The argument for returning to full daily attendance

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1 The school attendance challenge

The 2020 school year in South Africa looks as illustrated in Figure 1. Learners in the critical grades 1 to 5 lost almost 60% of the originally anticipated 198-day school year if one considers ‘Hybrid’ to be attendance every second day.

![Figure 1: School days in 2020](image)

Note: ‘Daily with distancing’ refers to situations where just one or two grades attended, meaning the targeted grades could experience full attendance. ‘Hybrid’ refers to situations where virtually all grades attended, meaning many schools would have employed rotational attendance.

A key question currently is whether learners can begin attending school on a normal daily basis when the 2021 school year begins on 27 January, at least in those parts of the country with relatively low levels of COVID-19 infections.

From a purely social welfare perspective, the argument for returning to regular attendance is high. The two things that must be weighed up against each other is the educational harm inflicted by reduced school attendance, and the infection risks associated with normal school attendance.

As explained in, for instance, a recent UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) blog, the harm to learning associated with school days lost is immense, and probably larger than what many would imagine, because school days lost in fact understate how much learning is lost, because of the psychological and forgetting effects on children. The UIS uses a factor of 2.0 in inflating schools days lost to learning lost: half a year of schooling lost equals a whole year of learning lost. Given links between education and employment, the World Bank has estimated that the 2020 disruptions to schooling will lead to large economic losses in the longer term.

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1 mgustafsson@sun.ac.za.
2 From official government notices and Table 1 in Mohohlwane et al (2020).
2 WHO understandings and advice

On the health front, the World Health Organization (WHO) continues to emphasise that not just the educational, but also health-related harm of missing school can exceed infection risks associated with having schools open. The WHO continues to advise that schools are relatively low-risk spaces when it comes to infections. The WHO continues to advise that schools are relatively low-risk spaces when it comes to infections. The WHO continues to advise that schools are relatively low-risk spaces when it comes to infections. The WHO classifies countries using the four levels of transmission intensity shown in Table 1. School-related measures recommended by the WHO at each level are from the WHO’s most recent advisory note on this matter, dated 14 September 2020.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of transmission</th>
<th>School-related measures (own italics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community transmission</td>
<td>School closures: ‘authorities may consider a risk-based approach for the operation of school[s] … including school closure, particularly in areas with increasing trends of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations for COVID-19 and COVID-19 deaths’. Distancing in open schools: ‘Maintain a distance of at least 1 metre between all individuals’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clusters of cases</td>
<td>As above, but some lenience on the distance rule: ‘The benefits of adhering to physical distancing of at least 1 metre inside a classroom should be weighed against the social, emotional, developmental and mental health gains from interactions between children.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporadic cases</td>
<td>‘All schools open’. Age-specific distancing: ‘Children under the age of 12 years should not be required to keep physical distance at all times’ and ‘Where feasible, children aged 12 years and over should keep at least 1 metre apart from each other’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No cases</td>
<td>As above, meaning while a pandemic still exists, anti-transmission measures should be continued.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the same policy note, the following is the only explicit linking of masks and distancing:

… age-appropriate wearing of masks [by learners] when physical distancing cannot be achieved.

This is potentially important, because it seems suggested that if masks are worn, a distance of less than one metre becomes possible.

The WHO acknowledges the existence of hybrid approaches between complete school closure and business as usual:

… staggering the start of school, breaks, bathroom, meal and end times; alternate physical presence (e.g. alternate days, alternate shifts)

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5 See references in my earlier 31 August report ‘Rules governing within-classroom physical distancing and reduced class size’.
6 Table uses World Health Organization (2020a: 2, 4).
7 World Health Organization, 2020a: 3.
8 World Health Organization, 2020a: 3.
The level distinctions in Table 1 remain somewhat irrelevant while countries remain stuck in the ‘community transmission’ level, which is still largely the case. For instance, in Africa only four of 47 countries were not at the ‘community transmission’ level in December 2020, according to the WHO\(^9\). These were Rwanda and Mauritius, both having ‘cluster transmission’, and Eritrea and Seychelles, with ‘sporadic cases’.

The WHO has recently defined four sub-levels of severity within the ‘community transmission’ classification\(^10\). Unfortunately, no-one seems to have used these yet to break down the intensity of prevention measures in schools.

The above suggests the WHO provides neither advice clearly for or against a normalisation of attendance in South Africa when the 2021 school year begins. However, the WHO’s emphasis on the harm done by missed schooldays, and its suggestion that with masks distances below one metre might be acceptable, seem to strengthen the arguments in favour of a return to full daily attendance.

3 Comparing what countries actually do

While doing what others do, without considering the science, is not a good thing, what actually occurs across the world influences South African perceptions to a large degree. If South Africa takes greater health risks, relative to educational risks, than everyone else, then this may not be acceptable. However, if South Africa is balancing the risks in ways many other countries are, then this could be more acceptable among the public.

It is unfortunate that what started as a useful day-to-day monitoring system of school measures on the part of UNESCO, now provides information which is of limited use, given the changing context. Specifically, the UNESCO system was designed to consider the following under the category ‘partially open’\(^11\):

(a) partial reopening in certain areas, and/or
(b) a phased re-opening by grade level or age and/or
(c) the use of a hybrid approach combining in-person and distance learning.

According to this, South Africa’s schooling system should be classified as ‘partially open’ and not ‘fully open’ currently. Yet South Africa’s schools are described as being ‘fully open’ from 24 August to now. UNESCO defines ‘fully open’ as follows:

For the majority of schools, classes are being held exclusively in person

This does not describe the situation in schools in South Africa since 24 August, a period when a majority of learners have been affected by rotational learning, meaning attendance on just certain days.

In hindsight, what would have been ideal is a ‘truly fully open’ category meaning attendance could proceed as before the pandemic. With UNESCO’s definition, ‘fully open’ could apply if 51% of schools are back to business-as-usual, while 49% are closed.

It may have helped if UNESCO’s definitions had been clearer. In particular, ‘combining in-person and distance learning’ in the above could mean some learners always do distance learning while some learners attend school – this approach is fairly common in more privileged schools in South Africa where parent choice must be respected – and it could mean each learner

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\(^10\) World Health Organization, 2020c.
attends every alternate day and is at home with homework on other days – this is what many public schools are pursuing. These two approaches are of course very different to each other.

Figure 2 uses UNESCO’s data to identify countries which have become ‘fully open’, when previously their status was either ‘partially open’ or ‘closed’. ‘Other’ in the map refers in nearly all cases to countries which by 7 December 2020 still required their schools to be ‘closed’ or ‘partially open’. Of course, at least with respect to South Africa, ‘fully open’ is not a correct classification.

**Figure 2: School status 7 December 2020**

![Map of school status on 7 December 2020](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse)

Source: Own analysis of data from [https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse).

Fortunately, there is a separate UNESCO dataset based on (so far) two waves of questionnaires sent to national education authorities. This dataset includes information on whether countries have adopted shifts of classes, or rotational attendance, as means to reduce the numbers of learners in the classroom at any point in time. Figure 3 draws from this other dataset, and breaks down the countries in green in the previous map into five categories. South Africa reported employing both shifts and rotation. Clearly, few countries classified as ‘fully open’ in Figure 2 are really back to regular daily attendance. **Perhaps the most significant ‘truly fully open’ country is Nigeria.** Some googling of Nigerian news sites confirms that there was a strong push by government in October to get schools to open for the new 2020-2021 academic year – normally this begins in September. Moreover, policy documents available online make no mention of shifts of rotation, suggesting that Nigeria’s push has truly been for regular daily attendance.

**Figure 3: School status using two UNESCO datasets**

![Map of school status using two UNESCO datasets](http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures)


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The problem with considering Nigeria as a ‘peer’ in South Africa’s own push for full daily attendance, is that statistics point to the pandemic being far more serious in South Africa than Nigeria. Where by early December South Africa had experienced 375 COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants\(^{13}\), Nigeria’s figure was just 6. Moreover, the fact that Nigeria’s private school coverage is around four times that of South Africa\(^ {14}\) creates stronger political pressure in Nigeria for a full reopening, as below-normal attendance can threaten the economic survival of private schools.

References


\(^{13}\) https://ourworldindata.org.