

# Implications of the Minister of Higher Education’s ‘no child left behind’ on an African Child during the Coronavirus Pandemic in South Africa

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## **Abstract**

The global decolonisation of education in higher learning encourages scholars to revisit the African past for inspiration to deal with contemporary education problems deterring students from enjoying the education they deserve. The current global Corona pandemic has expounded the inequalities existing in societies, leading to education institutions finding it difficult to ensure that all students access teaching and learning. In South Africa the majority of students are African and they reside in rural ecologies that lack infrastructure like electricity and running water. Many of such students lack resources to engage in the current technology-based education due to poverty and funding. Despite that, the Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, introduced the principle of ‘no child left behind’ during the implementation of online teaching without providing ways of attaining that. This chapter thus interrogates the feasibility of not leaving any child behind, especially those in rural ecology who have no access to online teaching and learning gadgets and struggle with networks. Existing research indicates that there is lack of acknowledgement of African teachers’ voices about solutions to their students’ experiences drawing from indigenous knowledge in matters that the government introduces in varied contexts. Therefore, the chapter reports on a qualitative study through the auto-ethnographic observations and reflection of two African lecturers about the ‘silenced’ narratives of diverse African

students' living contexts that need mitigation in the implementation of online teaching and learning to ensure they are not left behind during the era of pandemic. For this project we draw on one of the IsiZulu idioms, *umuntu akalahlwa* (a human person is not disposable), as a way of mitigating the concern of 'no child left behind'. The study concludes that *umuntu akalahlwa* is a pedagogy that can be used in unsilencing measures that inhibit students from accessing online teaching and learning as it, safeguards human rights of all students.

**Keywords:** Online teaching and learning; Corona virus; Higher Education; African child; *Umntu akalahlwa* pedagogy.

## 1 Introduction

The Corona virus is a global crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has affected both developed and developing countries alike. The effects of the virus range from health, economic, academic, cultural and political, among other ramifications. Academically, schools and higher education (HE) institutions have been hit hard by the virus especially in developing countries due to lack of resources. Closure of educational institutions interrupted many countries' teaching pedagogy. Zaharah and Kirilova (2020) argue that the major impact of the Corona virus in teaching and learning (T&L) is based on the fact that processes that take place at schools or in classrooms have to be moved to home through the use of online learning using various technological devices, such as smartphones, computers, and notebooks. Online learning is termed by most authors as access to learning experiences via the use of some technology (Carliner 2004; Conrad 2002; Crawford *et al.* 2020; Hodges *et al.* 2020). With online learning, students can access the course at any time at his or her own space and pace (Toquero 2020:3). However, with the vast inequalities that exist in the world, students from disadvantaged context will experience difficulties in engaging with online T&L. The challenges of the Corona pandemic on education are also noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) that around 290.5 million students worldwide who come from disadvantaged contexts are those who tend to be affected the most by the closure of educational institutions. In South Africa most students come from a disadvantaged context, with inaccessibility to

electricity, networks, data, laptops or smart phones. However, and in line with Minister Blade Nzimande's call for all involved in T&L in HEs not to leave any child behind during this pandemic crisis, how will this be feasible?

Hence the objective of this is to reflect on the implications of the Minister of Higher Education's 'no child left behind' for an African child during the Corona virus pandemic in South Africa. The chapter also seeks to tease out the pedagogy that can be used to ensure that 'no child is left behind' during the crisis brought on by the pandemic. One can argue that one positive impact of the Corona virus is that it exposes the inequalities that are rife in the South African education system and it provides the poor students with an opportunity to chart a way forward on how they want to be taught. As proposed by Ramose (1998), African people must regulate the teaching, learning and content of their education grounded in their understandings for contextual relevance. It implies that solutions can also be drawn from African indigenous knowledge. Since language is the reservoir of knowledge and wisdom, there is a need to exhume some of the gems from African languages for the purpose of this chapter to investigate the feasibility of 'no child left behind' during the period of pandemic. For this chapter we draw on one of the isiZulu idioms, *umuntu akalahlwa* (a human person is not disposable), as a way of thinking about some of the moral and ethical concerns confronting the online teaching currently in this context. This is part of *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy, as it promotes students' full participation in their learning, even within the poverty-stricken settings, so they are taught despite the context from which they come. The pedagogy ensures that all kinds of learning contexts are catered for in T&L. An African student in this chapter refers to all indigenous black students of South Africa i.e. Sotho-Tswana, Nguni, Tsonga, Venda, coloureds and the Khoi-San (Gade 2012:486).

## 2 Literature Review

Historically, colonial and apartheid governments divided Higher Education institutions racially. They were funded differently, with black institutions receiving less funding. South Africa in general and HE are plagued by profound inequalities. The impact of these inequalities prevents some students from either accessing, participating or succeeding in areas where others flourish. Though efforts have been made to address inequalities in South Africa, not much has been done to address inequalities concerning students in

HE (Ruswa 2019). As a result, many black institutions are geographically located in deep rural areas, homelands and are inadequately resourced (Maphiswana & Noyoo 2016). Policies on HE endorsed in the South African Constitution of 1996 and the Higher Education Act and White Paper of 1997 directed HE institutions on how to realise profound and wide-ranging essentials and objectives of transformation in its institutions (Dominguez-Whitehead & Moosa 2014). The transformation refers to the active removal of any institutional, social, material and intellectual barriers leading to the creation of a more equal, inclusive and socially just HE system (Leibowitz 2012). Literature on the current status of transformation in HE depicts that transformation is slow and that social, political and economic discrimination and inequalities of a class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature profoundly shaped, and continue to shape, South African HE (Badat 2012; Bozalek & Boughey 2012). This is the context most of African students in South Africa are faced with during the current pandemic crisis that has hit the world.

The dimensions of poverty may be thought of as individuals' financial resources; the family's financial resources; number of dependents; material resources such as the kind of accommodation students occupy; the physical conditions under which students learn on campus or at home; students' access to healthcare; students' well-being; the socio-cultural resources which are related to students' academic background; and the sustainability of these resources (Tinto 2003). Hence, Machika and Johnson (2015) suggest that HE institutions need to understand the full impact of the conditions of poverty under which many students live, think and learn while studying towards a degree or diploma, and how these conditions affect their academic success. Many of these students live in rural areas, of which (Jordan 2020) reports that a rural background may have a negative impact on individual student success; townships or peri-urban settlements where they do not have access to electricity, water, smartphones, Wi-Fi or even the internet.

Literature indicates that African students from disadvantaged backgrounds will suffer the most from the Corona epidemic in terms of their studies, especially if universities do not consider them (UNESCO 2020). Jones *et al.* (2008) outline that it seems as if HE institutions are not willing to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Machika and Johnson (2015) also reiterate that it is important for universities to understand the needs of students who are poor to best support their academic needs. These

scholars' views are also supported by Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), who argue that if HE institutions do not understand the nature of their students' poverty better, they will not be able to understand how they may contribute to the reproduction of structural conditions of poverty and inequality. This suggests that, within the context of the Corona virus, HE institutions have to ensure that no students are left behind in order to ensure social justice and the non-disposal of students due to the social context that can impede them from engaging in online learning.

Arguments presented reveal that, while students' unpreparedness is well documented, institutional unpreparedness to meet the needs of an African child is less recognised. The Minister of HE publicized that HE institutions must understand that they meet the needs of all students, including an African child, but he fails to state what strategies must be adopted. Scholars like Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020) have brought forward the idea of training students and teachers to use online resources to deal with the challenges of closed schools during the pandemic period. However, the gap is visible in literature and the government policies about the T&L of African students during the period of the Corona pandemic. Henceforth this chapter tries to fill that lacuna in academia and government policies by proposing practical strategies that can be implemented to meet the pedagogical needs to teach an African child, drawing from practitioners' narratives who are lecturers in HE.

### **3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The feasibility and implications of the principle of 'no child left behind' during the crisis of Corona pandemic in HE in South Africa will be explored through the reflections of the authors who are lecturers on their own experiences and observations known as auto-ethnography. Denshire (2013) explains that auto-ethnography is a method of qualitative research in which authors use self-reflection and writing to explore their individual experience and attach these autobiographical narratives to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. It does not uncritically tell the author's story, but critically works with the broader context of the narrative. Brodkey (1996:28) articulates that auto-ethnography goes beyond the writing of selves and this chapter couples it with the analysis and observation of our students about online T&L at the universities at which we teach. As argued by Zwozdiak-Myers (2012:3),

teachers who are keen to improve in their professional practice constantly ask questions about their teaching practice, which inspires commitment to continuously learn and create or find new ideas. For this chapter, the sources are the authors' written reflective teaching journals, and secondary sources like books, articles, reports, and online materials. Embodied auto-ethnographic accounts of professional practice in education studies, such as the one in this chapter 'can function as something of a corrective to depersonalized and disembodied accounts of professional work' (Denshire 2014:840). In this sense, auto-ethnography is aligned with critical discourse analysis used in this chapter, as it highlights matters of power irregularities, manipulation, and structural injustices in fields such as education.

The study is qualitative, since it records the experiences of individuals and it is concerned with peoples' lived experiences (Delpont *et al.* 2005). Self-reflection used in this chapter stems from what Brandenburg refers to as 'assumption interrogation', because it allows the researcher to cross-examine data through a reflection process so that new information emerges (cited in Tidwell & Fitzgerald 2009: xix). Freese (2006) explains reflection as a consideration of experience and learning as in reflection, people recall, deliberate and evaluate their experiences generally to develop their practice and to improve their understanding of experiences. This in line with LaBoskey's (2004) view that the purpose of a reflective study is to enhance our knowledge of social justice, which is the purpose of this chapter.

The authors' reflections were teased out from the teaching journals of History since 2013 (Chris) at one university in KwaZulu-Natal and the other lecturer (Zo) from January 2020 at a university in the North West. Due to the Corona pandemic we then started to reflect on our own social setting as African lecturers in order to link our observations and the ones we discovered with our African students while teaching at university to detect how an African child is catered for pedagogically during and after the period of the pandemic in HE institutions. Data were analysed by transcribing our observations, using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser 2001). Grounded theory ensures that data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with one another (Strauss & Cobin 1990:23). A thematic method of analysis (Cho & Healey 2008) was used (investigate the challenges faced by African students with online learning and whether the Minister of HE 'no child must be left behind' is realistic). To analyse our observation data we used

written archival documents and other secondary sources to fill the gaps created by our nostalgia.

The approach used in this chapter is based on Africanisation of HE by representation of pedagogy from indigenous language – *umuntu akalahlwa*. The idiom is aligned with the Minister’s principle of ‘no child left behind’ in T&L as it promulgates that in all humans there is inherent value and therefore each person must be treated in a humane manner. Masondo (2018) argues that the idiom emphasises two facets; that is,

- (a) the responsibility of care and love that one has to others; and
- (b) dealing with idiosyncrasy.

This suggests that a human person cannot be thrown away. *Umuntu akalahlwa* is a further exposition of the epitome contained in *ubuntu* as it strengthens humanising others as key to being human. Deviation by disposing a person is a violation of human rights, as it is broadly perceived as anti-social activities and behaviour. There is a sense that, regardless of what has happened, there is always a possibility for reintegration. According to Bewaji (2004), ‘the wellspring of morality and ethics in African societies is the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal wellbeing’. This suggests that African ethics protects human rights of all people and that no person must be left behind in terms fostering community life.

The idiom relates with the ethnographic study that focuses on self-reflection of lecturers in this chapter on the feasibility and implications of ‘no child left behind’. The reflections of the two African lecturers’ tallies with the idiom of *umuntu akalahlwa*, as it permits them to empathise with the African students they teach, which is one way of defending human rights and maintaining social cohesion, because the experiences of the underprivileged are recorded to ensure that they are integrated in T&L during the current pandemic.

#### 4 Presentation of Data

The first narrative is by a lecturer (Chris) from one university in KwaZulu-Natal. The students she teaches are mostly African and come from an underprivileged setting located in a rural context where homes are overcrowded, there is lack of electricity, running water and poverty is rife.

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Author two (Zo) lectures mostly white students who come from affluent areas that are urban located, with running water, electricity and are highly resourced. The two lecturers took a self-reflective narrative inquiry approach to make meaning from their experiences in teaching in HE during the era of crisis like the Corona pandemic.

Chris observed that the majority of the students she teaches come from poverty-stricken townships on the outskirts of South Africa, especially from KwaZulu-Natal.

I work for one of the leading universities in KwaZulu-Natal. The majority of our students are African and come from the informal settlements, townships and rural areas where there are problems with running water, electricity, and internet connectivity. Some students have indicated that university residences provided them with a conducive environment for learning, as they do not have to compete for space in their crowded homes. Their homes are normally four roomed and overcrowded with family members. Such students are funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme [NSFAS] and always struggle even to support themselves with the funds the government gives them. In such a context the Corona virus emerged as a major hit to the disadvantaged, because universities had to close and online teaching became the norm. The government, through the Minister of HE, informed universities to teach online, but lacked giving support on how this could be implemented. Moreover, the principle endorsed by the state is that 'no child must be left behind'. Worst of all, the poor students are yet again discriminated against as their social setting has been forgotten – overcrowding, data issues, technological needs, and funding. A paperless university is a problem as those who lack resources and funds are always left behind. As one of my African students said, the government, by not taking their economic background into consideration, is like *balahliwe* as the poor. My students request printed materials and recorded lectures saved on USBs, posted to students. It is because they prefer course outlines that are both online and hardcopies because network, electricity and funds inhibit them from going online to get course information.

Chris's reflection expounds that the issue of poverty is silenced in the



Minister's narrative – it must be debunked and lecturers must create constructive ideas to assist poor students. However, the fact that the Minister made the announcement that 'no child must be left behind', he was thinking about those to whom online learning was going to be a problem. On a number of occasions, he warned universities not to go ahead without taking appropriate steps to accommodate all students. Her students proposes the use of both a mixed method type of teaching online and a return to printed course packs. What is interesting is that students do not oppose online teaching, but sees it as an opportunity to learn online, as they will be empowered with this important skill that the world has turned to in this 4<sup>th</sup> industrial period. However, the context of such children must be taken into consideration if we are to use E-learning.

The other narrative is that of Zo who lectures at a university in the North West. Compared to Chris's students, most of her students are white and affluent, while the minority are African and come from rural areas in the North West Province. She observed that:

The university I am lecturing at in the North West attracts students from diverse backgrounds. The majority of my students are white and rich. The other calibre of students are those who come from rural areas and are African. I struggle with African students who complain about network issues, overcrowded homes and data issues. Not having these resources not only disadvantages these students, but does not allow for the grading to be a true representation of their work. It is worth mentioning that the university has been using an online platform for several years where students can access their module materials. During this pandemic, the university has worked together with various networks and have implemented a zero data charge, where students can access the online platform for T&L. Hence the university is ensuring that no student is left behind. Nevertheless, although my university has done this, not all students have the resources to allow for T&L to occur and for the inequalities gap not to widen. African students request that course packs be printed and sent to them to complement online T&L.

Zo's narrative reiterates Chris's reflection in that they both portray how African students propose to be taught during the era of pandemic. The

pictures revealed in both reflections show that students do not want to be left behind. Hence urgency is required in dealing with the ramifications of inequality so that they are not left behind in T&L. The narratives depict the context of poverty-stricken communities they teach and students who do not have the resources or funds to access their lecturers' resource material. Therefore, it is vital that an alternative is given to these students so that the principle of 'no child must be left behind' is achieved.

## **5 Data Analysis**

To analyse our self-reflection data, we used written archival documents, papers and scrapbooks, and other secondary sources such as articles, books, on-line literature and newspapers to supplement the gaps. The key themes identified from our reflection journals were teased out based on the correlation with the purpose of this chapter, which ensured credibility and trustworthiness.

### ***5.1 Can 'no child must be left behind' be Achieved during the Coronavirus Pandemic?***

The Corona virus brought to light the practicalities of the politics of access to knowledge in HE, as indicated in the narratives of the two lecturers in this chapter. Inequalities are still rife (Ruswa 2019) as the Minister of HE reiterates 'no child must be left behind' as universities embark on online teaching. This suggests that transformation in T&L is imperative and must accommodate all students' contexts, both rich and poor. Authorities have been silent about how this could be done. This chapter proposes that through the implementation of *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy, online teaching can be realised. The two practitioners bring forth information on the ground by narrating their experiences with students they teach who come from diverse backgrounds. The authors' narratives also depict that African students' context is silenced in the Minister's narrative. It indicates that mostly when the government takes decisions about HE it falls in the normative of excluding the knowledge of students' context. This renders itself to incomplete teaching pedagogy, because only one side of the teaching strategy (resourced) is favoured over that of the poor (poorly resourced) and this is tantamount to *ukulahla umuntu* (See Chris's narrative).

Agency is key in during this time of the Corona virus – action must be taken by all involved in HE to ensure that education continues, and no child is left behind. The idiom *umuntu akalahlwa* depicts that the Minister’s principle is feasible, as it calls for the equality of all in terms of access to education, despite the differences in socio-economic context. The narratives of the two lecturers also reveal that it is feasible to not leave any student behind, as long as the universities use both paper-based teaching and online. However, currently it is not feasible, as online teaching is the only teaching pedagogy currently used (Zaharah & Kirilova 2020). African students suffer the most, due to the lack of requirements for online teaching such as electricity, data, network, and funds. Hence Zo maintains that, ‘Not having these resources not only disadvantages these students, but does not allow for the grading to be a true representation of their work’. In addition, Chris’s student suggests an important fact of not being disposed (*ukungalahlwa*) by proposing a pedagogy that will assist in ensuring that all students are accommodated during this time of the Corona virus.

## **5.2 Implications of ‘no child must be left behind’: ‘Umuntu akalahlwa’ Pedagogy**

The implication of the Minister of HE’s principle of ‘no child must be left behind’ is the introduction of *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy. The pedagogy suggests that the education system is not congruent with the needs of the society it serves, as students’ contexts are not catered for in the current proposed online T&L. UNESCO (2020) mentions that students that will suffer the most from the Corona epidemic in terms of their academic year, especially if universities do not consider them, are the ones from disadvantaged backgrounds. Chris argues that the Minister of HE, by not giving clear proposals on what can be done to assist the students and universities so that they will ‘not leave any child behind’ makes HE inaccessible for the poor, especially the African child who comes from the context of poverty as he/she cannot afford data, and other resources that will make education qualitative. This implies that ‘knowledge is a commodity and access is the key’, which means that those who do not possess and cannot access that knowledge are at a disadvantage (Dziuban, Moskal & Hartman 2005: 11). Hence the Minister’s principle is to ensure the pedagogy of *umuntu akalahlwa* to ensure that no

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student is rendered to a category of *ukulahlwa* (dispose students) during this time of the Corona virus.

Therefore, this chapter proposes the use of *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy during the Corona T&L crisis, which acknowledges the context of poverty within which most students live. The pedagogy cannot be used in a crisis situation only – as an intervention it is necessary, but it should also be used as part of the academic processes going forward.

This is because systematic curriculum development, including materials, needs to ensure that diverse pedagogies are drawn together when narratives are told or written down (Waghid 2002:69). Naturally, lecturers who encompass both the rich and poverty context of students they teach would do a great job in taking into cognisance the two contexts together for themselves when they teach in times of crisis like the Corona pandemic. Though complex, this chapter has illustrated through the narratives of lecturers' teaching during the Corona pandemic that it requires committed practitioners who are willing to engage in *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy. As Masondo (2018) argues, the idiom emphasises the responsibility of care and love that one has to others, and dealing with idiosyncrasy. This suggests that a human person cannot be disposed of; instead, he always has to be integrated into the community. Thus, accommodating all students in T&L during the crisis of the pandemic is part of humanising others as it is key to being human, As Bewaji (2004) articulates, 'the wellspring of morality and ethics in African societies is the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal wellbeing'. This indicates that African ethics protects human rights of all people and safeguards equality to ensure social cohesion.

As part of community building and the integration of African students who are underprivileged and are unable to engage in online T&L, *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy must be revisited in line with democratic principles and values of transformation of HE. Globally, universities introduced a paperless T&L strategy, but in line with the context and proposals of African students from Chris and Zo's reflections, online teaching must be complemented by integrating a paper-based T&L style. Chris mentioned that 'my students request printed materials, recorded lectures saved on USBs posted to students'. On the same note Zo states that 'African students request to for course packs to be printed and sent to them to complement online T&L'. The two proposals can work together effectively and can assist students from all contexts to learn with ease and no child will be left behind.

*Umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy embraces both online and measures that can aid in bridging face-to-face contact teaching. The pedagogy allows teachers to understand different contexts as different and not superior to the other and in the process, students will understand their identity as diverse South Africans in a globalised world better. The pedagogy tallies well with the tenets of South Africa's Constitution, Act 108 of 1996 of equal treatment of everyone, and as such must be implemented, as the world currently faces the pandemic and must be part of the HE teaching policy.

## 6 Conclusion

Education has been the battleground of the poor and rich and as a result HE T&L strategies still omit the integration of the poor so that they can enjoy quality education and 'no child must be left behind'. The Corona virus has highlighted the stringent gaps between the poor and rich students in HE. The reflections of the two lecturers in this chapter suggest that little has been done by the government and HE to bridge and make sure that the poor enjoy quality education amidst their challenges with resources within this context of Corona virus. The call of this chapter is that to ensure that 'no child must be left behind' during the Corona virus period as requested by the Minister of HE, the *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy as it promulgates integration of all students in their T&L despite the context they come from. The reflections of two lecturers indicate that we have to move away from silencing students' context when we adopt teaching strategies that are accorded as significant, but due to political propaganda are pushed to the periphery.

Teaching pedagogy in South Africa must be relevant to the call of what education is driving us to – democratic principles of respect for all contexts that are silenced. This will contribute to nation building by empowering students in HE to embrace identity that is – inclusive of everyone in terms of class, culture, religion, sexual orientation and other ways. As the narratives of lecturers have pointed out, using *umuntu akalahlwa* pedagogy in the dispensation of any crisis or dispensation in education illustrates that any course can be taught to any student in any discipline as long as the pedagogy is effective and is aligned with the context of students and pushes them to deep learning. The chapter is a contribution to the topical global debate on decolonisation by stating that the social settings of poor students must be

considered in HE while constructing T&L strategies, especially during the era of the Corona virus pandemic.

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