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AGAINST ALL ODDS: ENABLING DISTANCE LEARNING IN LOWER QUINTILE SCHOOLS

While public benefit organisations have long spoken out about the importance of bridging the 'digital divide', the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, more acutely than ever before, the impacts of unequal access to digital tools and connectivity. In this learning brief, two initiatives committed to keeping learners in school – the Zero Dropout Campaign and Public School Partnerships – share how they supported learners through the mandatory school closures, outlining key breakthroughs and barriers along the way.

THE ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN aims to halve South Africa's school dropout rate by 2030 by spurring individual and collective ownership of the problem. Established as a research project funded by the DG Murray Trust in 2015, the Zero Dropout Campaign has since grown into a national advocacy campaign with two dedicated programmes of action and a national network of implementing partners. Today, the campaign works with four implementing partners operating in 27 schools across the country.

PUBLIC SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS is a collaborative approach to public school innovation that brings together government, funders, no-fee schools and non-profit education support organisations. It seeks to provide additional expertise, resources, flexibility and greater accountability to no-fee schools in a bid to achieve greater equity in quality education.

INTRODUCTION: SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED, NOW WHAT?

On 15 March 2020, President Ramaphosa declared a state of emergency and announced school closures from 18 March until after the end of the April school holidays. While the decision to close schools was an attempt to contain the spread of coronavirus, it came with significant social and economic costs – particularly for those already living in disadvantaged communities.

For example, after a month of intensive lockdown, active employment was found to have decreased by 40%, and in nearly half of these cases, workers did not expect to return to their jobs¹. The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) also found that 47% of respondents reported that their household ran out of money to buy food in April 2020 (prior to the lockdown, 21% of households reported that they ran out of money to buy food in the previous year)².

Disruptions of this nature and severity can trigger or worsen instability in lives of learners, placing them at risk of disengagement and dropout³. While schools across the globe turned to distance or remote learning options to mitigate the impact of school closures⁴, this is not a viable option in areas where there is unequal access to digital tools and technology, such as rural or poor communities. Studying at home is further complicated when the child does not have a caring adult to support their learning journey. In South Africa, distance learning is possible for roughly only 5-10% of all learners⁵.

This brief explores how the Zero Dropout Campaign and Public School Partnerships (PSP) approached distance learning with the help of their respective NGO implementing partners and school operating partners (SOPs). Their interventions are focused on Quintile 1-3 schools⁶, where learners are most at risk of dropping out.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN SWITCHING TO DISTANCE LEARNING

According to UNESCO, the effectiveness of distance learning solutions depends on four levels of preparedness: technical preparedness, content readiness, pedagogical preparedness and monitoring and evaluation⁷.

Within this framework, there are four key things to consider before switching to digital:

1. **Access to digital tools, connectivity and resources**
2. **A safe and supportive environment for learning**
3. **Teacher readiness**
4. **Tracking learner progress.**

1 Access to digital tools, connectivity and resources

It goes without saying that access to the internet and digital resources is the main hurdle to distance learning in South Africa. Statistics shows that only 22% of households have access to a computer and just 10% have internet connection at home⁸. While mobile penetration is high among adults, only 60% of mobile phone users are connected to the internet, and it is unclear whether children have exclusive or unlimited access to these devices⁹.

The cost of data is a further barrier for many households. Even if resources are open access or even zero-rated, they may remain inaccessible due to connectivity issues or the lack of hardware in learners' homes, including a basic smartphone for many. Learners and/or their parents may also lack familiarity with the online learning platforms being used. Access to adequate signal or electricity in rural areas, as well as the time spent helping in the home rather than studying are additional barriers to distance learning for many learners.

In the absence of access to digital tools, connectivity and resources, educators and learners are unable to develop their digital literacy competencies. Digital literacy can be defined as “the skills you need to live, learn, and work in a society where communication and access to information is increasingly through digital technologies like internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices”¹⁰.

2 A safe and supportive environment for learning

If a learner does not have food, a safe and quiet space in which to study, and some form of support at home, these factors can affect their ability to learn and stay connected with school.

While primary caregivers are not expected to play the role of substitute teacher in distance learning, their love, encouragement and support are important contributors to good educational

1 Jain, R., Budlender, J., Zizzamia, R., & Bassier, I. 2020. The labour market and poverty impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa. Available at: <https://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/materials/papers/csae-wps-2020-14.pdf>

2 Spaul, N. et al. 2020. Overview and Findings NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1. National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM). Available at: <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Spaul-et-al-NIDSCRAM-Wave-1-Synthesis-Report-Overview-and-Findings-1.pdf>

3 The World Bank 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-covid19-pandemic-shocks-to-education-and-policy-responses>

4 UNESCO. 2020. Dealing with obstacles to distance learning. UNESCO, 20 April 2020. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/dealing-obstacles-distance-learning>

5 Van der Berg, S & Spaul, N. 2020. Counting the Cost: COVID-19 school closures in South Africa & its impacts on children. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP). Stellenbosch University. Stellenbosch. Available at: <https://nicspaul.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/van-der-berg-spaul-2020-counting-the-cost-covid-19-children-and-schooling-15-june-2020.pdf>

6 Quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools are not allowed to charge fees as they are located in the poorest areas of the country; they are often referred to as no-fee schools.

outcomes. However, the type of support a caregiver is able to give is conditioned by socio-economic factors and their own level of literacy. For example, two in three South African parents say that they never read to their children¹¹.

3 Teacher preparedness

Educators need to explore how best to convert content created for face-to-face learning into lessons that will be comprehensible and engaging through digital channels. They must adapt their teaching style so that learners are able to understand the work without the advantages of a traditional classroom setting, such as the ease of communication between teacher and learner.

Educators must also consider their learners’ cognitive abilities and capacity to work independently at home. Some learners may need additional support and tutoring if they are not performing at the level of their peers.

Given the speed at which schools were closed, there was little to no time to ready teachers to engage in virtual learning. However, skill is not always as important as will. The most important aspect of teacher readiness in this instance was to have teachers connect, experiment and show learners there was still a connection to school. Cultivating a disposition to try was the real measure of success. The technical capacity to teach virtually will be of less importance over the long term to learners than hearing from caring adults at school. Even so, teachers found creative ways where they were willing to try: some sent voice notes, others called every child in their class and some uploaded YouTube videos where they could.

Once teachers became more familiar with distance learning and the platforms at their disposal, the challenge was – and will remain – sustaining the enthusiasm for online teaching and learning. There is still so much we do not know about how to effectively ensure learners are learning at home in the South African context that it warrants further investigation and innovation.

4 Tracking learner progress

Knowing how many learners have access to digital tools and connectivity in a given school is important. This information can be captured in a Google form that can also be used as a monitoring and tracking tool. Once a remote learning solution is established, educators need to determine the best way to regularly assess progress.

7 UNESCO. 2020. Dealing with obstacles to distance learning. UNESCO, 20 April 2020. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/dealing-obstacles-distance-learning>

8 Van der Berg, S & Spaull, N. 2020. Counting the Cost: COVID-19 school closures in South Africa & its impacts on children. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP). Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch. Available at: <https://resep.sun.ac.za/counting-the-cost/>

9 Ibid.

10 Western Sydney University. What is digital Literacy? Available at: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/digital_literacy/what_is_digital_literacy

11 This footnote is missing

MAKING THE SWITCH: PIVOTING OUR PROGRAMMES

The Zero Dropout Campaign

The Zero Dropout Campaign works with NGO implementing partners that have established relationships in vulnerable communities. The implementing partners identify learners who are at risk of dropping out, using an early warning system that tracks chronic absenteeism, behaviour and academic performance (also known as the ABCs). Learners found to be at risk of dropout are enrolled either in **A) mentoring sessions**, **B) in-school accelerated catch-up programmes** or referred to other state services for additional support. During **C) home visits**, primary caregivers are supported to understand their role in helping children succeed at school.

A MENTORING

Before the national lockdown came into effect, the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW), an implementing partner of the Zero Dropout Campaign, would hold face-to-face mentoring sessions with at-risk learners. These services were constrained by lockdown restrictions, forcing the organisation to rethink how it connected with learners. The lockdown hastened the launch of a ‘Virtual Connection’ programme in which Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) connect with learners via WhatsApp groups. Learners are now also able to participate in digital reading clubs, poetry sessions, and debates in these digital groups.

B IN-SCHOOL ACCELERATED CATCH-UP PROGRAMMES

The ‘Reading for Meaning’ after-school programme is a core project of the Zero Dropout Campaign. The programme aims to rebuild foundational literacy skills among learners whose reading competencies are below their grade level. During the lockdown, the campaign moved quickly to make ‘Reading for Meaning’ stories and activities [available online](#) and via WhatsApp for parents and education practitioners.

C HOME VISITS

The Khula Development Group (KDG), a Zero Dropout Campaign implementing partner, renders services in disadvantaged communities in Paarl and Stellenbosch where access to data is limited. To mitigate the impact of learning losses, fieldworkers began promoting at-home learning and distributing school packs to beneficiaries.



“During a survey conducted at 11 schools, we found that the participation levels of primary caregivers with learners doing schoolwork at home was poor to moderate.”

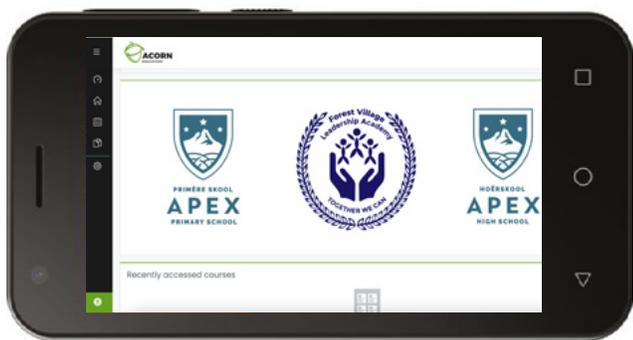
Bianca Oppelt, Communications Manager,
Khula Development Group

Public School Partnerships

Collaboration Schools – the name given to schools part of the Public School Partnerships programme in the Western Cape – used a range of strategies to ensure learners stayed on track during lockdown. From making basic smartphones available to reducing the cost of connectivity, the below interventions were found to drive up engagement and attendance rates:

ACORN EDUCATION

Acorn Education is a Western Cape PSP operating partner. Learners in their network of schools could access virtual schooling via the Moodle app or browser, completely data free as the service was zero-rated via Binu. Where households did not have access to a basic smartphone or internet-enabled device, they were loaned these devices. Steps were also taken to reduce the cost of connectivity through reverse billing and by regularly sending data directly to learners' phones.



Acorn Education's Moodle LMS on the affordable Kicka smartphone.

APEX HIGH SCHOOL

A no-fee school supported by Acorn Education, Apex High initially used Facebook when virtual teaching was required. Fifty-five Facebook groups – all linked to the Apex High Facebook page – allowed educators to upload and share pre-recorded lessons on their phones or computers via the relevant Facebook subject group daily. The school quickly transitioned to Moodle, with the Apex High Virtual School quickly running a full timetable for all grades, from 8am-4pm, four days a week.



“Apex High learners proved keen to continue their learning as average learner attendance reached nearly 80% across subjects.”

Khayakazi Namfu, Programme Director,
Public School Partnerships

FOREST VILLAGE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY AND APEX PRIMARY SCHOOL

Also supported by Acorn Education, these schools transitioned to virtual learning by sending WhatsApp messages of recorded lessons and worksheets to learners covering key subjects.

EXAMPLES OF DIGITAL TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY:

HARDWARE

A number of school operating partners purchased basic smartphones, or Kicka phones, for learners. These are hard-wearing, affordable phones that cost roughly R250 each. Some schools allowed learners to borrow phones as school property, while others implemented a buy-back model.

SOFTWARE

Different modalities of teaching and learning are better suited to particular platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom or Moodle. For example:

> WhatsApp:

This platform is inherently social and carries multi-media messages. However, you need data to use this app.

> Facebook:

Educators can record lessons on their phones or computers and upload these lessons onto a Facebook page or group.

> Moodle:

All Collaboration Schools migrated to Moodle – a free and open-source learning management system (LMS). The system allows schools to upload and manage content and lessons, set assessments, and track individual learner engagement as well as manage calendars and virtual classrooms.

> Zoom:

Teachers can host lessons with multiple participants. It is easy to use and install, but requires a subscription fee and stable internet connection.

> Moya messenger:

This app is not as popular as WhatsApp, but has similar features. It is a data-free platform for messaging, but requires data to open and view files and send voice notes.

OBROADCAST TECHNOLOGY:

In collaboration with the Department of Basic Education, the SABC – the public broadcaster – made lessons available on radio and television for certain grades.

OTHER RESOURCES:

Access to electricity and the internet.

LESSONS LEARNT IN THE TRANSITION TO DISTANCE LEARNING

1 The cost of connectivity

In just over three months of implementation, the Zero Dropout Campaign and Public School Partnerships – together with their partners, and a lot of trial and error – gained the following insights and achievements to better facilitate distance learning in the South African context moving forward:

REVERSE BILLING:

Through a partnership with a data-free platform created by BiNu, Public School Partnerships arranged for the cost of data to be reverse-billed so that poor families did not carry the financial burden.

ZERO-RATING EDUCATION WEBSITES:

The DG Murray Trust, together with the support of the initiatives it funds, lobbied mobile operators to zero-rate educational content.

CHEAPER DATA:

School operating partners made a point of purchasing low-cost data bundles that proved value for money. They made use of WhatsApp data bundles and platforms such as Flickswitch, which help to manage data connectivity.

2 Deciding what platform to use

It is beneficial to choose a platform that learners and educators are already familiar and comfortable with. The platform should be compatible with their devices, light on data, safe and secure to use. WhatsApp ticks all of these boxes, making it a popular choice in the transition to distance learning.

ADVANTAGES OF WHATSAPP:

- ✓ Facilitates group chats
- ✓ Facilitates real-time communication between learners and teachers
- ✓ Facilitates real-time communication between teachers and caregivers
- ✓ Audio lessons can be sent directly to learners
- ✓ Learners can access multimedia content
- ✓ Report cards can be sent directly to the caregiver's phone.

3 Tailoring the content

CONSOLIDATION:

Though the best theoretical approach would be to consolidate content to suit distance learning (for example, avoiding new



Khanya is 18 years old and in grade 11 at Khayelihle High School in Umbumbulu. He lives nearby with his grandmother and two cousins in Empandwini, Umbumbulu. His parents and siblings live in Port Shepstone but he moved to look after his grandmother. Although his home is not too far from the main road it is impossible to reach with a car. "We tried to form a WhatsApp group but it was not efficient because some of us do not have cell phones."

topics, structuring lessons around familiar concepts for learners and/or focusing on learning areas that are least likely to cause misunderstanding), this was not often the case.

Teachers mostly made do with what was at hand, using textbooks they had with them, covering largely familiar Term 1 and Term 2 topics. Some committed teachers were able to keep pace with the full curriculum before plans to consolidate were announced. For those teaching matric subjects, there was more of a concerted effort to cover all possible content. Some partnership primary schools in the Eastern Cape attempted to shift the focus towards skill-building, rather than curriculum coverage. As certain schools perfected their distance learning, full curriculum coverage became a possibility once more. However, the degree of coverage was highly dependent on the ability to support, develop and hold accountable teachers for distance learning at a time when there were no clear national directives.

CREATIVITY:

The content should be interactive, relevant and interesting enough to spark curiosity and discussion. Depending on the platform and context, making use of images, voice notes, emojis and videos help to encourage engagement.



"Emojis and fun activities can be used to initiate a conversation when learners are reluctant to talk about how they are doing or feeling. In our programme, we ask learners to share the last three emojis they used or ask them to do brain teasers and tongue twisters."

Kuhle Ntintili, Isibindi Ezikoleni
Programme Coordinator at the National
Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW).

4 Driving engagement

KEEP IT SHORT:

Distance learning can be a challenge – even in well-resourced environments. To avoid digital fatigue, it is useful to keep the sessions short (one to two hours at most) depending on the content and objective.

ADULT SUPPORT:

Key aspects that seem to drive engagement at Collaboration Schools appear to differ depending on the age of the learner. For primary school learners, it is vital to involve parents in the process. Where schools have managed to reach parents, engagement has been found to be higher. High school learners are more independent but early evidence from PSP indicates that engagement is higher when a learner has a supportive adult in their life who shows interest in what they are doing.

LIVE LESSONS:

Whether or not the learning modality is live or pre-recorded also affects engagement. Live lessons are likely to increase engagement compared to studying alone.

TIPS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT:

- ✓ Summarise the information
- ✓ Clarify and show examples
- ✓ Make the lesson memorable
- ✓ Use multimedia content
- ✓ Make activities fun, practical, and relatable
- ✓ Monitor and evaluate learner progress.

CONCLUSION: DELIVERING HOLISTIC AND SCALABLE SOLUTIONS

Distance learning presented education officials with a dilemma from the onset. In South Africa many vulnerable learners do not have exclusive access to a television or radio in the home, let alone access to digital tools and connectivity. As outlined above, the Zero Dropout Campaign and Public School Partnerships, through their partners, quickly put into place measures to overcome some of these barriers to distance learning.

However, schools are not only spaces for learning – they are also places where many learners access meals and psychosocial support. Distance learning is therefore only one piece of the schooling package that needs to be translated into a digital experience. A good example is the NACCW’s ‘Virtual Connection’ programme, which adopted a blended or hybrid approach to managing the provision of psychosocial support services and mentoring. Similarly, Khula Development Group combined home visits and caregiver education with the provision of distance learning material.

With the possibility of future lockdowns and school closures, learning from these initiatives will help us to build a robust evidence base for good practice to better support learners through distance learning, particularly those who are already vulnerable. Taking these initiatives to scale, however, will require the buy-in and support of education officials, parents, teachers and their unions. It will also require that educational resources provided by public benefit organisations are zero-rated going forward.

This brief was authored by **Rahima Essop**, Communications Lead for the Zero Dropout Campaign, with contributions from the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW), Khula Development Group (KDG), and Public School Partnerships (PSP).

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