

COVID-19

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The critical role after-school activities play in transforming education during and beyond Covid-19

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Among the countless systemic and structural issues the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to contend with, the future of education for millions of children is by far the most complex. Now, more than ever, it has become necessary that we think about education beyond the classroom.

During a [policy briefing in April](#), the United Nations cautioned that although children may not be the face of this pandemic, “they risk being among its biggest victims” due to the irreversible impact it has on their educational learning and development.

This is clear, as Prof Jonathan Jansen’s letter of plea to the minister to [“cancel the school year ‘for the sake of our children’”](#) is growing to be a populist view among academics and health experts alike – contrary to its reception [three months prior](#).

The optimism over saving the school year three months ago made sense. Although the country had been put under strict lockdown and schools were closed under set timelines, our uninformed reasoning saw these restrictions as merely temporary. There were detailed, albeit delayed, plans in place to ensure that the 13 million learners at home received academic support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in various ways.

Unfortunately, home conditions in [many under-resourced communities](#) exposed pervasive structural inequalities no different to conditions in the low/no-fee paying schools, often hampered by limited human capacity and learning material. It is no surprise then, that millions of learners received little to none of the [supporting resources promoted by DBE](#) during the period of school closures. By contrast, this period saw the immediate and mass mobilisation of organisations from the non-profit sector adapting, fundraising and collaborating to support communities in areas of health, nutrition and education.

A significant player in mobilising innovative efforts has been organisations that run after-school programmes (e.g. extra-curricular arts and culture, sports, life skills, and academic support). School closures and lockdown restrictions meant that most after-school organisations had to pause physical operations and reevaluate what supporting learners looked like in the absence of physical programmes.

It did not take long for organisations to connect with parents and learners to offer alternative methods of engagement and tutoring. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Microsoft Teams were used to ensure that learners continued actively learning at home. Other organisations based in the Eastern Cape even collaborated to produce fun educational content for television, through [QuaranTV](#) as a response to children and youth in communities without access to online learning.

Even as lockdown restrictions slowly ease to allow some grades to return to school, many organisations continue to provide learners who are still at home with psycho-social support, as well as tailored learning materials like the [Treasure Box](#) collaboration by The Learning Trust and partners.

Coordinated distribution of learning materials has also been accompanied by [food packages](#) to families in need. These efforts have arguably had a larger and more immediate impact than the delayed plans proposed and poorly administered by our government.

Despite the underfunded work of the non-profit sector, its practitioners have shown determination, compassion, and direction in an effort to, again, bridge the gap that has exposed the inefficiencies of the DBE's plans to ensure every learner is catered for. If anything, the pandemic has illuminated the perennial challenges faced by the education sector, and simultaneously built a strong case to suggest that after-school organisations are a powerful player in transforming the stark inequalities of the system.

The end of Covid-19 will not mean the end of pandemic-related challenges. The reality is that some of the supplementary systems and practices established during the crisis will have to remain long after it has ended.

While the school system will be heavily burdened for the rest of the year by the continuous rise in infections, it is clear that partners in non-profit education are thinking creatively and strategically about the future and about the value of alternative learning methods beyond the classroom.