COVID-19 Forces a System Change – Rethinking Schooling towards a 'Learning Society' Framework

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted every aspect of society, placing immense pressure on South African education institutions and families to find ways to cope and re-negotiate schooling amid the stark disparities that exist in South African society. In an unprecedented move, the Department of Basic Education announced that families could opt to homeschool their children during the early phase of the pandemic. Illich (2002) states that the two essentials for an educational revolution are the development of a new understanding of the educational style of an emerging counterculture and a new orientation for research. The pandemic has presented these very essentials. Illich (2002) further states that the first step towards establishing a learning society would be to conceptualise how learning in this new framework might unfold and which institutions could be used to manage and support this decentralised approach to learning. This paper uses the theoretical framework approach to explore the literature and debate around the concept of a learning society. It also explores how the tenets of natural learning can be considered the bedrock of a learning society. The devolution of power in this framework can address the challenges posed by the current system as it has the potential to transform individuals and create a thriving learning society.

Keywords: natural learning, home education, learning society, unschooling, COVID-19, governance

Introduction

The impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic still reverberates around the world as countries put in place measures to mitigate the challenges it has created and continues to create. The impact and uncertainty of the pandemic have made the management of schools rather difficult. In most countries, schools have implemented closures to manage the spread of the novel coronavirus responsible for the pandemic (Bayham & Fenichel 2020; Mahaye 2020). However, it is our contention that school closures have brought to the fore questions, debates and the shortcomings of the current South African system of education. Mahaye (2020: 18) states that the pandemic has illuminated the current education system and has presented South Africans with a golden opportunity to have the courage of insight to be 'innovative, creative, radical, versatile in advancing with agility the decolonisation of education'. Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) also assert that the pandemic, with all the human suffering it has brought, presents an opportunity to reassess the current schooling system.

One of the ways schools attempted to manage the loss of curriculum hours and face-to-face teaching was through the use of technology. Nationwide, schools uploaded lessons on various media platforms to continue teaching, with the expectation that parents would help to close the gap in learning (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020), demonstrating the creativity and inventiveness of people to find solutions to address the challenges (Mahaye 2020).

By integrating conventional schooling with online methods – a blended learning model – schools in most communities continued with teaching (Mahaye 2020). The blended learning approach still holds onto the notion of traditional schooling, which is physically attending a school but using technology to supplement or replace aspects that can be done as distance learning (Mahaye 2020). This approach runs the risk of remaining conservative rather than using the opportunity to deeply interrogate the shortcomings of the current education system because with the impact of the lockdown measures under increased scrutiny, the economic and cultural inequalities that beset society at large are illuminated (Evans *et al.* 2020). The lack of access to technology has deepened the divide between rich and poor (Mahaye 2020) and excluded a significant group of children from schooling (Esposito & Principi 2020).

This article contends that the pandemic has provided society with an opportunity to critically question all assumptions held in esteem on the governance of education and to propose solutions that will address this current COVID-19 crisis and the disparities in education, to empower both individuals and communities.

Methodology

This article uses the theoretical framework approach to place the current schooling crisis in context of the pandemic and poses the following question: Can a learning society framework and the natural learning approach address the challenges of the current schooling crisis? It explores both past and current research and debate around the concepts of a learning society and natural learning. Various articles from different countries were reviewed and relevant arguments that supported the contention were drawn out to provide a strong and cohesive understanding of the concepts. The authors also referred to and drew from their past research on natural learning to illustrate the synergy between these concepts within the proposed framework.

What is Learning?

One of the assumptions that needs interrogation is the definition of learning. The World Development Report (World Bank 2018) states that schooling and learning are not necessarily synonymous. According to Gobby and Millei (2017), schooling is a formal way of educating children in designated institutions and usually involves teachers instructing students in a formal curriculum comprised of distinct subjects. Thus, this projects the dominant message that direct and planned instruction at schools produces learning (Illich 2002). However, since learning takes place from birth without any formal instruction, humans have a natural desire to learn, and significant learning takes place when the subject matter is relevant to the learner, with or without a teacher (Holt 1989; Rogers & Freiberg 1994; Hondzel & Hansen 2015; Hartwell 2016). The common meaning of learning is the gaining of knowledge and understanding or the acquisition of a behaviour or skill through study, direct instruction or experience (Visser 2001). The experiential learning theory states that learning is an active and individual process as meaning-making becomes an inside phenomenon (Simpson

1976). Natural learners (Holt 1983; Pattison 2013; Ramroop 2019) believe that free and creative environments engage people, improve achievement, encourage cross fertilisation of ideas and critical thinking. According to Visser (2001), authentic learning has four requirements: instruction should coincide with the learners' desire to learn; the learner should be involved through exploration; instruction should be delivered on demand; and failure is positively recognised as a driving force for learning.

In contrast, school-based learning assumes that learning is a linear process that must be measured and managed (Ramroop 2019). Institutional learning values and the legitimising of its dominance can create debilitating dependency on institutions (Illich 2002). This dependency confuses the demand for instruction as a demand for learning, and therefore, can pervert individuals' natural inclination to learn and impact on the responsibility for one's own growth trajectory (Illich 2002). It also leads to the institutional and compulsory management of learning taking precedence over individuals' needs, creating distance in the understanding of the self, family, community and environment, and polarising society with its grading system (emphasis on certification) into approved measures of social control (Illich 2002).

Equating schooling and teaching with learning is an illusion because the very act of teaching can lead to a disassociation from the acquisition of skills and actual learning (Holt 1983; 2004). Although teaching does contribute to learning under certain circumstances, people also acquire their knowledge and skills outside of the schooling system. According to Dewey (2015), the incidental learning that happens while life is lived is empowering. This learning happens more in the relationships and partnerships between learners and their families, communities and environments. According to Illich (2002: 17), 'it relies on the critical intent of all those who use memories creatively. It relies on the unexpected question which opens new doors for the inquirer and his partner'.

It may be argued that generations have successfully learnt through the schooling system. Yet, on a global scale, schooling as a means for a successful life hides an important truth: for millions of people, especially in developing countries, learning outcomes in basic education are so low (disproportionately affecting children from poor households) that they are facing a learning crisis (World Bank 2018). Furthermore, even if instruction in schools leads to learning and success, it 'never yields the joy of knowing

something to one's satisfaction' (Illich 2002: 40) because the unmeasurable personal growth through experience, creativity and self-discovery is replaced by the rituals of schooling – a contributing factor to the learning crisis.

'Governmentality' and Schooling

Foucault (1980 as cited in Simons *et al*. 2006) states that a characteristic of a modern state is the governmentalisation of the state, which aims at governing people at all levels. The exercise of power has become 'more finely meshed, expanded and scattered' and has resulted in increased governability through the regulation and standardisation of people's conduct (Feges & Nicoll 2008: 13). Olssen (2008: 36) argues that governmentality is 'individualizing and totalizing, in shaping both individuals and populations, in order to understand the collective exercise of power'. Schools are an example of an apparatus of the state's governmentality and a setting for disciplinarian power (Rose *et al*. 2009).

Operating through this disciplinarian power, schools shape and regulate the population in a specific way, in accordance with the perceived mainstream needs of a society (Feges & Nicoll 2008). Schools are also examples of instrumental rationality because in the linear pursuit of compulsory education for all, many other essential aspects of people's development are not taken into consideration (Elfert 2016). Schooling is very structured with 'an endless process of escalating rituals' which replaces the essence of education (Abdushomad 2014: 106) and often displaces and disengages the individual person and compromises true learning. MacNeil (2001) states that the disengagement of learning from society has become the distinguishing hallmark of modern education.

Fasheh (2001) posits that the problem with education is not only what it offers, but more importantly, what it conceals, marginalises, makes invisible, and/or renders useless. Pattison and Thomas (2020) concur that much of what passes as education is not education but ritual, and children also learn from the hidden curriculum of schools which may not necessarily serve the pedagogical needs of the learners. According to Pattison and Thomas (2020), the development and management of the curriculum as a goal-orientated and planned process that aims to ensure common destinies, is another expression of power and governmentality. It makes knowledge part of a political drive to impose and maintain social order, and it places the

responsibility and management of the political and cultural values of the day within the administration of the educational authorities.

While the government believes that more governance and rules, such as lowering the compulsory age for school attendance, will improve education (BBC News 2018; BusinessTech 2020a), the poor results of educational tests (Spaull 2013) provide evidence that schooling is not synonymous with learning. The World Bank (2018) asserts that schooling without learning is a wasted opportunity and a great injustice to the child and future generations. It is also a waste of resources, both at individual and national levels. An example of this is the high level of teacher absenteeism in developing countries, including South Africa where the bulk of the national budget goes to teacher salaries (Spaull 2013). According to the World Bank (2018), one of the reasons, amid deeper systemic causes, for the learning crisis in which schools do not produce evidence of sufficient learning, is the poor management and governance of schools and the learning process.

During the relatively early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing with the teaching of the curriculum required a huge effort by School Management Teams (SMTs). While schooling continued for children from higher income households, it did not necessarily continue for children from lower income households, especially children in rural villages, as access to internet and devices became serious obstacles (Cahya 2020; Mahaye 2020). However, Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) note that even before the pandemic many schools had been experiencing a learning crisis. The pandemic merely illuminated the high level of learning poverty. Therefore, the management of learning cannot go back to usual after the pandemic. Mahaye (2020) states that the pandemic has created an opportunity for government to correct the inequalities in the educational system so that there is equal access and opportunity for all. According to Illich (2002), for an educational revolution to happen, a new understanding of the educational style of an emerging counterculture and a new orientation for research need to be developed. With this impetus and opportunity for change, it is incumbent upon the Department of Education to re-conceptualise the framework for education in South Africa and to create a new style of educational relationship between people and their environment, using research evidence and creative thinking and solutions to ensure that authentic learning and development take place.

The Counterculture: Home Education and Natural Learning

Home education is the broad term that describes parents managing their children's education at home rather than sending them to school (Griffith 1999; Ramroop 2019). Home education is parent- or child-led and home-based. The neologism natural learning, an approach that falls under the home education movement, is a life philosophy that eschews the pervasive institutional learning that characterises most modern societies, including the common 'school-at-home' approach of traditional homeschooling communities. It is commonly referred to as unschooling, life learning or self-directed learning (Ramroop 2019). This approach was cemented as an empowering and viable way to live and learn by thinkers and leaders such as John Holt, John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore (Ramroop 2019). It is not a new phenomenon.

Home-based natural learning predates schooling as in the past all members of society learnt through and about their societies and environments in a natural way (Blok 2004). Knowledge, skills and culture were handed down to younger generations by older members of the family and community. Therefore, learning was a natural and inseparable aspect of living (Ramroop 2019). In the same way, families who follow this approach believe that learning will happen as life is lived and that children have the ability to choose their area of interest and learn what they believe is important to them. Their learning is personal, meaningful and an integral part of who they are, rather than something that is alien to and outside their lives. With natural learning, children are not coerced into learning but are given the space and opportunities to pursue their interests with freedom and autonomy which allows them to live flourishing lives on a personal and collective level (Petrovic & Rolstad 2016). A typical natural learning home has a rich and well-resourced home environment. The family makes a concerted effort to ensure the children are exposed to and are meaningfully engaged in a variety of interests. Children engage with their area of interest with as much depth and for as long as they chose, often with exclusive attention and devotion. Although parents may sometimes offer to help based on their observations and acute understanding of their child, a cornerstone of this approach is to assist only when invited by the child (Holt 1983; 1989; 2004; Ramroop 2011; 2019). Pattison (2013) has found that children can learn without any

deliberate adult intervention. Various researchers (Kirschner 2008; Pattison 2013; Ramroop 2019) point to the crucial role of the parent or other caregivers in the natural learning environment. The parent has a vested interest in their children and coupled with deep love, respect and compassion along with the need to see the children succeed, the parents provide them with time, attention and the necessary resources. They nurture both the children and their interests beyond what is considered the usual parenting demands, making the relationship between the parent and child a dynamic partnership in living and learning. People in many parts of the world are starting to recover and re-claim learning as a natural aspect of life and are creating new environments to make it real (Gomez-Portugal 2015).

What is a Learning Society?

The first notable book on the idea of a learning society was written in 1968 by Robert Hutchins who envisioned a society where learning is not confined nor limited to one portion of an individual's life or a specific institution (Miller 2001). The concept of a learning society gained further momentum from Ivan Illich's book *Deschooling Society* (2002), and from the UNESCO commissioned reports by Faure (1972) and Delors (1996). These writings brought to the fore the concept of lifelong learning and that learning is not a place and time-based endeavour.

The Faure Report (1972), driven by the social democratic ideals of individual freedom and a new respect for learning, places the 'focus on the human condition and on the role of education for the development of every individual potential' (Elfert 2016: 3). Feges and Nicoll (2008) point out that the report was humanistic and the role of education reflected the optimism and progress of the era in which it was published. The Faure Report (1972) emphasises a shift from traditional schooling to a broader perspective of education that incorporates both non-formal and informal learning. It also raises concerns that the current instrumental and technocratic educational systems risk the spirit of enquiry and alienate, enslave and deprive human beings of their freedom and capacity to act. According to Elfert (2016), although the Faure Report was a catalytic agent for lifelong learning in the Western countries, it had little influence on developing countries because it was seen as too philosophical and impractical.

The Delores Report (1996) echoes the tenets of natural learning by

stating that the encompassing view of education should aim to enable each individual to discover, unearth and enrich their creative potential. This aim requires moving beyond the instrumental view of education to one that emphasises the development of the complete person. However, the concept of lifelong learning, as espoused in the Faure Report (1972) changed to reflect the neoliberalist ethos where the humanistic ideal was replaced by a focus on economics and the development of human capital, emphasising science and technology to increase productivity (Feges & Nicoll 2008; Elfert 2016). Thus, instead of the 'humanistic ideas concerning equality and personal development, concepts such as evaluation, control and cost efficiency became important' (Feges & Nicoll 2008: 90). The notion of a skilled, competent and qualified workforce became the central arguments for lifelong learning and the responsibility shifted to individuals to obtain the necessary skills to find employment in the marketplace (Elfert 2016). In this way, neoliberalism promoted a specific form of freedom by integrating the self-conduct of the governed into the practices of government (Elfert 2016). The rising concern about neoliberalism in educational policies and strategies prompted UNESCO to host a conference themed *Ubuntu! Imagining a Humanist Education Globally* in the United States of America in March 2015.

Although the democratic and participatory society based on the freedom, creativity and solidarity captured in the Faure Report failed to come to fruition, the report emphasised learning as a continuum within the four pillars of education: learning to know; learning to do; learning to be; and learning to live together. In other words, learning happens in all spheres of life (Elfert 2016). It also promoted the view of education as a full and equal human right, showed its leaning towards humanist education and the holistic development of individuals to reach their full potential in a pluralistic society (Elfert 2015). For example, the pillar of 'learning to be' emerged as a timeless priority because the prime goal was to ensure that individuals are fully entitled to rights and self-fulfilment. It must be noted that the Faure (1972) and Delores (1996) reports are considered 'unfailures' because their relevance rests in the challenge they represent in the increasingly instrumenttal and technocratic view of education (Elfert 2015).

According to Simons *et al.* (2006), a learning society contains and expresses the principles of a universal humanity and is a promise of progress that may seem to transcend the notion of a nation. Learning societies, which also lean towards the definition of 'commons', existed as organic systems

made up of 'human and non-human, living and non-living, material and spiritual beings and forms woven together in inextricably entangled ways' (Escobar 2015: 348). Learning societies are based more on collective, communitarian and egalitarian values and less on a hierarchical vision of society (de Majo 2016). Bollier and Helfrich (2015) assert that humans have a need to work together to create and co-operate in order to meet shared goals. Throughout human history, societies have been characterised by communitarian values, and it is believed they have been key to human survival (Hewlett 2016). According to Wilson (2015), one of the defining criteria of egalitarianism – a characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies – is keeping the disruptive competition among members in check because succeeding as a group was the main selective force in human evolution. This is in direct contrast to the competitive and hyper-individualistic characteristics that are purported to be the ultimate fulfilment of people in modern society. These characteristics are entrenched by the schooling system where the individual is required to train, re-train and re-skill, to upgrade their credentials and to outdo others in preparation for lifelong job seeking (Feges & Nicoll 2008).

In a learning society, conviviality is the process of creating networks for mutual support which results in more resources and relationships becoming available. Bystrom (2019) describes conviviality as fundamentally concerned with making spaces of communality more positively interactive through everyday practices and routines of people inhabiting them and by how people use the variety of tools available to the community. A mingling of traditional and modern technologies for the changes towards a more socially equal and sustainable learning society is suggested (Serpa *et al*. 2020).

Natural learning can be seen as a microcosm of how a learning society functions, and therefore, the tenets of natural learning can be the bedrock of a learning society. These are the fundamentals of natural learning and a learning society:

- Learning is embedded in meaningful contexts. It is founded on individuals developing their own interests and addressing problems and questions that are of particular importance in their life.
- Individuals share, connect and collaborate on a regular basis to exchange views, organise common activities (sport, art, tours, 'play

dates', etc.), workshops, specific courses, and many other shared activities that can bring people together.

- Learning and living are not separate entities but are intertwined, and therefore, learning becomes an interdisciplinary collaborative activity that deepens critical thinking and problem solving.
- Learning is seen as a natural aspect of life and not place based. Learning can happen in whatever contexts individuals deem relevant.

Natural learning is congruent with Illich's (2002) view that an educative society highlights meaningful learning, which enables individual's autonomy, mutual interaction and political awareness. Thus, the attainment of a learning society requires a new way of organising, managing and governing society. Illich (2002) outlines four essential approaches that will re-organise the current systems into a convivial learning society system that will give individuals access to any educational resource that may help define and achieve their goals.

1. Widely available educational objects or tools: Conviviality should be enhanced by a reference service to educational objects or tools that are widely available to the community (Saurén & Määttä 2011). Apart from tools and objects, spaces for learning are also tools for conviviality. For example, communities can transform schools into convivial spaces. Other facilities (libraries, laboratories, museums, factories, airports, farms, theatres, showrooms) can become convivial spaces that provide access to learning opportunities for community members (Illich 1973). Another example of a convivial tool is the establishment of skill centres for all people who want to learn skills. All community members should have access to these centres to choose instruction among hundreds of definable skills at public expense (Illich 2002). These skills should not be monopolised but shared, and the skill centres should be judged by customers, results and reputation. Skill centres can also be at the workplace itself. These ideas and examples multiply the opportunities for skill development in an interdisciplinary way.

2. Establish a skill web and skill exchanges: This is where skilled experts are part of a network and database where people share their contact de-

tails, skills, current concerns, learning aspirations and the preconditions under which they are willing to serve as models for those who want to learn the skills (Saurén & Määttä 2011). Technology has taken this network of skill sharing to a different level and learners can now have access to people, knowledge, skills and friendships at the click of a button.

3. Peer matching skill exchange: According to Illich (2002), when young teenagers are given the proper incentives and access to tools and programmes, they fare better than most teachers when sharing their knowledge about their topic of interest. Learners with similar interests should have the opportunity to find each other to creatively apply their learning and sharing. Peer matching is a communications network in which people describe the learning activity they wish to engage with in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry.

4. Reference services: This is a database or catalogue that provides information and reference services of professionals, paraprofessionals and freelancers. The information can include addresses, self-descriptions of the person and service and conditions of access to the services (Serpa *et al*. 2020). This enables a motivated learner to access help when needed. In this way, the learner selects a teacher by perusing the information within the catalogue as well as accessing a reference from the professional's previous customers (Saurén & Määttä 2011).

These four essentials illustrate that a learning society that emerges from its organic roots, embedded in communities, embrace different organising principles and make way for new systems based on communitarian modes of investment. In other words, families and communities will decide on their fit-for-purpose infrastructure within the emergent innovations that may come to the fore. There can be no monopolies or institutional dominance (Chambers 2010) because communities and governments become partners in the creation of a learning society.

According to Ramroop (2019), the following will be visible in a learning society:

- A vibrant learning ethos with people of all ages enjoying a variety of learning opportunities.

- Well-resourced learning centres that are open and accessible to all.
- Apprenticeship programmes for all who want to learn or re-skill.
- Open and safe areas for children to play.
- A variety of higher learning institutions and programmes that are available or access to these spaces through technology.
- Coaches and community volunteers to manage a variety of sporting activities.
- Access to technology and internet.
- Free engagement in activities with no compulsion nor punishment.
- Available tutors and other skilled professionals, willing to share their knowledge and skills.
- Elders share indigenous knowledge and are valued and integral to the community.
- Learning for all that is not age-based.
- Learning that is not place-based but embedded in daily life and activities.
- Extensive infrastructure in all communities that support learners and learning activities.
- Communities are environmentally and ecologically aware and conservation practices are integral to daily lives.
- Vibrant support systems that contain continuous innovation and feedback to develop knowledge and skills.
- Clear articulation of collective purposes and goals.
- Communities that are open to an ever-expanding group of supporters, innovators and funders.
- A wide variety of learning providers developed and maintained.
- New ways of managing support relationships – learners should have access to independent and trusted mentors.
- People will be connected, share, collaborate and live their full potential while contributing positively to the development of their community.

According to Illich (2002) and Bollier and Helfrich (2015), any practice that does not compete, but co-operates and shares, and technology that helps to make the best out of everyone's power and imagination, creates an environment where ordinary people find pleasure in sharing knowledge and

building things together, thereby strengthening both the individual and the community. This raises the question: How can a learning society be implemented, managed and governed to allow communities to take their own initiatives to manage their learning instead of relying on imposed bureaucracies? Gibson (2015) stated that the concept of a learning society is a challenge to education departments and academics as they need to shift their geography of reason by challenging preconceived ideas of who does the thinking and where it is done. A learning society will restore agency to the people who know and live their situations.

The discussion on natural learning shows that the tenets of natural learning are the bedrock of a learning society. Its philosophy and evidence of success (Kirschner 2008; Pattison 2013; Ramroop 2019) illustrate that the inverse of school is possible because self-directed, self-motivated and autonomous learning is fundamental for true and empowered learning. Natural learning shows that instead of funnelling education through teachers, instruction and the rituals of schooling, it is possible to create new avenues to the world of living and learning to optimise life and learning experiences. Illich (2002) states in his book *Deschooling Society* that the society he describes and hopes for in a learning society is a society that does not yet exist and that he is building a bridge to nowhere. However, if natural learning is embraced and practised as it is by most natural learning families and communities, then this society can become very real.

Challenges in South Africa

Illich (2002) boldly states that poor people need funds to enable them to learn and not just to get certified because they lack the casual educational opportunities that are generally readily available to more resourced families, which include conversations, books, and holiday travel. This is the 'incidental learning' (Dewey 2015) that poor children will not be able to catch up if they depend on the school for their education. Thus, creating an environment that gives communities access to resources that will allow for equal opportunity are critical for the development of the individual and their communities.

However, the implementation of natural learning within the learning society framework, which has a strong focus on family engagement, could be a challenge in South Africa, as it has diverse notions of what a family

entails and comprises (Hall & Mokomane 2018; Ramroop 2019). According to Rabe and Naidoo (2015), the nuclear family is not a hegemonic model as there are a variety of family structures for various reasons. For example, traditional family and community life was fractured by the migrant labour system that underpinned the policies of the apartheid system, leaving a legacy of socio-economic damage (Bank 2017). According to Hall and Mokomane (2018), the following factors also impact family and community structures: non-marital childbearing; the HIV epidemic, which resulted in many grandparents (12%) becoming primary caregivers of children and the rise of child-headed households; 54% of families are female-headed; 30% of the poorest 20% have no co-resident parent; and 66% of African children live in extended family households. These factors must be taken into consideration when looking at how the tenets of natural learning and a learning society can be implemented.

Therefore, programmes must be identified to support and empower families and communities to provide the fundamental family base for their children (Ramroop 2019). The traditional social worker together with village elders and mentors must play a more definite role in addressing issues of parenting within a whole community. Davies (2019: 2) states that human evolution has always depended on communities collaborating with each other because 'collaborative learning is a powerful way of creating new knowledge', and through sharing, various solutions emerge. Burton and Slater (2019) found that more than 15% of participants in their study highlighted the importance of the active involvement of the extended family in children's lives because they teach them life skills across multiple generations. Thus, the 66% of African children living in extended family structures in South Africa may not be an impediment to natural learning or a learning society. Reasonable efforts to ensure that homes and communities are well-resourced (within their unique definition) with a variety of materials and that children are involved in a variety of activities which enrich their lives in terms of competence and confidence would be a priority. For example, in Johannesburg there are libraries, museums, art galleries and other facilities that families can access. In contrast, most schools in Limpopo do not have a functioning library (Mojapelo & Luyanda 2014). This gross disparity in resources, inherited by the current government from the apartheid system, continues to hamper the development of individuals and communities.

A learning society would also solve the problem of 3.3 million South

Africans in the 15–24-year age group, referred to as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs), who are not employed, enrolled at a school or educational institution, or in training programmes (Hall & Mokomane 2018). The number of NEETs is increasing, with four out of every ten females in this age group falling into this category (BusinessTech 2020b). If the key characteristics of a learning society are taken into consideration, then every individual can learn throughout life and all agencies and communities within the society become learning providers (Tien 2013). This category of NEETs can cease to exist and a nation of motivated and engaged people will be nurtured.

Proposed Framework for a Learning Society

The following framework was proposed by the researchers in a doctoral thesis titled *Natural Learning in a South African Context: A Critical Analysis* (Ramroop 2019). It is our contention that characteristics of a learning society can be incorporated into the broader South African society. The following stages for the establishment of a learning society were taken from the abovementioned thesis:

Stage 1

This is the understanding phase where relevant stakeholders (communities, government and individuals) must agree that the current education system is not serving the needs of the people or broader society. Humility and honesty should be the fundamental driving value as robust and deep discussions need to take place in various forums to identify the needs of the communities and how these needs can be resourced. As all stakeholders and beneficiaries are heard and honoured, indigenous knowledge becomes an authentic aspect of learning in the communities. Various communities of practice or commons (this is a group of individuals with a shared interest who resolve to work towards a shared goal) are established as members align themselves within their areas of interest and expertise. Some community projects can be set up immediately, for example, community gardens and clean-up campaigns. Communities must also strengthen bonds of mutual wellbeing to counteract the competition and hyper-individualism of the current system, setting the foundation for a more egalitarian society.

Stage 2

Collective consultation to determine the collective vision is done from a position of care and not in the role of a technocrat. Resource audits and the transformation of institutions and personnel must all be in process to ensure the concept of conviviality within the community. The inclusion and straddling of indigenous knowledge with current modern knowledge and cultural systems are included. Communities of practice or commons are working together towards their common goals. Members consolidate their competence and learn from each other. People offer their services in terms of skill exchange and peer matching, as suggested by Illich (2002). Dialogues towards a more collective vision becomes stronger and more concrete, fulfilling the notion that a learning society should 'empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them' (Illich 2002: 75).

Stage 3

The transformation of institutions to ensure its accessibility and conviviality is complete. For example, schools have been turned into thriving community centres bustling with activity for all community members, completely endorsing the notion of lifelong learning. There is a database for skills sharing both within the community and for skills that need to be accessed outside the community, either via a national sharing network or via other technology. Members of the commons continue to develop their repertoire of knowledge and skills with each other and add to the learning webs (Illich 2002). The local, provincial and national government structures and personnel are engaged to determine the resources that need to be provided. The concept of apprenticeship becomes firmly entrenched and accessible to all.

Stage 4

Communities are supported and empowered, institutions are transformed, and learning is entrenched as a natural aspect of living and growing. A variety of learning networks are established, and a healthy sharing of skills is established. Community members have access to all available resources to help them self-direct their own learning and development. Members of the commons are skilled practitioners that share as and when needed. The

communities have a range of resources, people and activities to nurture the growth of individuals within their learning society.

STAGE 1: COMMON GROUND
-Engagement & Dialogue
-Tenets of NLA
-Community of Practice

STAGE 2: CROSSING THE DIVIDE
-Transforming relationships
-Transforming institutions
-Partnerships
-Skill and resource audits

STAGE 3: CREATIVE CHANGES
-Implement changes
-Establish learning webs
-Skills exchange
-Apprenticeship programmes

STAGE 4: CRITICAL EMPOWERMENT
-Supportive
-NLA established
-Range of resources
-Accessibility complete
-Partnerships established

STAGE 5: TRANSFORMATION
-Society transformed
-Authority devolved
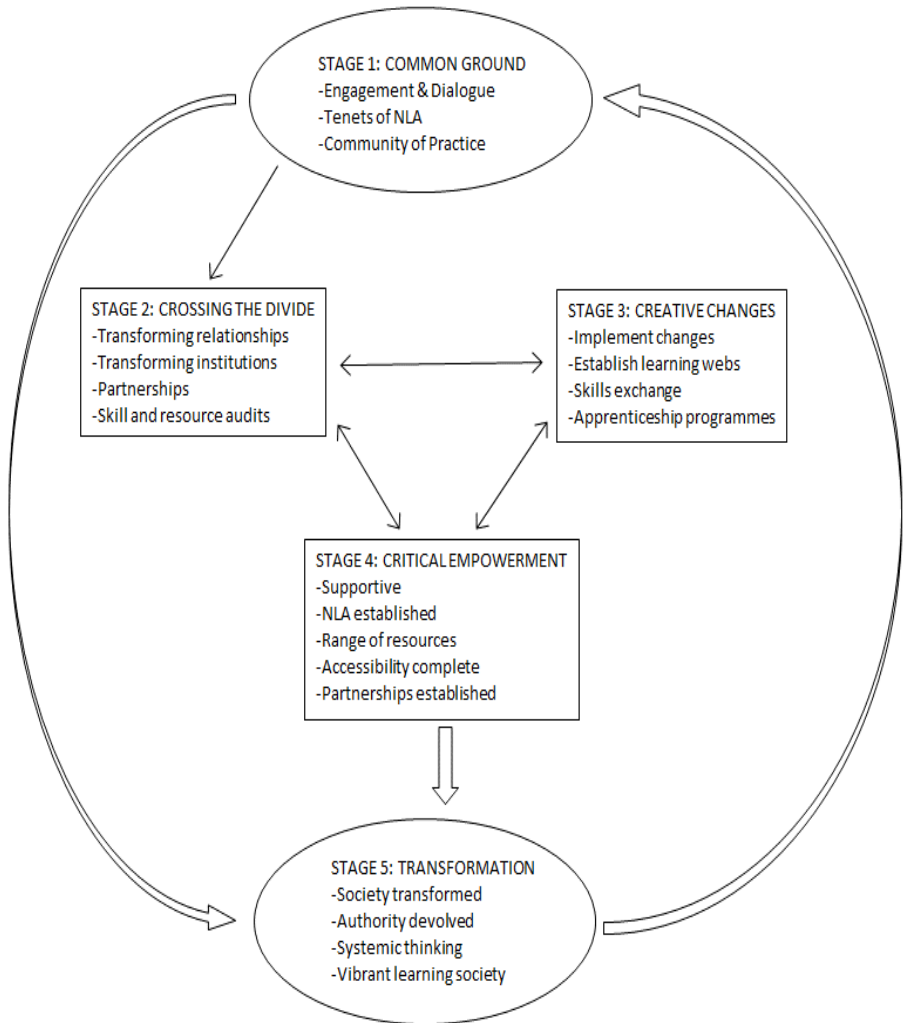-Systemic thinking
-Vibrant learning society

Figure 1: A diagrammatic understanding of the five stages of a learning society

Stage 5

The community has transformed, and the notion of a learning society is cemented and part of the daily rhythm of the community. The natural learning approach is the normal practise, and there is an easy straddle between traditional, indigenous and modern. Authority is devolved and the notion of trust building as a cornerstone for the continual transformation of the learning systems is entrenched. The practise of reflection strengthens the systemic thinking that has taken root in the hearts and minds of the community. Systemic thinking emphasises patterns, trends and feedback loops and it focuses on understanding the interactions between human and ecological systems (Davies 2019). Appropriate financial support from the government is well established because government will still have the responsibility to support the wellbeing of all its citizens, especially to alleviate poverty: 'The government are no longer the sole providers and controllers of education, but together with the economic sector, are partners to the communities in meeting their needs and therefore building their society' (Ramroop 2019).

Conclusion

During the apartheid period and in the last few decades, much money from government, non-government and the private sector has been funnelled into schools as the conduit for social change. This reliance on schools to cure disadvantages has not brought any significant results at a national level (Spaull 2013). According to Illich (2002: 49),

> either we continue to believe that institutionalised learning is a pro-
> duct which justifies unlimited investment or we rediscover that legis-
> lation, planning and investment, if they have any place in formal
> education, should be used mostly to tear down the barriers that now
> impede opportunities for learning, which can only be a personal
> activity.

Illich (2002) further states that the claim that a free society can be founded on the modern school is paradoxical because the safeguards of individual freedom are removed by the schooling system. Therefore, to create a new learning environment, there must be an understanding that neither individual

learning nor social equality can be enhanced and/or achieved by the current ritual of schooling. The fundamental value of both natural learning and a learning society is based on all individuals realising and actualising their instincts, skills, and knowledge in their own way and contributing to the growth and development of their communities. A learning society is dynamic, evolving and reflexive and resists bureaucratic and tightly controlled systems; it is where people apply their creativity and energy to solve problems while enjoying the benefits of their communitarian learning efforts. As contemporary societies are the result of conscious designs (Bollier & Helfrich 2015), it is recommended that South Africa consider the learning society framework to help lift the nation out of the doldrums of poor learning and so that young learners will no longer be institutionally bound within school walls but will be immersed in constructive learning activities (MacNeil 2001).

The learning society model has the potential to change the way people conceive of and construct the role of community in learning and human development. In this way, instead of the country hurtling towards a monoculture with deep disparities, it will affirm and nurture diversity and growth within communities. The aim should be the liberation of human creative potential and the mobilisation of human resources to solve social, political, economic, and material problems (Ramroop 2019). Illich's vision of a learning society is often described as utopian. However, with the rise of inequality and the status quo of education, the utopian thinking around a learning society is equally important because it opens up spaces for creativity and ingenuity (Elfert 2016), and in this way, challenges and changes the assumption of education *for* all to education *by* all.

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