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# COVID-19 as a Call for Prophetic Education in South Africa

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**Abstract**

Nelson Mandela's famous assertion that 'Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world' continues to inspire generations in South Africa. While often invoked to encourage young people to pursue learning, the quotation also serves as a call to lawmakers to redress the deep inequalities that have historically disadvantaged Black communities, ensuring both equitable access and quality in education. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these systemic failures, disproportionately affecting marginalized social and racial groups. Drawing on a critical analysis of public documents and pedagogical theories, this article argues that as long as educational provision remains unequal, the demand for prophetic education as an alternative to secular schooling is not only relevant but urgent. By foregrounding honesty, morality, and justice, Prophetic education offers a transformative model capable of addressing entrenched inequities. The article examines the shortcomings of the current system, highlights the lessons revealed by the pandemic, and proposes pathways through which Prophetic education can contribute to reconciliation, empowerment, and sustainable national development.

**Keywords**

COVID-19; education; exposure; disadvantaged groups; South Africa

## Introduction

South Africa is a country with a long history of inequality. Its dark colonial history and apartheid past still raise their ugly heads in different forms within society. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, particularly when lockdown laws and regulations were enforced to stem the spread of the virus, the effects of these historical inequalities, whether hidden or open, were exposed. These inequalities in the education system occur within a context where most of the population are Christian, implying that it is the children of Christians who are mostly affected by the continuing marginalization in the education system. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequities in education, especially with the closing and reopening of schools, both public and private. It has been indicated that some schools were transparent about adhering to the regulations and protocols, while others were not (Evans et

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al. 2021[a]). The divide between public and private schools in South Africa is well-known, and it reinforced the line between the rich and the poor. Thus, the challenges that public schools, where most of the learners and educators are Black, must deal with are very different from the challenges experienced by the so-called 'former Model C or private schools.' Wilson (2021) notes that South Africa's apartheid system was orchestrated, among other things, by policies like the Land Act of 1913, which ensured that racial disparities between Blacks and whites were not only legally entrenched but also the norm. Such policies were used to ensure that economic barriers were under the control of the white minority through the apartheid system.

These apartheid-era differences and their consequences for historically disadvantaged communities invited the attention of this study. The outbreak of the pandemic and its rules ensured that the discomfort of both educators and learners multiplied (Sievertsen and Burgess 2020). This is because many educators in disadvantaged schools were confused about how to proceed, while their counterparts in advantaged schools were enabled and equipped to continue educating their children.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 contributed to this brutal inequality, further impoverishing Blacks and migrant workers. Since these policies aimed at controlling the life and movement of Black people, they resulted in the inequality that dominates the Black experience today. While most of the Black population was subjected to what was called the 'Bantu Education' policy system, the minority white population thrived because of access to better education (McKeever 2017). This had been one of the points from which the apartheid government managed to racially advantage others while at the same time disadvantaging most of the Black population. It is one of the roots where the inequalitites that are in existence today had been manifested. Education became a tool through which Blacks blindly remained under the control of the white government. Stephanie Allies and others (2019) indicate that such a worldview brings further clarity to the relationship between education, poverty, and inequality, which is still observed in South Africa today. Regarding religion, even the missionaries who came to South Africa and Africa to promote Christianity were used as secret weapons of apartheid; hence, some churches can still be held accountable for reinforcing the inequalities of the past and those that still exist today.

Currently, the demographic in South Africa indicates that the Christian population is almost 77%, inclusive of Catholic, Orthodox, and other Christian denominations. Muslims are counted at 1.6%, traditional religion at 4.4%, Hindus at 1%, Jews at 0.10%, other religions at 2.7%, and unaffiliated at 10%. It is within this context that the view is expressed that most children enrolled in public and private schools are Christian. Businesstech reports, 'Given the country's prevailing socio-economic challenges of high and enduring unemployment, widening inequality and worsening poverty, there is also enormous pressure for the post-school education and training system to respond far more effectively to current and future labour needs and appropriate areas of economic development' (cit. in Writer 2022). The author's interpretation of this is that the education of our children is unable to provide answers to our situation. South Africa is not producing the skills and qualifications needed in the economy; hence, graduates are unemployed, while the economy continues to suffocate (Lehohla 2016).

Secondly, concerns about moral and ethical matters continue to go unanswered: unjustified and unwanted crime continues to increase, while the education system does nothing to address the moral decay in the society through the education of our children. There is an agreement that good character is fundamental in Christian moral education (Madewesi 2006; Otonti 1983; Anwuluorah and Okafor-Udah 2015). Senseless corruption that continues to engulf the economy and negatively impact the lives of many people is a symptom of the moral decline in our society, which can be addressed through the education system. Runcan

and Runcan (2021) contend that prophetic education, among others, can influence the character and behaviour of future rulers and governors. This article argues that since the education sector has been and is still failing in its mission to educate South African children, there should be an alternative education system driven by Christian education.

Past political injustices that oppressed Blacks in South Africa cannot be remedied without education playing a major role, especially because education was also a tool utilized by the white-minority governments to formulate and justify those inequalities. This is because colonial apartheid shifted everything about Black identity, including their educational way. Camins (2015) reiterates the importance of this in his research. Some aspects he touched on are that education should aim at focusing on social, academic, cultural, and intellectual development, to mention a few. From a different context, which is similar to South Africa, Mihălţean and Aghioritul argue, 'Lately, there has been a moral crisis in society that is increasingly profound and visible. Crime and corruption, laziness, neglect and lack of accountability, lying and selfishness, drunkenness, smoking, drug use, sexual debauchery, etc. are deeply rooted' (Mihălţean and Aghioritul 2021, 53).

The fact that the South African education system has been changed at various times over decades, while the results have not brought about improvements, makes it relevant to speak about prophetic education as an alternative. The next section discusses some of the core issues that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore in South Africa's education system.

**Problem Identification**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that public and private schools were not receiving the same attention and treatment from the South African government. For instance, some lacked basic facilities like water. The Africo Barometer (Isbell 2020) underlined this in their blog, entitled 'COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa highlights unequal access to services.' The lack of resources to educate children in their homes was mentioned as one of the challenges. Some of those who had such resources could continue educating their children at home, while others could not, meaning their children would unfairly fall behind in their education when examinations were written (Isbell 2020, 1). During COVID-19, when an announcement was made by the Ministry of Education that schools would be reopening after closing for the lockdown, labour unions seriously contested this decision because there was uncertainty about whether the Department of Education could ensure that schools would be a safe environment to work in. The COVID-19 pandemic unmasked clear disparities in the education system, with some schools, for instance, lacking water as a basic resource to curb the spread of the virus, while other schools, mainly private, had access to a variety of facilities (Mbinqo-Gigaba 2020). Furthermore, the work of teachers in public schools doubled due to teachers with comorbidities not returning to work, while others opted to resign and were not replaced. In addition, the salaries of schoolteachers remained unchanged. The labour unions did not seriously raise this issue with the government, although members continued to pay their monthly subscriptions. The argument could have been raised that the job descriptions of teachers had changed since the implementation of the COVID-19 rules (for instance, scanning of children upon entrance to school), which would justify a re-examination of teacher remuneration. By the time COVID-19 happened, the issue of a salary increment had been pushed under the carpet for some years already (Mbinqo-Gigaba 2020).

Even though students are expected to play a role in taking their own educational direction, the South African government misses the opportunity to help them reach their potential where they can bring answers to their communities, for example, the challenge of moral decay (Baloyi 2024). It is imperative that education must produce a generation that is able to respond to the current challenges within their immediate contexts. Shenilla Mohamed (2020)

indicates that, for South Africa to comply with its own laws regarding education, there is an urgent need for change. Mohamed's claim signals that the current education system is failing. The legacy of apartheid is evident in the education system, and COVID-19 has highlighted the current government's failure to tackle the historical challenges faced by public schools, as evidenced by the crumbling infrastructure and overcrowded classes. Such sentiments are not regularly expressed by young graduates in South Africa, a sign that something is just not right with the education system. In a recent article, Jonathan Jansen wrote that our education is not relevant to South African challenges (Jansen 2023). His argument echoes Smangaliso Kumalo's (2005, 66) earlier argument that South African education must be rooted in its African context. A curriculum based on Western ideologies, which led to the 2015 #FeesMustFall student uprising, continues to disadvantage the very people it was supposed to uplift. Van der Walt's opinion is that

> [Parents'] choice of schools for their children has become particularly problematic in the current circumstances, because most schools have become secular and, hence, cannot support Christian parents in their task of educating children, in line with the former's baptismal vow. In addition to this, Philosophy of Education has all but disappeared from teacher education curricula. These circumstances have not, however, detracted from Christian parents', teachers', caregivers' and other educators' need for a Christian Philosophy of Education (Van der Walt 2016, 1).

Freedom of religion in schools presents a complex challenge. Parents from religious backgrounds often expect public institutions to safeguard their children's right to practice their faith. Yet, by design, public schools cannot privilege or protect any single religion without compromising neutrality. This tension makes it difficult to reconcile freedom of religion with policies that might appear biased toward particular traditions. The issue is further complicated by the widespread belief that religion plays a vital role in shaping a child's moral development. When schools remain secular, parents worry that the moral values instilled at home are not reinforced in the classroom. Such concerns resonate with the broader frustrations of many Black South Africans, who feel the state has failed to meet its educational responsibilities. As Jansen and others (2009) explain, these frustrations stem from three interrelated challenges: the inadequacies of formal education in Africa, the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, and persistent leadership failures.

## Theoretical Foundations of Prophetic Education

According to Sholeh (2018, 228), the term *prophetic* derives from the Greek *prophetess*, meaning one who speaks ahead of time or proclaims the future. prophetic education, therefore, is not merely about individual enlightenment but about laying the foundation for collective vision and national development. Within the African context, such education cannot ignore the Ubuntu principle of 'I am, because we are' (Mbiti 1969), a reminder that its relevance lies in how it responds to the needs of contemporary society. What makes this model distinctive is its transformative purpose: it equips learners not only with knowledge but also with the capacity to become solutions for their communities.

The research article entitled 'Some Struggles of the Department of Education' made some demands and expositions which COVID-19 highlighted to the Ministry of Education, urging them to look at ways to end the unequal education system in a country like South Africa (Baloyi 2021a). In the special issue on decolonization of education in the African context, Anthony Reddie (2023) extended Freire's (1990) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by indicating that participative Black Theology has a special role to play in making education relevant and useful to contemporary people. His ideological approach to education argues, among other things, that liberative praxis, often orchestrated by dehumanized experiences, demands

transformative education and self-actualization. For Freire, the critical living experience of ordinary people should be considered when such curricula are made available (Freire 1990).

Prophetic education, grounded in honesty, morality, respect, and service, seeks to liberate and humanize those marginalized by political and economic oppression (Sholeh 2018, 232). South Africa offers a stark example, where the enduring inequalities of colonial apartheid continue to shape the lives of Black communities. Although prophetic theology had long existed, it gained prominence in South Africa in 1985 with the publication of the *Kairos Document*, authored by church leaders in direct response to apartheid's unjust laws and oppressive systems. This text marked a turning point, positioning prophetic theology as a critique of churches that had aligned themselves with apartheid. The document exposed how inequality permeated every sphere—including education, which was deliberately structured to entrench Black subjugation (Third World Theology 1985, chap. 5). Furthermore, chapter two highlighted the theological divide: on one side, a theology that legitimized apartheid; on the other, a theology that raised the voices of the oppressed, insisting on reconciliation, justice, and peace in the face of systemic violence.

Reddie (2023), in 'Transformative Education, Participative Black Theology and the Challenge of Making a Difference', brought in the dimension of liberation theology and pedagogy of the oppressed as another way into prophetic education. His in-depth reading of Freire (1973, 1990) from the Brazilian context fits well into South African transformation. He emphasizes the importance of transformative education and self-actualization that should arise from reflections and lived experiences of ordinary people. This kind of discussion captured much of the time of scholars like Gutierrez (1973) and Lloyd (1972). Freire's ideological approach to education was that of humanizing and encouraging intellectual breakthroughs as a mode of practical theology, which played an important role in his transformative pedagogical approach. Since some of these pedagogical scholars, like Freire, came from the background of practical theology and other relevant theologies, the relationship between transformative theology and transformative education becomes simple to understand when reading through the lenses of the Kairos document. Cleophas states:

> In South Africa, classroom pedagogy and online teaching and learning take place in a society that has been classified, according to a recent research-based study, *Inequality Trends in South Africa*, as the most unequal in the world. This finding was made three months before a national lockdown began on March 26. This means South Africans entered the lockdown period in unequal economic conditions and now experience it as such (Cleophas 2020, 1).

Consequently, economic inequality gave rise to educational inequality even during apartheid because those who had money could afford to take their children to what were called Model C schools, or schools for the well-to-do, while children from poor backgrounds had no choice but to go to public schools, sometimes without even basic facilities like water.

A final consideration is whether prophetic education can be meaningfully applied within the South African context. Given South Africa's relative economic strength and its position as a developing nation, the implementation of prophetic education is both feasible and necessary. At its core, such an approach holds the potential to contribute to reconciliation—a pressing issue that remains evident in questions of ownership and access. Persistent challenges, including unresolved land disputes and entrenched inequalities that continue to erode the nation's social fabric, demand an educational model capable of fostering unity. Prophetic education, by shaping children as agents of justice and community renewal, offers a pathway toward building a future in which the next generation can transcend division and embody the promise of a more equitable South Africa (Baloyi 2021b).

## COVID-19 and South Africa's Problematic Education System

There have been several ways in which the inequality of the South African education system was exposed during COVID-19. The very first basic issue of water, a fundamental resource for ordinary people to use against the spread of the virus, was a significant challenge in some public schools. It was not widely known that there are schools without water (one of the basic resources prescribed by WHO to curb the spread of COVID-19) in the country until the Minister of Education announced the reopening of schools. The cry of parents from some of the poor schools, as well as unions, indicated that there were schools with the resources to carry on with teaching during the pandemic, which was not the case for many formerly disadvantaged schools. It was also indicated that in some schools it would be difficult for teachers to apply distancing as prescribed by WHO since many of the schools were overpopulated, while schools for better-off people had none of those problems.

Another challenge was the issue of remote teaching and learning introduced during COVID-19. It should be noted that in the South African context, there are many senior teachers (in the so-called public schools for the poor) whose training some 30 to 35 years ago did not even include computers as part of their curricula, but they are now expected to be competent in online teaching. The situation is very different from the so-called former white schools or Model C schools because the training of the teachers back then was also not similar. This kind of expectation will compromise learners' futures as senior teachers (and in all probability many younger teachers too) grapple with teaching online without ever having received any training in this regard. I cannot agree more with Plitnichenko (2020), in her article entitled '10 Challenges of E-Learning during COVID-19', when she says, 'It's hard for teachers, students, and parents to start using a learning management system or any other digital tool out of nowhere without additional training.' It is a very strange expectation that teachers are supposed to move their classes online right away, having no additional training and with no extra budget (Plitnichenko 2020).

The question about inequality of teachers' knowledge and experience when it comes to digital teaching by necessity was raised by Lederman (2020) and Mishra and others (2020), who emphasized the issue of the new normal against the traditional teaching that most teachers, especially in public schools, underwent. Due to the loss of teachers from public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic because of death or resignations, there remains a serious gap in human resources that requires the attention of the government. Cruywagen (2021) indicates that 1,700 teachers died due to the pandemic in 2020. Ngqakamba (2021) argues that it will be difficult for the government to fill these teaching posts. The author argues that it becomes difficult for the education department to expect good results from children while it is unable to replace the teachers who left by hiring more teachers. On the other side, the reduced number of teachers are left to perform their jobs under challenging circumstances, without consideration being given to the stress that those teachers are already experiencing. The concern is that, despite this loss, the Minister of Basic Education insisted that there will be no hiring or replacing of the teachers (Maqhina 2020).

This challenge is also exacerbated by the overcrowding in schools and classes, and this complaint had already been submitted to the Parliament of South Africa by the South African Teachers' Union (Writer 2021). On the other hand, News 24 (Ngqakamba 2020) was quoted saying, 'As part of President Cyril Ramaphosa's Presidential Employment Stimulus Programme, the basic education sector aims to create 200,000 employment opportunities for education assistants and 100,000 for general school assistants.'

The strategy of hiring and rehiring temporary assistants at schools is both a postponement of taking care of the problem and an indication that the government is not considering the quality of the education that the children receive. Besides that, according to another report,

this strategy seems to be the action plan to shift gears on youth employment (Research Report 2023). There is also the aspect that this policy can lead to abuse, since temporary assistants are often expected to take on tasks that are not in their contracts, since this is regulated and managed only on a school principal level. This is because it is most likely that the young people who will be temporarily hired will, firstly, be graduates who were supposed to be getting permanent employment within their respective fields, or, secondly, be people who are not qualified in the teaching profession. The allocation of staff in these positions can also be undermined due to nepotism, since principals have the power to hire and fire without consulting anyone. Moreover, this writer would raise the argument: how long will the 'Black child' be kept in such temporary appointments when, at the age of 35, they are considered not employable, while it is the state that wasted their time?

The lack of supporting measures, like counseling for schoolteachers and learners in public schools, has been exposed, particularly regarding the many challenges in our public schools. This is not because funds are not there to support those projects that deal with school problems specifically, but because there is a lack of political will, accompanied by the spirit of greed and corruption. The Minister of Basic Education, Mrs. Angie Motshekga, confirmed that psychological and emotional restlessness was observed among learners and clearly came out during the peak of the pandemic (Ndaba 2020). Teachers were expected to deal with the children's unruly behaviour, without being trained to do so. Managing the timetable around the limited human resources that the headmasters had available, while some teachers, due to their comorbidity status, were allowed to stay at home, was a serious problem, which demanded some psychological and even spiritual counselling (Wadhwa 2020). According to Monama (2021), there is a clear need for the counselling services in public schools, because it has been found that there are so many problems, leading to psychological stress for both the educators and learners. This is an area in which there is an indication of a need for a Christian counsellor who will try to bring attentive and non-judgmental listening. Since students encounter various problems, there is a need for optimized counselling services (Suprinyato et al. 2020). The interesting part is that even the Minister of Basic Education identified the need for education to work with faith-based organizations, since the challenges they are faced with are overwhelming. We observe that since public schools are governed by secular government rules and a constitution that enshrines the human rights of South African citizens, it will be unhelpful to get involved without infringing on other non-Christian citizens' rights.

## The Implication for Prophetic Education

While prophetic education aims to humanize the dehumanized people, its process is received with contestations from those who benefited from the education that dehumanized other people (Kotimah et al. 2021, 5). Most of such contestations have been evident in Indonesia (Maemonahet et al. 2023). In his research, Kigotho (2019) asserts that issues like nepotism, corruption, and ethnic conflicts arise from outdated education systems and technologies, which need changes and adjustments to suit contemporary lives, values, and morals. Chukwuma (2022, 73) is undoubtedly correct that one of the outcomes of prophetic education is its holistic nature, as it firmly holds to the Christian values of honesty, love for humanity, diligence in service, and community building. In other words, it will contribute to producing learners who can positively impact society. This is exemplified by the fact that, in public schools, some educators and lecturers go to the extent of demanding sex from students in exchange for examination success. The integration of biblical morals and values into the education system will, besides knowledge, instill values that will help improve the economy and make good citizens. Okolie and others (2020) hold the view that higher education institutions must transform the next generation, not only with skills and competencies. Essentially, the values of African people are based on relationships and reverence for God;

hence, what Christian education can do for children will not be like what the secular education of public schools is doing.

It is remarkable that prophetic education and Christian schools go beyond the academic and can foster moral and spiritual growth. The moral decay, which most African countries, including South Africa, are concerned about, is something that politics and other sectors have failed to address. Even the current education system has failed, but the country can find its solace in prophetic education. The integration of biblical principles to foster positive morality in the sub-Saharan African education sector is important. This aligns with the Thomistic thinking highlighted in Horowski's (2020) work on religious education and virtues. According to Horowski (2020) and MacIntyre (2007), neo-Thomism teaches us that one's context, socially and individually, must form the aspects of virtues of one's educational life. Teaching a child in their specific religion and faith tradition aims to promote the child's personal, moral, and spiritual development, as well as to build his or her religious identity within a particular religious tradition (Van der Walt 2016, 1). It is the objective of every Christian parent to protect their children and ensure that their education does not deviate from their faith.

The appeal submitted to the Cape High Constitutional Court on May 4, 2000, indicates that the secular government and Christian norms are in serious disagreement when it comes to the policies that should govern the lives of children if moral regeneration is one of the country's objectives. This is how the argument was presented in court:

This matter concerns the prohibition by the South African Schools Act of 1996 of corporal punishment in schools. The *Prophetic Education* of South Africa, representing 196 independent Christian schools, contends that this prohibition violates the right of parents of its pupils to freedom of religion and that it interferes with the right to establish independent schools, the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice, the right to enjoy their culture, and the right to practice their religion. These contentions were rejected by Judge H. J. Liebenberg in the Eastern Cape High Court (Christian Education South Africa 1999).

Although the appeal clarified why children should be treated as children at school, like giving them worthy punishments when they are out of order, the government defended its Bill of Rights and managed to win, and therefore, the banning of the punishment of children remained protected. This implies that the Christian rule would not work in public schools, where human and children's rights are enshrined and protected. As much as the Christian church is a societal structure intending to play a pivotal role in the transformation of South Africa, it must get involved and engage with the problems of contemporary Africa, including the educational crisis (Strauss 2002; Jansen et al. 2009). Throughout history, the church has played a significant role in correcting the impact of secular education (Sifuna 1990; Maathai 2009). In their research, Jansen and others (2009) state very clearly that in a secular state like South Africa, Christian education, as directed by the church, becomes the option for the future of our children. The general school of thought on education is that the standardized curricula for education that have been imposed on South Africa for years have not yielded the desired results; hence, the students need their cultural diversity to be accommodated, but that can only happen if the state public education system is replaced by Christian education. In that way, the inclusivity and diversity of students' needs will be prioritized (Evans et al. 2021[b]).

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that South Africa's education system has long failed to deliver meaningful transformation, thereby undermining both social justice and economic growth. Unless decisive action is taken, the inequalities entrenched in today's classrooms will inevitably reproduce themselves in the future, since the quality of education profoundly

shapes the opportunities and identities of tomorrow's citizens. The persistence of these failures—ranging from structural inequities to the neglect of historically disadvantaged communities—makes it imperative to propose alternative models that can genuinely empower learners. The state's public education system, which continues to perpetuate inequality rather than dismantle it, has proven inadequate to meet the contemporary challenges facing South Africa. Yet education remains one of the most powerful vehicles for national renewal. In this light, Christian education must intensify its efforts, positioning itself not merely as a supplement but as a transformative alternative capable of addressing past injustices and cultivating a generation equipped to pursue reconciliation, justice, and sustainable development.

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