

Digital Disparities and Educational Exclusion: Examining Online Learning Barriers Among Underprivileged Students in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of the rapid shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on underprivileged learners in South Africa, with a focus on digital disparities that threaten to deepen existing educational inequalities. The purpose of the study was to critically examine the structural, infrastructural, pedagogical, and policy-related barriers that hinder equitable access to online education. Using a qualitative research methodology, including policy analysis and a review of existing literature and statistical reports, the study identified how limited access to digital devices, unreliable internet connectivity, and unsupportive home environments have excluded marginalised students from effective online learning. The findings reveal that these digital divides disproportionately affect students in rural and low-income communities, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in the education system. The article recommends targeted policy interventions such as state-sponsored digital infrastructure development, inclusive curriculum design, and public-private partnerships to bridge the digital gap. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on education and inequality in the Global South by highlighting the urgent need for an inclusive digital education policy framework. It emphasizes that equitable access to digital learning is not only a technological challenge but also a socio-political imperative for educational justice in post-pandemic South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 triggered an unprecedented transformation in education systems worldwide. With lockdowns and school closures enforced as public health measures, formal education had to pivot almost overnight to remote and online learning modalities. In theory, digital education promises continuity, flexibility, and even innovation in pedagogy. However, in practice - particularly within developing countries like South Africa - it exacerbated long-standing structural inequalities and exposed the fragile foundations of educational equity and access.¹

South Africa's already unequal education system, shaped by its apartheid legacy and deep socio-economic divisions, struggled to adapt to this digital shift. While well-resourced schools in urban and affluent areas managed to maintain a semblance of academic continuity through synchronous and asynchronous digital platforms, the vast majority of the public-school learners - especially those in rural,

¹ UNESCO, "Education: From Disruption to Recovery," 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

peri-urban, and impoverished communities found themselves excluded from the digital classroom. These students lacked not only the necessary hardware, such as laptops or smartphones, but also consistent electricity, data connectivity, and digitally literate adult support at home.²

Crucially, the pandemic did not introduce new inequalities -it merely magnified existing ones. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), though heralded as equalising tools for education, became new instruments of stratification.³ As access to learning became increasingly contingent on one's ability to connect to the internet and navigate digital platforms, the digital divide became synonymous with educational exclusion. Students from low-income households were not only deprived of learning opportunities but were also at risk of falling irreversibly behind their peers, further entrenching cycles of poverty and marginalisation.⁴

Moreover, geographic and infrastructural disparities played a central role in this exclusion. In provinces like the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal, many schools lacked even the most basic infrastructure—let alone the technological ecosystem required to support online learning.⁵ The intersection of poverty, remoteness, and underdevelopment formed digital silos - educational vacuums where entire cohorts of learners were effectively locked out of academic progression.

This paper seeks to critically examine the multifaceted nature of digital exclusion in South Africa's basic education sector. It explores how infrastructural deficits, socio-economic status, pedagogical limitations, and policy incoherence converge to produce and perpetuate digital disparities. In doing so, the paper engages with the broader constitutional and developmental implications of educational inequality in a democratic society. Anchored in the constitutional guarantee of the right to basic education (Section 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), it argues that digital exclusion is not merely a technical or logistical challenge, but a profound social injustice that requires urgent policy intervention, inclusive technological investment, and systemic reform.⁶

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative, document-based research design, employing policy analysis alongside a systematic review of existing literature and statistical reports to examine barriers to equitable online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than relying on primary data collection, the research synthesised and critically interpreted secondary sources to identify structural, infrastructural, pedagogical, and policy-related constraints confronting underprivileged learners. This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how limited access to digital devices, unreliable internet connectivity, and unsupportive home environments exacerbate educational inequalities. By situating these findings within broader debates on educational justice, the methodology provided a rigorous foundation for the study's recommendations on inclusive policy interventions and digital infrastructure development in South Africa.

DISCUSSION

Structural Inequalities And The Digital Divide

South Africa's education system remains deeply stratified along historical and socio-economic fault lines, despite three decades of democratic governance and reform-oriented education policies. The enduring legacy of apartheid, which engineered spatial, racial, and economic inequality, continues to manifest in differential access to educational resources.⁷ The dualistic nature of the system is stark - while some learners attend well-resourced urban schools equipped with libraries, science laboratories, and digital

² Nic Spaull and Servaas Van der Berg, "Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

³ Laura Czerniewicz, "Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online," *University World News*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200325160338852>.

⁴ Mbongwe Mandisa, "Digital Exclusion and the Right to Education in Post-Pandemic South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 4 (2021): 1–12.

⁵ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *General Household Survey on Education*, 2021.

⁶ *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996, Section 29.

⁷ Salim Vally and Enver Motala, *Education, Economy and Society* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2014).

infrastructure, the majority are enrolled in underfunded public schools in rural and township areas that lack even basic amenities.⁸

Structural inequality in education is further compounded by the digital divide, which refers to the chasm between those who have meaningful access to and can effectively use ICTs and those who cannot.⁹ This divide is not merely about the presence or absence of digital tools but encompasses disparities in digital literacy, data affordability, connectivity, and access to ongoing technological support.¹⁰ The digital divide is both a product and perpetuator of broader social inequalities: children from low-income households are less likely to own digital devices, less likely to have internet access at home, and more likely to rely on schools as their primary access point to digital learning.¹¹ According to Statistics South Africa, only one in five households in rural areas have any form of internet access, and fewer than 10 per cent possess a desktop computer or laptop.¹² By contrast, over 70 per cent of households in the wealthiest quintile have reliable access to digital devices and internet connectivity.¹³ These disparities meant that when education shifted online during the COVID-19 pandemic, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were not only unable to access virtual classrooms but were also excluded from vital learning materials, assessments, and teacher engagement. Even where mobile phones were present, limitations in screen size, data costs, and application compatibility severely constrained effective learning.¹⁴

Moreover, digital exclusion intersects with other structural barriers such as poor electricity supply, inadequate school infrastructure, and low parental education levels.¹⁵ In many rural communities, intermittent power outages or the absence of electricity altogether meant that even when digital devices were available, they could not be reliably used. In households where caregivers lacked formal education or digital skills, learners often received no academic support, further widening the gap between them and their better-resourced peers.¹⁶

This structural digital divide is not a temporary setback - it has long-term implications for educational outcomes, employment prospects, and social mobility. Unless addressed through targeted interventions, these disparities will continue to entrench cycles of poverty and undermine the transformative potential of education in post-apartheid South Africa.¹⁷

Infrastructure and Technological Barriers

A critical and persistent barrier to online learning in underprivileged communities across South Africa is the glaring deficit in digital and educational infrastructure. This challenge is most acute in rural and peri-urban areas, where many schools operate without consistent electricity, reliable internet access, or even the most basic structural amenities necessary to support a safe and conducive learning environment.¹⁸ In numerous cases, schools lack secure facilities to store ICT equipment, which discourages investment in digital tools. These infrastructural shortcomings are not merely logistical inconveniences; they reflect deeper failures of developmental equity, spatial justice, and state prioritisation in historically marginalised regions.¹⁹

The broader state of infrastructure in South African schools remains deeply uneven. According to the Department of Basic Education, thousands of schools still rely on pit latrines, are housed in unsafe buildings, or operate without access to piped water.²⁰ These conditions are fundamentally incompatible

⁸ Nic Spaull, "South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994–2011," Centre for Development and Enterprise, October 2013, <https://www.cde.org.za>.

⁹ Nompumelelo Mohohlwane, Stephen Taylor, and Brahm Fleisch, "Building Back Better: Lessons and Policy Directions for South African Education Post-COVID-19," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 11, no. 1 (2021): 1–10.

¹⁰ Salim Vally, "Education Rights, Education Inequality and COVID-19 in South Africa," 2021.

¹¹ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *General Household Survey on Education*.

¹² UNESCO, *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap* (UNESCO, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.54675/YFRE1448>.

¹³ Vally and Motlale, *Education, Economy and Society*.

¹⁴ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *COVID-19: Guidelines for the Management of Learner Access to Remote Learning Platforms*, 2020.

¹⁵ Mohohlwane, Taylor, and Fleisch, "Building Back Better: Lessons and Policy Directions for South African Education Post-COVID-19."

¹⁶ Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Czerniewicz, "Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online."

¹⁸ Laura Czerniewicz, et al. "Digital Inequities and the South African Higher Education Transition to Online Learning during COVID-19," *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 2 (2020): 100–101.

¹⁹ Vally, "Education Rights, Education Inequality and COVID-19 in South Africa."

²⁰ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *School Infrastructure Performance Report 2020* (Pretoria: DBE, 2020).

with the demands of remote learning. Even where electricity is available, it is frequently unreliable - subject to routine load shedding and grid instability - which often renders devices and internet routers inoperable during instructional hours.²¹ This unpredictability undermines both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) modes of online learning.

Internet connectivity presents an especially daunting challenge. Data from the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) show that high-speed broadband is largely concentrated in metropolitan areas.²² Many rural schools lie outside the reach of fibre-optic networks and instead depend on mobile network coverage that is both uneven and prohibitively expensive.²³ Even in areas nominally covered by mobile networks, signal quality is often poor, particularly in mountainous or isolated regions. Moreover, the high cost of mobile data restricts consistent usage, preventing both students and educators from regularly downloading educational content or participating in virtual classrooms.²⁴

Technological barriers also affect teachers. Many educators in under-resourced schools lack the necessary digital literacy to facilitate online instruction. Where training is offered, it tends to be generalised and fails to address the specific pedagogical challenges associated with disadvantaged contexts.²⁵ Compounding the problem is the absence of on-site technical support to manage software, troubleshoot devices, or maintain connectivity - factors that contribute to the under-utilisation or premature deterioration of available equipment.²⁶

These infrastructural and technological limitations collectively undermine the promise of digital learning as a tool for educational inclusion. Without significant and equitable investment in digital infrastructure, efforts to expand online education risk reinforcing existing inequalities and further marginalising learners in impoverished communities.²⁷

Educational and Pedagogical Challenges

Digital learning extends far beyond the mere provision of devices and internet access; it demands the cultivation of digital literacy, pedagogical adaptation, and emotional and psychological support for learners. In South Africa, educators working in under-resourced schools face significant difficulties in meeting these demands. The abrupt transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed widespread deficiencies in teacher readiness, particularly regarding digital pedagogy - the practice of designing and delivering effective, engaging instruction through digital platforms.²⁸

Many teachers lack familiarity with educational technologies and have received little to no formal training tailored to online teaching methods.²⁹ This digital illiteracy impairs their ability to manage virtual classrooms, deliver interactive lessons, and provide timely feedback. As a result, online instruction often mirrors traditional, passive lecture formats, failing to exploit the capabilities of digital tools and leading to low levels of learner engagement and participation.³⁰

The socio-emotional dimension of learning has also proven difficult to replicate in remote settings. Underprivileged students, who often depend on schools for emotional security and social interaction, are especially vulnerable to the isolation that accompanies online education.³¹ The absence of in-person interaction, peer collaboration, and teacher presence fosters emotional disconnection, anxiety, and

²¹ Mohohlwane, Taylor, and Fleisch, "Building Back Better: Lessons and Policy Directions for South African Education Post-COVID-19."

²² Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), *State of the ICT Sector Report in South Africa* (Pretoria: ICASA, 2021).

²³ Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), *State of the ICT Sector Report in South Africa*.

²⁴ Mandisa, "Digital Exclusion and the Right to Education in Post-Pandemic South Africa."

²⁵ Nic Spaull and Jonathan D. Jansen, *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

²⁶ Vuyisile Mncube and Thabisile Hlatshwayo, "Teachers' Experiences of Technology Integration in Teaching and Learning in South African Rural Schools," *Journal of Education* 84 (2021): 43.

²⁷ UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021).

²⁸ David Mhlanga and Tankiso Moloi, "COVID-19 and the Digital Transformation of Education: What Are We Learning on 4IR in South Africa?," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 7 (2020): 180.

²⁹ Spaull and Jansen, *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality*.

³⁰ Mamphela Ramphela, *Dreams, Betrayal and Hope* (Johannesburg: Tafelberg, 2017).

³¹ Asanda Ngoqo, "Psychosocial Effects of COVID-19 on Disadvantaged Learners in South Africa," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 4 (2021): 537-40.

demotivation - factors that contribute to declining academic performance and deteriorating mental health.³²

Further compounding these challenges is the lack of accessible and contextually relevant digital learning materials. Educational content is frequently developed with urban, middle-class learners in mind, ignoring the lived realities, languages, and cultural contexts of students from rural and township areas.³³ This misalignment not only limits comprehension but also alienates learners, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and disengagement.

In sum, the success of digital education in South Africa hinges on far more than hardware provision. Without meaningful investment in teacher development, learner support systems, and culturally responsive content, the digital transformation of education will risk deepening, rather than bridging, existing educational inequalities.³⁴

Policy Gaps and Institutional Failure

Although the South African government has long expressed its intent to leverage digital technologies to transform education, the realities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed critical policy deficiencies and institutional weaknesses. The Department of Basic Education's 2004 *White Paper on e-education* laid out an ambitious vision to integrate ICT into all aspects of schooling, to improve learning outcomes and address historical inequalities.³⁵ Yet, two decades later, this vision remains largely unrealised. Implementation has been fragmented, inconsistent, and inadequately aligned with the needs of disadvantaged communities.³⁶

A core problem lies in the decentralisation and fragmentation of responsibilities among national, provincial, and local education authorities. This has led to duplication of efforts, incoherent policy application, and wide disparities in ICT integration between provinces.³⁷ Wealthier regions such as Gauteng and the Western Cape have advanced more rapidly with digital rollouts, while poorer provinces like the Eastern Cape and Limpopo remain underserved. The lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms further hinders the ability to learn from and scale successful initiatives.³⁸

The government's pandemic response also underscored a lack of preparedness and foresight. The shift to online learning was reactive rather than strategic, characterised by delayed planning, inconsistent communication, and uneven resource distribution.³⁹ Promised interventions - such as the distribution of devices and provision of subsidised data for low-income learners - were either delayed, inadequately funded, or poorly executed, leaving millions of students effectively disconnected from formal learning for extended periods.⁴⁰

Institutional capacity at the school level also remains alarmingly limited. Many schools lack designated ICT personnel, and support systems for the maintenance of hardware and software are virtually nonexistent.⁴¹ Without these foundational supports, digital learning interventions risk being short-lived and ineffective. The absence of localised technical assistance not only limits the sustainability of ICT use in classrooms but also discourages teacher uptake and integration of digital tools.⁴²

Finally, these policy and institutional gaps intersect with broader socio-economic inequalities, which further obstruct equitable access to digital education. Without a coherent, inclusive, and adequately resourced policy framework - one that addresses infrastructure, affordability, teacher development, and

³² Hloniphile Mthembu and Deevia Bhana, "Language, Learning, and Social Justice in the South African Classroom," *Language and Education* 35, no. 3 (2021): 229–46.

³³ Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), *State of the ICT Sector Report in South Africa*.

³⁴ Mandisa Mbongwe, "Digital Exclusion and the Right to Education in Post-Pandemic South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 4 (2021): 1–12.

³⁵ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *White Paper on E-Education: Transforming Learning and Teaching through ICT* (Pretoria: DBE, 2004).

³⁶ Spaull and Jansen, *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality*.

³⁷ Vally and Motala, *Education, Economy and Society*.

³⁸ Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), *Evaluation of ICT Integration in South African Schools* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2018).

³⁹ UNICEF South Africa, *COVID-19 and Education: A Crisis and Opportunity* (Pretoria: UNICEF, 2020).

⁴⁰ UNICEF South Africa, *COVID-19 and Education: A Crisis and Opportunity*.

⁴¹ Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030* (Pretoria: DBE, 2020).

⁴² Madiba Mbulungeni and Mkhize Makhosazana, "Digital Education in Rural South Africa: Capacity and Constraints," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 2 (2020): 1–12.

learner support holistically - the promise of digital transformation in South African education remains aspirational rather than attainable.⁴³

Social Implications: Education and Intergenerational Poverty

Education has long been recognised as one of the most powerful instruments for social mobility and poverty alleviation in South Africa. The country's post-apartheid constitutional framework enshrines the right to basic education for all children (Section 29 of the Constitution), reflecting a commitment to redressing the injustices of the past and fostering equal opportunity.⁴⁴ However, the increasing reliance on digital platforms to deliver education during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep fractures in this commitment, revealing how economic status now critically determines access to education in practice.⁴⁵

When education is digitally mediated, disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, and supportive learning environments translate directly into disparities in educational attainment. Underprivileged students—those from low-income households, rural areas, or informal settlements—face persistent barriers that limit their ability to participate fully in online learning.⁴⁶ This exclusion is not simply a matter of immediate academic setbacks but has profound social consequences that resonate across generations.⁴⁷

The lack of access to quality education driven by digital exclusion contributes to the entrenchment of intergenerational poverty. Without consistent engagement and achievement in education, students face diminished prospects for higher education, vocational training, and employment opportunities.⁴⁸ This perpetuates a cycle of deprivation where poverty, lack of education, and limited socio-economic mobility reinforce one another, undermining efforts towards social justice and economic development.⁴⁹

Moreover, educational exclusion exacerbates broader social inequalities related to race, gender, and geographic marginality. Girls and young women in under-resourced communities are particularly vulnerable to dropping out, as the pressures of household responsibilities, caregiving, and early pregnancy increase in the absence of school support structures.⁵⁰ The digital divide thus risks deepening existing gender disparities and marginalising those already on the periphery.⁵¹

In sum, failing to address digital inequities in education not only compromises individual learners but also threatens the broader societal goal of breaking cycles of poverty and inequality. Ensuring equitable digital access is therefore imperative not just as an educational priority, but as a crucial social justice and human rights concern.⁵²

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the entrenched digital divide in South African education requires a holistic, rights-based approach that centres on equity, inclusion, and sustainability. The following key recommendations can guide policymakers, educators, and civil society actors towards achieving digital justice:

- a. *Universal Device Access:* Ensuring that every learner has access to a personal digital device (such as a tablet or laptop) is foundational. This requires government-led procurement programs, partnerships with private sector donors, and innovative distribution models that reach rural and marginalised learners.⁵³

⁴³ UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021).

⁴⁴ The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, sec. 29.

⁴⁵ Vally and Motala, *Education, Economy and Society*.98-100.

⁴⁶ Vally and Motala, *Education, Economy and Society* .

⁴⁷ Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), *Digital Access and Learning Inequality in South African Schools* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2021).

⁴⁸ UNICEF South Africa, *COVID-19 and Education: A Crisis and Opportunity*.

⁴⁹ Moses Ngware, "Education and Intergenerational Mobility in Southern Africa," *African Education Review* 18, no. 2 (2021): 150–51.

⁵⁰ Global Education Monitoring Report, *Gender Report: A New Generation* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021).22.

⁵¹ Meryl James and Sadiyya Haffjee, "Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa," *Agenda* 35, no. 1 (2021): 105–9.

⁵² United Nations, *The Right to Education in the Digital Age: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, A/77/262* (New York: United Nations, 2022).para. 38–40.

⁵³ Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030* .

- b. *Affordable and Reliable Connectivity*: Internet access must be affordable and stable. South Africa should invest in expanding broadband infrastructure to underserved areas, promote zero-rating of educational content, and regulate mobile data costs to remove financial barriers to connectivity.⁵⁴
- c. *Policy Recommendations*: There is a need for a coherent digital education policy that prioritises equity. Public-private partnerships should be leveraged to expand access to devices and connectivity. Zero-rating educational websites and subsidising data for students are critical.⁵⁵
- d. *Pedagogical Innovation*: Teacher training must be restructured to include digital pedagogies that are contextually relevant and inclusive. Multilingual and culturally responsive digital content is essential.⁵⁶
- e. *Comprehensive Teacher Training*: Teacher professional development must include ongoing digital literacy and pedagogy training tailored to diverse school contexts. Empowering educators with the skills to design interactive, culturally relevant, and inclusive online content is essential.⁵⁷
- f. *Localised and Inclusive Content*: Educational materials should be adapted to local languages, cultural contexts, and the realities of learners from various socio-economic backgrounds. Open educational resources and community-driven content development can enhance relevance and accessibility.⁵⁸
- g. *Public-Private Coordination*: Effective collaboration between government agencies, telecommunication companies, non-governmental organisations, and education stakeholders can mobilise resources, share expertise, and coordinate implementation efforts to maximise impact.⁵⁹
- h. *Creation of a Digital Equity Index*: Developing a comprehensive, transparent monitoring tool that measures digital access, quality, and outcomes across regions and demographics can guide policy interventions, track progress, and ensure accountability.⁶⁰
- i. *Community-Based Approaches*: Local learning hubs and community Wi-Fi initiatives can mitigate household-level disparities. Schools should become centres of digital inclusion, offering after-hours access and support.⁶¹
- j. *Holistic Learner Support Systems*: Digital education initiatives must be integrated with psychosocial support, community engagement, and mechanisms to address barriers like hunger, safety, and parental involvement to create enabling environments for learning.⁶²

CONCLUSION

The accelerated digital transition in education, propelled by the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic, has unveiled both transformative possibilities and stark structural vulnerabilities within South Africa's educational landscape. While digital platforms can expand learning access, diversify pedagogical approaches, and align education with the demands of a rapidly evolving digital economy, they have also exposed and, in many cases, exacerbated entrenched socio-economic inequalities. For countless underprivileged students, the shift to online learning has not facilitated inclusion but has instead deepened existing disparities, often rendering educational engagement an elusive goal.

Digital education, if equitably implemented, possesses the potential to serve as a critical vehicle for redress and empowerment. Yet this promise remains unrealised in the absence of intentional and systemic reforms that confront the root causes of digital exclusion—namely, infrastructural inadequacy, limited digital literacy, fragmented policy responses, and the socio-cultural marginalisation of vulnerable communities.

⁵⁴ World Bank, *Digital Economy for Africa Initiative: South Africa Country Diagnostic* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

⁵⁵ Department of Basic Education, *Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030*. 45.

⁵⁶ Jako Olivier, "Blended and Online Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Teacher Readiness in South Africa," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 53, no. 1 (2022): 152–54.

⁵⁷ Olivier, "Blended and Online Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Teacher Readiness in South Africa."

⁵⁸ Mamphela Ramphele, *Conversations with My Sons and Daughters* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2012).123-126.

⁵⁹ Martin Gustafsson, "The Economics of Digital Learning in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 3 (2020): 4–7.

⁶⁰ Research ICT Africa, *Measuring the Digital Divide in South Africa* (Cape Town: RIA, 2022).1-13.

⁶¹ National Planning Commission, *National Development Plan 2030* (Pretoria: NPC, 2012). 263.

⁶² UNICEF, *Building Back Better: Education Recovery in Africa Post-COVID-19* (Nairobi: UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, 2021).14-17.

To fulfil the constitutional guarantee of the right to basic education as articulated in Section 29 of the South African Constitution, the state must adopt a rights-based, learner-centred approach. This entails comprehensive investment in ICT infrastructure, the development of inclusive and multilingual digital content, sustained teacher training in digital pedagogy, and robust policy frameworks that prioritise equity and resilience over mere technological deployment.

Crucially, the digital divide should not be treated as a neutral technological gap but as a reflection of broader patterns of historical and systemic injustice. Addressing it requires more than hardware and connectivity - it demands a normative commitment to social justice, participatory governance, and the reimagining of education as a public good in the digital age.

Ultimately, the transformation of digital education into a tool of opportunity rather than exclusion hinges on sustained political will, strategic coordination among public and private stakeholders, and deep engagement with the lived realities of South African learners. Only then can digital learning become not merely a temporary adaptation but a cornerstone of a more just, inclusive, and future-ready education system.

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