

What South Africa's teachers brought to the virtual classroom during COVID-19

October 5 2020, by Mmaki Jantjies



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While celebrating this year's World Teachers Day, we should recognize how the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the key role that teachers already play in South Africa's schools.

Before the pandemic, many teachers in the country [had not received](#) substantive formal technology training, either to support blended

teaching and learning or to fully apply online learning. The decision by the Ministry of Basic Education to shut down schools in response to the pandemic forced teachers to adapt and innovate to ensure that learning continued despite the challenges faced.

South African schools are clustered into quintiles ranging from one to five. This was done to ensure an equal and fair distribution of resources across schools. Schools in the lower quintiles are often based in under-served communities where resources are limited, while quintile five schools are well resourced. This approach was introduced to address past inequities which affected schools. Regional variances, therefore, exist in terms of access to computer labs and related computing resources.

Although many rural and peri-urban schools [have some form](#) of computing or information technology resources, some have [none at all](#).

The Basic Education Department created a [COVID-19 guide](#) for teachers addressing aspects of health as well as potential resources that they could use when teaching from home. This is how teachers across South African schools have responded to COVID-19:

- Having little to no previous experience, they have had to adapt to [online learning](#) platforms while learning how to use learning management systems during the pandemic.
- To keep supporting learners, the teachers used online teaching resources and conducted one-on-one consultations using platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp and Google messaging services that allow video calls.
- The WhatsApp messaging service has been repurposed for learning. Schools have created WhatsApp learning groups to take pictures of book pages and send them to parents, while learners receiving teaching material through their smartphone apps have enabled classes to continue. The Department of Basic Education

also launched a [complementary WhatsApp portal](#) to provide teachers with information about COVID-19 and educational material.

- In some instances, teachers pasted pieces of paper on the wall and used them as "whiteboards," then recorded themselves on their phones to teach learners from these whiteboards. They shared the videos with parents via the WhatsApp groups. Schools have also used platforms such as Facebook to share information and send learning material to parents.

Radio and television [have also been used](#) by teachers to supplement learning. Prior to the pandemic, these had lost popularity as key learning media. But, teachers now recognize that since most learners have access to them, they should be incorporated into remote learning material. The Basic Education Department also [recognized](#) that pupils were more likely to be able to access radio and television compared to any other technological medium of learning.

While South Africa's [focus](#) prior to the pandemic was on digital transformation in the fourth industrial revolution, teachers have emerged as key players in digital skills development and sustainability.

Going forward

Beyond COVID-19, a lesson for South Africa and many other countries is the role that teachers play in co-creating a digital learning environment. For technology to be adopted in schools, the [school](#) leadership and teachers play an important role in the sustainable use of any educational technology.

Indeed, teachers are best placed to adapt lesson plans to suit the child's home environment. For some, online devices may be readily accessible, while others will need to receive printed materials or tune into radio or

TV lessons. Having a range of options is critical in a country like South Africa, where there are enormous variations in income and access to resources.

How technology is introduced also makes a difference. I've been working with a number of schools to help provide digital skills that can be used in science, technology, engineering and maths lessons. What we have found is that giving teachers and school principals ownership of the process is vital in the technology adoption process.

To this end, teachers should be encouraged to support each other through the learning journey. Champions of technology in schools need to be recognized and rewarded in order that technology adoption is not seen as just an additional task or burden for teachers.

The education system needs to build e-learning ecosystems involving national and provincial governments, schools, teachers, parents, telecommunications companies, NGOs and the private sector. Most importantly, teachers need to be supported and trained in digital education. These interventions should look beyond the pandemic as critical components enabling learning with technology in and beyond the classroom.

Education professionals and researchers should listen to teachers, work with them and reward them for innovating with technology in schools. Teachers still hold the key to children's learning and no keyboard or screen can replace their role.

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