

# Collective commitment, action needed to move forward with innovative learning

By [Helga Jansen-Daugbjerg](#)

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In my view, the recent announcement by President Cyril Ramaphosa to close public schools again was a political decision and it should not have come to this. If the Ministry of Education was decisive in the beginning and really took to heart the science of the matter and the complexity of our society, they would have played a wait-and-see game. Instead, they sent our kids to school and then changed that decision, which was enormously disruptive for the teachers and the system.



Helga Jansen-Daugbjerg, Activate Change Drivers programme lead for the TVET Graduate Attributes Programme (TVET GAP)

It also laid bare the inequalities in our society. Some schools could adapt to an online situation or try and make up the work. Other schools just couldn't because they have an infrastructural backlog, apart from having no access to any kind of digital platforms. The ministry missed the boat in being decisive in the beginning, and now that they are being decisive, it comes at a time when the infection rate is spiking. And, of course, parents' fear for their children and teachers' fears for their lives and their families collided.

Even developed countries like Canada put the academic year on hold for primary and high school children and used the time to be innovative around education, thereby sparking a completely different conversation around how we educate our children and why we educate our children. What do we want them to be in the world? Not just as individuals, but as society. We had this window too.

Unfortunately, fatigue and frustration have now set in and I don't know now if we as a society are as ready to spark that conversation as we were three months ago.

## Community uprising

I remember, and many of my contemporaries will too, losing a year of schooling in 1985 at the height of unrest in our townships. Teachers in our township banded together when the schools were closed in September 1985 and they were schooling in people's garages, churches opened up their halls, and schooling continued. This is not the same type of environment because the virus requires physical distancing, but there was a community uprising then that saved the academic year - there was innovation. There was a coming together.

The state has missed the boat on truly partnering with communities and civil society. I do understand government's view that in a crisis situation, it is harder to get poorer children and girl children to return to school. I get that our public-school system is a lifeline for many children. I get that this is a deadly virus with no cure. I also don't think that losing half a year's schooling is necessarily a total loss – we can catch up. Children will learn. They don't need a brick structure to learn.

But my point is that it is time for society to reflect and also rise up to take care of our children. Entire communities need to come together to care for the children while their parents are at work, and to create the safe spaces for our children that we grew up in.

## **Creating safe spaces**

Our next step should now be to action and show our commitment to children everywhere, and to create those safe spaces for them in our communities. There is a role for NGOs, community halls, churches and the Department of Education to ask how do we come together as communities to keep our children fed and safe while their parents are at work, rather than herding them into classrooms with teachers who are over 55 years who have co-morbidities.

The fears around the economy are well founded, but this is also an opportunity to refashion our economy so that it is more equitable, so in moments of crisis, people don't run out of food and society is able to create a social safety net. The principles of the kind of society that we want were established in the first few weeks of lockdown, when the social support network measures were announced. However, the decisive moment is now and calls for restructure. The fears of a five- to seven-year economic downturn are real, but if we do things the same way we have done for the past 25 years economically, we will end up in the same place.

## **Trial-by-error situation**

This is truly a trial-by-error kind of situation - we have never been here. No government in SA has been in this position to respond to a global event like this. In terms of education, the Department of Basic Education is learning the hard way that unions, when they have to protect their members, will step into their power. The disruption to the system could have been avoided if the minister was less set on saving an academic year and a matric exam, and more able to hear what principals, trade unions and ordinary teachers were saying rather than the political optics.

We can't save much right now, all we can do is mitigate against the destruction. The moment for innovation now. We have to feel our way through this collectively and acknowledge there are mistakes. All we can do is move forward.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Helga Jansen-Daugbjerg, Activate Change Drivers programme lead for the TVET Graduate Attributes Programme (TVET GAP)

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