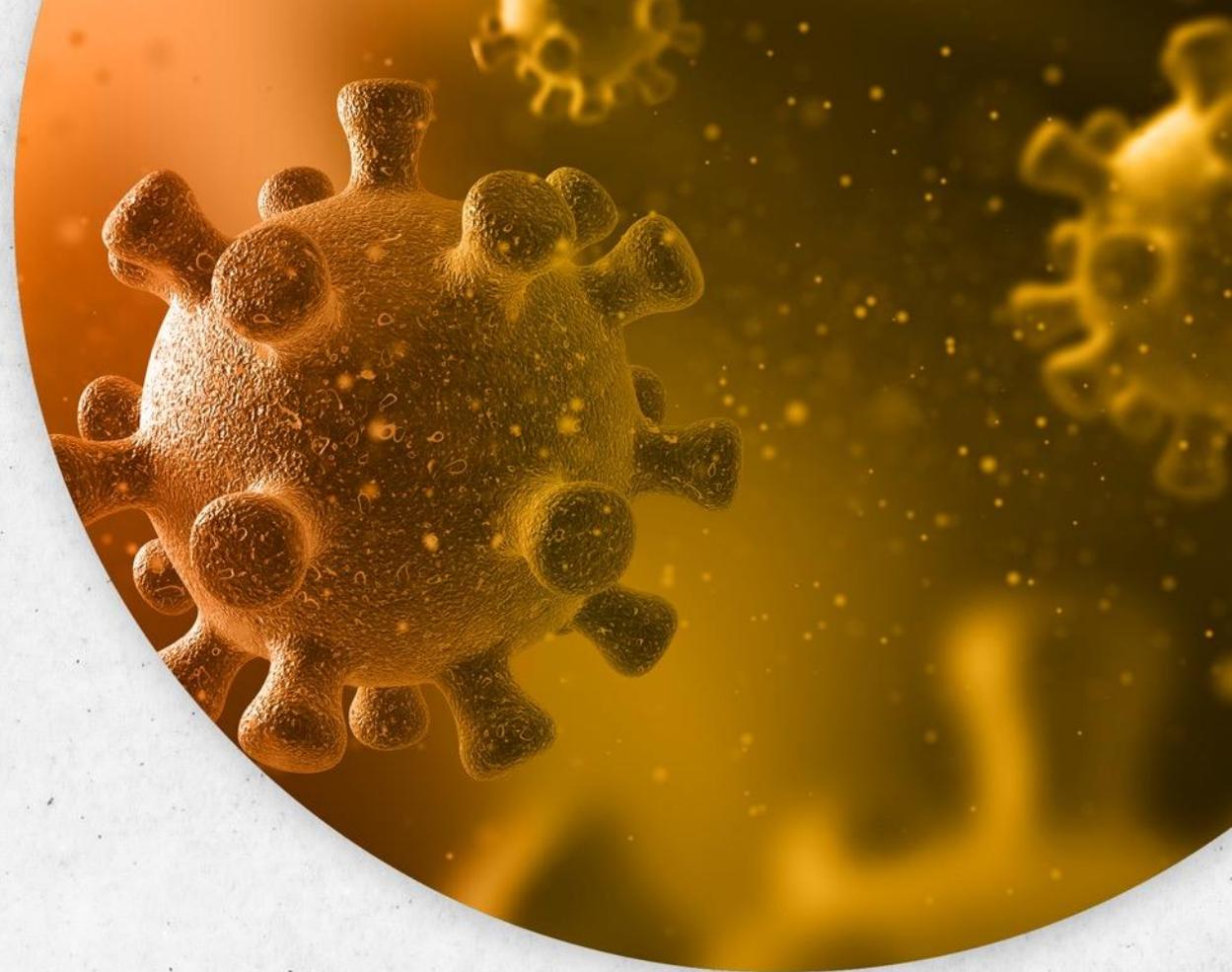
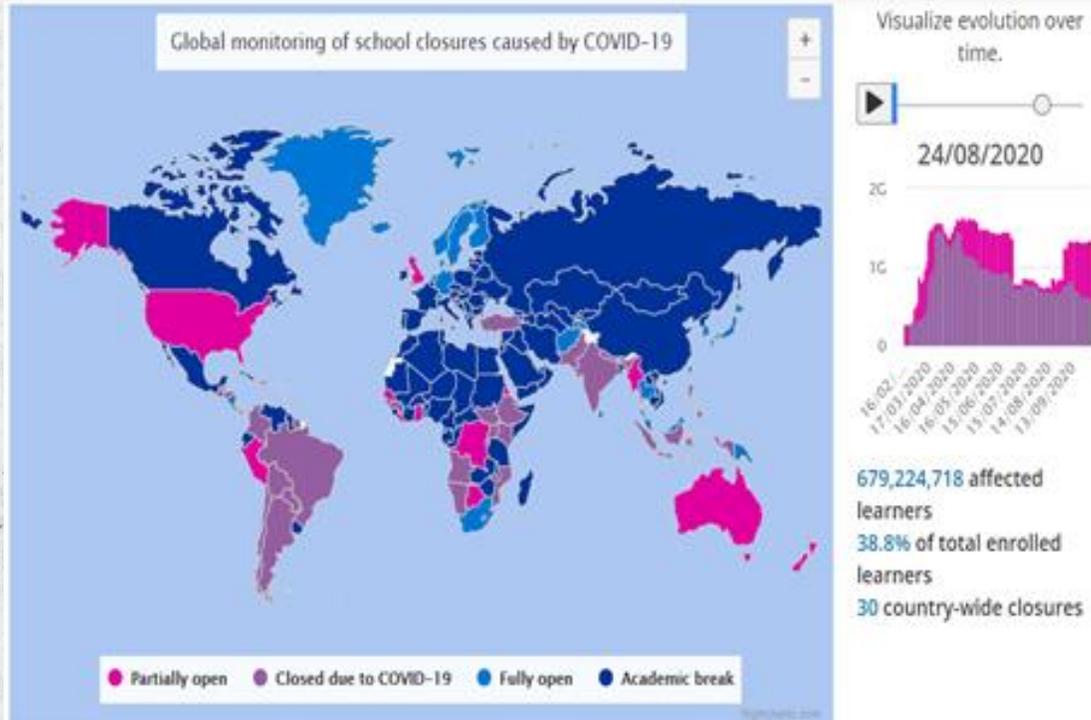


Some late developments

In May 2021 due to a new upsurge in the spread of Covid-19 the DBE announced that contact sports were suspended. Non-contact sports were allowed while maintaining social distancing and hygiene. The Outbreak Response Team is monitoring the situation.



Early recommendations/ Immediate interventions



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Early recommendations/ Immediate interventions

The unprecedented Covid-19 crisis has presented the education sector with a unique opportunity to show that the departments of education, schools and higher educational institutions can and must:

1. Adapt to the changing teaching and learning environment.
2. In the long term, transform the status quo (e.g. the socio-economic and digital divides) in South Africa.
3. Provide all learners and students with tools to handle future pandemics and other crises.



Early recommendations/ Immediate interventions

4. Develop programmes to address the lost teaching and learning time and mitigate the effects of the missing curriculum content.
5. During lockdown periods, maintain contact with learners and students – the PSET sector was generally successful in maintaining an online presence. The school system, however, needs better ways of online teaching and learning. Rather than wait for the next crisis, it should start developing structures and methodologies to help educators and learners engage with innovative strategies.
6. Develop effective communication systems to avoid confusion, and ensure that all are fully aware of the policy, procedures and actions to be undertaken.



Early recommendations/ Immediate interventions

7. Ensure that decisions to close or reopen schools are not driven solely by health considerations (e.g. mortality or morbidity among children). People's needs, especially those in vulnerable, high-risk settings, should be an equally important consideration.
8. Rethink the meaning of learning. In the pandemic, learning was equated to curriculum coverage. However, it transcends the curriculum to include socialising, interacting with peers and teachers, and developing skills for cooperation, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, and so on.
9. If social justice is to be a central feature of offering quality education for all in times of crises, decide how this could be achieved.
10. Ensure political will to drive sustained investment in quality education (with its infrastructure) and healthcare, so that institutions can weather the effects of disasters.

Early recommendations/ Immediate interventions

An important learning point from the pandemic is that the departments of education should assess the preparedness of educational institutions to operate safely under difficult conditions. This should include the availability of sanitisers, PPE, cleaning agents, and cleaning and screening personnel. More importantly, the assessments of infrastructure must include the teaching and learning environment.

Are teaching staff safe (e.g. their own health)?

Can institutions manage with the current number of staff or should more personnel be deployed? What happens to institutions when those with comorbidities remain at home?

Could certain institutions share resources and infrastructure?

Could spatial limitations around safe distancing be addressed by sharing spaces among different schools (e.g. allowing school halls to be used by other schools)?

Could teachers from some schools be sent to others where staff may be older, for example, and there may be fears around comorbidities?

As a final recommendation, the decision to close educational institutions and continue with learning at home must consider the spatial, infrastructural and socio-economic disadvantage, which is the lived experience of a majority of students.