



Record

SADC Webinar: Reopening Schools in the time of COVID-19 ~ Best practices, Experiences and Challenges 3 September 2020 (Platform: Zoom)

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Presentations

Dr Patricia Machawira	The context of Teacher and Student Health and Wellbeing in ESA
Oliver Liang	Educators, safety and the return to school : an ILO approach
Dr Granville Whittle	Managing Safe Schools in the Context of COVID-19
Eric Sinyangwe	Naboye Secondary School
Godwin Khosa	Reopening of schools post COVID-19 lockdown
Trixie-Belle Nicolle	School Health and Nutrition in the Context of COVID-19 in Southern Africa

Abbreviations

CSTL	Care and Support for Teaching and Learning
ESA	East and Southern African Region
ESARO	Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
NECT	National Education Collaboration Trust
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PSS	Psychosocial support
ROSA	Regional Office for Southern Africa
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES/ISSUES

The webinar highlighted the close relationship between health and education and the negative impact of COVID-19 has had in this regard.

- Schools serve as a protective net, providing learners with much needed nutrition and health support, as well as information to protect themselves from various risks, including from COVID-19. The closure of schools has deprived learners of this support.
- COVID-19 lockdowns have also exacerbated pre-existing challenges facing schools, for example, poor infrastructure such as WASH facilities.
- The school closures have also widened inequalities and have affected the most vulnerable to a greater extent.

Government responses to COVID-19 have varied across the region, but there have been several common elements.

- Most Ministries of Education and their partners have developed resources to support both learners and teachers. These include a combination of printed curriculum materials for home use, scripted lessons plans for TV and radio and on-line teaching.
- Some governments have developed SOPs to guide schools in ensuring safety of learners and staff in education institutions.

All Member States (with the exception of Tanzania) enforced a lockdown of schools at the start of the pandemic. Most have adopted a phased approach to the reopening of schools.

- Between 30–40% of learning days have been lost across all Member States (except Tanzania).
- In most Member States, schools were, or are being, reopened for exam grades first. Cohorts of learners (exam classes and others, when they have been reopened) are being restricted to ensure social distancing.
- The evidence suggests that schools do not pose a greater risk of transmission of the virus than is faced by the public at large.
- Challenges noted include:
 - The low turn-out of learners
 - Concerns of caregivers about the safety of their children
 - That psychosocial support provided by governments has not been accessible to all learners
- Key lessons learnt include the importance of:
 - Providing PSS in schools

- Keeping caregivers informed of steps taken to ensure the safety of their children
- Keeping school nutrition programmes running

At the systemic level, it is necessary to build resilient and robust systems. The following elements are critical for doing so:

- Infrastructure (e.g. so learners can be provided with the necessary WASH facilities to prevent the transmission of the virus)
- Capacity building (e.g. equipping teachers with ICT skills)
- Financing
- Building of partnerships

Note on Questions and Answers

Due to time constraints, not all questions raised in Zoom's Q&A and Chat could be answered in the sessions. These have been included in the [Appendix](#).

COMMENCEMENT

The meeting started at 09h10.

Welcome and opening remarks

Dr Raja (Robin) Vinesh Sannassee, SADC Secretariat

Participants introduced themselves through Zoom's Chat facility.

In the absence of Dr Gina Guibunda, Director Primary National Directorate, Mozambique, Dr Sannassee welcomed all participants on behalf of Ms Dudu Simelane, Director: Social & Human Development, SADC Secretariat. The webinar was part of a series that SADC Secretariat is hosting in collaboration with various partners to delineate Member States' responses to Covid-19. Dr Sannassee also invited participants to join the Secretariat for the third Webinar, which will be held in October on the theme of Open and Distance Learning. The present webinar covers three themes related to COVID-19 that Member States have to grapple with namely: Teacher and learner wellbeing, Managing safe schools and How school systems are coping.

Dr Sannassee thanked the presenters, facilitators and reactors for having agreed to contribute to the discussions. He acknowledged MIET Africa's contribution for organizing and hosting the webinar, as well as the Secretariat's partners, UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP, for their technical support.

SESSION 1: TEACHER AND LEARNER HEALTH AND WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

Facilitator: Dr Remmy Shawa, HIV and Health Education Officer, UNESCO ESARO

Dr Shawa gave a brief overview of the first session, and introduced Dr Machawira (and then later, Oliver Liang).

Context: Teacher health and wellbeing in the ESA Region

Dr Patricia Machawira, Regional Advisor, Education for Health and Well-being, UNESCO

See presentation: [The context of Teacher and Student Health and Wellbeing in ESA](#)

Dr Machawira noted the intertwining nature of the relationship between Health and Education and she promulgated that school closures (resulting from COVID-19) have widened inequalities and have affected the most vulnerable to a greater extent. She outlined the measures put in place to address the health and wellbeing of learners *and* teachers, as well as the challenges they face. She explained some of UNESCO's responses and the resources that have been developed, for example, the Safe to Learn initiative (all resources can be made available to

participants). Schools can provide students with much needed nutrition and health support, as well as information to protect themselves from various risks, including from COVID-19.

Addressing teacher wellbeing amidst the COVID-19 crisis in Africa

Oliver Liang, Head, Public and Private, ILO (Geneva)

See presentation: [Educators, safety and the return to school: an ILO approach](#)

Mr Liang noted that within the “ecosystem of a school”, the term “teachers” includes school leaders and support personnel (cleaners, food preparers, providers of transport, etc.). He outlined the ILO’s key Occupational Health and Safety principles guiding the response to COVID-19, including the ILO advocacy for a “social dialogue” approach—i.e. that when policies are developed, this must be done in collaboration with those who are impacted. Other key principles include Risk assessment, Infection control, Mental wellbeing, the Right to leave immediate danger, Sick leave, Social protection, and Gender and family responsibility.

Health and Wellbeing for students and teachers during and after school reopening

Panel discussion: experiences from the field

Panellists: Julius Natangwe Nghifikwa (official, Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, Namibia), Charles Kumchenga (Secretary General, Teachers’ Union, Malawi), Nyuki Orina (Student, Tanzania), Andrew Banda (Teacher, Zambia)

Dr Shawa introduced the four panellists.

Namibia: Mr Nghifikwa outlined the steps taken in Namibia after schools were closed in March. The government provided an allocation to schools to procure PPE (including sanitizers and temperature guns) so that they would be safe when they reopened. To ensure that education could continue during lockdown, government provided printed education materials for learners for use at home (under the guidance of parents), and which were then submitted to teachers at regular intervals. Scripted lesson plans for TV delivery were also provided.

Various challenges were encountered that are still being grappled with, including the lack of connectivity (including even for radio) in remote rural areas. Also, teachers have had to use their personal resources (computers, data, etc.), for which they are not being compensated.

Malawi: Mr Kumchenga explained that while there was some on-line teaching, less than half of the learners could access the lessons. It was recently announced that schools would be reopening in a phased approach as from 7 September, starting with exam classes (Form 4).

Q&A: in response to a question about teachers' safety, Mr Kumchenga reported that schools were being assessed for hygiene and safety and would not be allowed to reopen unless they met the required standards.

Tanzania: Ms Orina was asked about challenges students have been presented with by the pandemic. She noted that while academic time has been reduced, syllabus content has remained the same, and also noted the psychological pressures as a result of the pandemic.

Q&A: Ms Orina was asked how she, as a student representative, has raised the challenges that students face, and with whom. She explained that she attends various forums, including those for higher learning, and brought up the challenges there.

Zambia: Mr Banda, a head teacher in a school in Zambia, explained that schools were closed on 20 March, resulting in 4.2 million learners being at home. However, the Ministry reopened schools for exam classes (Grades 7, 9 and 12) on 1 June (1.1 million learners). Measures taken to safeguard learners included the halving of class cohorts to ensure social distancing and the disinfecting of classrooms. Although national exams were completed successfully, the increase of cases in the country was a cause for concern.

Challenges noted include the low turnout of learners and that the PSS provided by government was not accessible to all schools.

Q&A: Asked about how the government is prioritizing the health and safety of teachers as they return to school, Mr Banda explained that in the beginning this had been a challenge, but the situation is now improving.

Response to panel discussion

Reactors: Simphiwe Mabele (ILO)

Mr Mabele noted the various questions that had been raised in Zoom's Q&A and Chat.

There were two related questions about risk allowances:

Q: Why are teacher unions in Malawi demanding risk allowances when they are aware that the government's budget is already strained? What is the ILO's take on risk allowances?

A: Mr Liang (ILO) noted that risk allowances are a general concern in education and these need to be addressed in long-term negotiations between unions and government. The ILO encourages constructive social dialogue that will result in more sustainable improvement in conditions for teachers.

Q: What measures have been put in place to mitigate the effect of the current pandemic on the broader issue of HIV&AIDS service delivery?

A: Dr Machawira (UNESCO) acknowledged that there are dangers for learners not being in school, not only with regards to the fight against HIV but for broader SRHR issues. To this end, many Member States have tried to reach learners in their homes, for example through radio. Nevertheless, even such low-tech interventions are not available to all young people, especially the most vulnerable.

Q: How have other countries dealt with teachers with underlying health issues?

A: Mr Mabele (ILO) explained that some countries have signed agreements with procedures to be followed for teachers with underlying conditions, which highlights the importance that unions play in education and during social dialogue, as mentioned by Mr Liang.

SESSION 2: MANAGING SAFE SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Context: Managing safe schools during COVID-19

Thandi Chaane: Chief Executive Officer, MIET Africa

Ms Chaane introduced herself and each speaker before their presentations.

Panel discussion: experiences from the field

Presenters: Dr Granville Whittle; Landie Diamond; Louis Mwansa; Eric Sinyangwe

Dr Granville Whittle, Deputy Director-General, Department of Basic Education, South Africa

See presentation: Managing Safe Schools in the Context of COVID-19

Dr Whittle's presentation covered four main topics: Importance of schooling, Available evidence, Safe return to schools and Lessons learnt.

Key points included that prolonged closure of schools is not an option in a developing country context, especially since the digital divide entails remote learning is not accessible to most. The evidence suggests that schools do not pose a greater risk of transmission of the virus than is faced by the public at large, and for that reason there has been a phased reopening of schools in South Africa. To ensure safety in education institutions, SOPs have been formulated to guide schools. Dr Whittle also explained the implication on the curriculum for this year and 2021. Key lessons learnt include the importance of PSS and keeping school nutrition programmes running.

Landie Diamond: Principal, Westlake Primary School, South Africa

Ms Diamond shared some of the practical experiences to ensure her school was safe when it reopened to learners and teachers. She noted the importance of providing PSS for all groups.

(learners, teachers and parents); parents were provided with orientation sessions on their roles in providing education, as 50% of learning was to be done in the home. Various videos (which can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/user/landiediamondify>) were produced that allayed parents' fears about their children returning to school.

Louis Mwansa: Director of Planning & Information, Ministry of Education, Zambia

Mr Mwansa outlined the current position in Zambia, which he noted was similar to that of other Member States. As had been previously noted, Zambian schools had reopened for exam classes (Grades 7, 9 and 12) and very few new cases were reported that could be linked to these schools. The lessons learnt from this experience (including the importance of hygiene, the use of masks and social distancing) informed the safe reopening of schools for the remaining grades.

Mr Mwansa noted challenges that will be faced, including in particular, the problem of space in schools to practise social distancing.

In Grades 1 to 4, there would be a focus on numeracy and literacy, while in the higher grades there would be condensed curriculum across all subjects. Infrastructure challenges are particularly severe in rural areas, and an option being considered is to accommodate groups of learners on alternate days, as well as to use various digital platforms (such as radio and TV), although there are limitations with this approach as many children, especially in rural areas, will be excluded. Other measures being considered include reassessing how much time is spent on exams and making greater use of continuous assessment methods instead. However, all these recommendations are subject to cabinet approval.

Eric Sinyangwe: Head Teacher (Naboye Secondary School) Zambia

[See presentation: Naboye Secondary School](#)

Mr Sinyangwe introduced his presentation by noting that for schools to reopen, a broad risk reduction strategy was needed, and then explained the measures adopted in his school. These included: temperature screening, adequate sanitation facilities, seating arrangements, the holding of mini-assemblies (rather than full meetings of the school), disinfection & fumigation, ventilation & isolation rooms, and in-house COVID-19 sensitization workshops. The challenges he noted included inadequate funding, the provision of clean water, shortage of infrastructure space (which has implications for social distancing) and the poor attitude of some parents. He concluded by advocating strongly for the reopening of schools as “no nation can run without education”.

[Response to panel discussion](#)

Reactors: Stephen Gubi, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe; Arthur Maposa, school head, Zimbabwe; Pascal Chitundu, head teacher, Malawi

Mr Gubi noted that schools in Zimbabwe were closed in March, but exams were successfully held in June, allowing the government to attempt to reopen schools in July, using a phased approach.

The government has developed SOPs for guiding schools to operate in the COVID-19 environment; these have been distributed to all schools and are being followed. Training of teachers and other staff on how to manage schools during the pandemic has been rolled out across the country; each school has a trained health coordinator who collaborates with the closest clinic.

As a corollary to the above, Mr Maposa noted that the successful execution of the June examinations in Zimbabwe shows that schools can operate safely, provided SOPs are followed.

Q&A: Responding to a question about the safety of learners using public transport to get to school, Mr Maposa explained that school buses were disinfected, but also of importance is that because schools are zoned, relatively few learners have to use public transport.

Mr Chitundu noted that schools are about to reopen in Malawi. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education drafted guidelines that have been distributed to all education institutions at all levels (primary to tertiary), and which form part of the training which teachers are undergoing. When schools are reopened, they will be provided with resources such as buckets (in cases where they do not have running water) and sanitizers. Other measures include disinfecting all schools, stopping food vending, encouraging physical distancing, staggering break-times, suspending extra-mural activities & assemblies, and making the wearing of masks compulsory. He also acknowledged the help received from external partners, such as MIET Africa.

Q&A: Session 2

Ms Chaane thanked all panellists for their input. She posed several questions (some of which were answered using Chat).

Q: How can Grade 12s in South Africa be made exam ready?

A: Dr Whittle noted that in South Africa the Grade 12s will write full exams. They lost the least amount of time during the academic year, and additional support is being provided to them through various platforms. The exam period has been extended (with universities opening much later in 2021).

Q: What is “curriculum trimming”, and does it equate to “knowledge trimming”, and what criteria were used when the curriculum was trimmed?

A Dr Whittle (in Chat): “[curriculum trimming] means that the curriculum per grade is reduced by identifying the key skills and competencies that learners will require for the next grade. ... it means that in the next academic year, teachers will have to ensure that these competencies are reinforced.”

SESSION 3: HOW ARE SCHOOLS COPING?

Facilitator: Dr Wycliffe Otieno, Chief, Education and Adolescent Development, UNICEF

Context: Resilient education systems

Dr Otieno introduced the session by defining resilience of education systems as being the ability to withstand the present shocks so that inclusive participation, effective learning and teaching, and quality outcomes are not interrupted. It is acknowledged that 30–40% of learning days have been lost in all SADC Members States (with the exception of Tanzania). But there have been more challenges than just the loss of time, because other services provided through schools, for example nutrition programmes, have also been disrupted.

Panel discussion: experiences from the field

Presenters: Mr Godwin Khosa; Trixie-Belle Nicolle

Godwin Khosa: CEO, NECT, South Africa

[See presentation: Reopening of schools post COVID-19 lockdown](#)

Mr Khosa explained that the NECT has worked with a host of partners on a variety of education issues, but that COVID-19 is a novel challenge that has exacerbated pre-existing problems in schools. He asked, “What’s the mischief?”—i.e. does it lie in Education, Schooling or Learning? He sees learning as a proxy; he noted that in a 2016 survey it was found that in a “normal” situation (i.e. pre-COVID-19), curriculum coverage averaged only 30%. An important question is whether the arrangements being made do improve learning; it must be acknowledged that education and schooling have been significantly impacted by COVID-19. He concluded by stressing the need to focus on the need for improvement in education and the increase in learning outcomes.

Trixie-Belle Nicolle: Regional Programme Policy Officer for School Feeding based in the WFP, Regional Office

[See presentation: School Health and Nutrition in the Context of COVID-19 in Southern Africa](#)

Ms Nicolle’s presentation included an overview of some of the key trends related to school feeding programmes that have been observed in the region over the past few months. She noted the phased approach to reopening schools in the SADC Region, which contrasts with that of the East African Community Region, where reopening schools has generally been delayed until 2021. In order to continue to support school meals, most SADC Member States have shifted to some form of take-home rations for learners, the effects of which include increased government leadership, a shift in focus from rural to urban areas, and the re-thinking of monitoring approaches. Ms Nicolle concluded by outlining the joint work that UNICEF and WFP are doing in the region.

Response to panel discussion

Reactors: Bertha Seutloali, Lesotho; Lindiwe Dlamini, Eswatini; Julius Nghifikwa: Namibia

Bertha Seutloali: Chief Education Officer Secondary Schools, Lesotho

Having closed all schools on 24 March, Lesotho adopted a phased approach for reopening, commencing on 28 August, with all teachers beginning to work from home. From 31 August, all private schools offering external international exams were opened, which would be followed by other schools offering external exams on 7 September. In the next phase, all public schools offering external exams would open on 6 October. Finally, all schools will close on 21 March 2021. Other measures adopted included a shortened school day (09h00–14h00), but with the addition of an extra day per week of schooling (either Saturday or Sunday).

The negative impact of COVID-19 on education has to be acknowledged (including issues such as gender-based violence, disruption of immunization campaigns and nutrition, and the increased risk of early pregnancies), especially for vulnerable children. Nevertheless, the pandemic does present opportunities (for example, the re-evaluation of continuous ways to help minimize the loss of teaching time through exams): “it takes a crisis to innovate”.

Lindiwe Dlamini: Director, Educational Testing, Guidance and Psychological Services Unit, Eswatini

Eswatini has also adopted a phased approach to re-opening of schools. The Eswatini education system has demonstrated resilience, for example in the adoption of “school rapid response teams” (based on the CSTL model). It was noted however, that ICT (e.g. devices and data) is expensive, which had presented challenges, given the limited resources. There is also limited capacity to provide PSS, although training of teachers on trauma counselling is ongoing.

Julius Nghifikwa: Deputy-Director: HIV & AIDS Management Unit, Namibia

Namibia is currently in negotiation with unions and private schools regarding the reopening of schools. Despite there being a lot of unease, they are scheduled to reopen on 7 September. Private schools, however, have already indicated their readiness to reopen. COVID-19 has presented the opportunity to re-think approaches to various issues, for example on-line teaching and health & safety.

REFLECTIONS

Carolyn Medel Anunuevo, Head of Education Unit, UNESCO ROSA

The webinar’s three sessions corresponded to three important issues relating to school reopening: —i.e. individual-level (learners and teachers), the school-level, and the system itself.

- On the individual level, it is acknowledged that the present situation has been unsettling: children are scared and teachers are uncertain. Ms Anunuevo noted that a group that was not covered in the webinar (though raised in Chat) was that of parents, including those who are illiterate and are struggling to cope with their role in assisting with their children's education.

She also noted the big “divide”—for example, digital or rural/urban—that have added to the anxiety of children.

- At the school level, the webinar highlighted other roles that schools play aside from education, for example in nutrition. The COVID-19 lockdowns have highlighted pre-existing challenges facing schools, for example infrastructure and governance.
- At the systemic level, it is necessary to build resilient and robust systems, and it was acknowledged that the following elements were critical: infrastructure, capacity building (e.g. equip teachers with ICT skills), financing and the building of partnerships.

CLOSURE

In closing, Dr Simelane acknowledged the progress made in the webinar. She highlighted the importance of the three themes—teacher and learner wellbeing, managing safe schools, and how the system and infrastructure is coping. She thanked Member States for sharing their experiences, especially the measures ensuring readiness for the safe return to school. She noted that importance of providing PSS was highlighted, and complimented Member States for investing in resourcing the return to school.

She expressed participation to the Secretariat's partners—UNESCO, UNICEF and MIET Africa for their continuing support and the help in putting together the webinar. She again thanked everyone for their participation.

The meeting closed at 12h50.

APPENDIX

Questions and comments from Zoom Q&A and Chat*

The following questions were asked directly during the sessions and answered.

Q: Suggested strategies and mitigation plans to stop transmission during transport to and from schools.

A Andile Dube (in Chat): in South Africa, SOPs have been created for scholar transport. UNICEF has developed posters for transport providers. The SOPs/Guidelines are in line with the transport gazette on capacity and social distancing), handwashing/sanitizing, temperature.

Q to Bertha Seutloali (Lesotho): please expand on “blended learning”.

A: The interactive platform that was developed in Lesotho will mean some face-to-face learning with learners, and when they are on a shift, they will be given some assignments to do at home.

The following questions (or comments) were asked (or made) and answered in Q&A or Chat.

Comment: If a child’s temperature is found to be out of the acceptable range and the child needs to be sent home, this needs to be done with the parents’ knowledge and consent as this exposes them to risks and dangerous contacts on their way home.

Q: What are UNESCO and other organizations doing about digital or online learning for rural and marginalized schools in Southern Africa?

A Dr Machawira: Member States supported the development of radio lessons to reach marginalised learners with limited access to internet; through the Global Coalition, partnerships have been negotiated with [the] private sector such as Amazon, WhatsApp and Facebook to ensure access; training of teachers on online teaching methods.

Q: Access to social protection is limited in some countries, health and pension contributions being eroded by inflation in some countries. How then do we ensure teachers have access? On the same note, non-contributory social protection/social assistance is just almost near to impossible to access- politicization and perceptions about social assistance continue.

A Dr Machawira (UNESCO): This is a challenge and the response goes beyond the scope of the education sector, as social protection/pension is under the remit of Public Service. Teachers feel exposed if they have to be in the forefront with no adequate PPE and with their safety not assured. This remains a key concern for most teachers.

* Questions and answers from Q&A and Chat have been included largely verbatim.

Q: Please share best practices on TVET and science lessons that require practical sessions. Are there any best practices following blended approach for teaching-learning i.e. classroom for practical/ demonstration and theory by radio education.

A Ms Anunuevo (UNESCO ROSA): Many TVET institutions are still not at par with primary and secondary schools in terms of ICT infrastructure for distance learning and the COVID 19 crisis is demonstrating that this should be addressed. The training of TVET instructors on the integration of ICT in education still needs to be undertaken on a massive scale. But I am sure, we will be able to find examples of good practices on blended approaches in TVET and science lessons.

Q: How to help learners with other health conditions such as asthma and bronchitis who cannot endure wearing a mask the whole day?

A Mr Mwansa (Zambia): the first step is for school managers to quickly identify these children. Secondly, we shall have to work with the Ministry of Health officials at national, provincial, district, including health facility levels to manage such cases professionally.

Q: How do you deal with stigmatisation when a teacher is returning to school after contracting COVID-19?

A Ms Diamond (South Africa): It is pivotal to educate the school community around the virus so that misconceptions can be eliminated. When physical distancing is applied and all safety protocols are observed, then when a teacher returns to work, the rest of the staff feel comfortable because they aren't at risk. When there is a clear understanding of how the virus moves and gets transmitted, then there will be no stigma. Educating everyone becomes crucial.

Q: Is there is any tracking of the sustainability of handwashing in schools. In my case, I find this is a very crucial area to address but as days go by, fear of COVID 19 disease is decreasing and even the facilities installed are no longer used effectively.

A Dr Machawira (UNESCO): I do agree that with time we all get complacent ... but handwashing in general is an important practice to be promoted in all schools for general hygiene measures.

The following questions were not answered in the sessions or Q&A or Chat. If any delegates are able to provide responses to these questions, please email these to Bashni Naicker (bashni@miet.co.za) and responses will be collated and disseminated.

Q: How can parents be helped to assist their children with their learning?

Q: How is student listenership over radio measured?

Q: How can innovation be nurtured and sustained in the face of inequalities particularly between urban and rural areas?

Q: please share some of the best practices to social distancing in preschool given that it may be difficult and unnatural for young learners to not mingle with each other.