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COVID-19: UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VULNERABLE CHILDREN OF ESWATINI

ABSTRACT

In a bid to contain the spread and infection rate of COVID-19, Eswatini closed all its schools on 17 March 2020, and for a year they remained closed. Despite education being the only viable means towards a better future, the closing of schools set-off to heighten prevailing educational disparities towards academic access, experience and achievement for the vulnerable children of the country. Adopting intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the paper seeks to analyse the educational effects of COVID-19 on the vulnerable children of Eswatini. The aim is to identify and discuss how educational systems and processes amidst the COVID-19 era sought to amplify the already compounded, complex and dominant educational disparities for children affected by vulnerability. A systematic literature review was conducted to understand child poverty and vulnerability in Eswatini schools and the implications of the COVID-19 school restrictions on the vulnerable children. Strategies to minimise the adverse effects of the pandemic on inclusive and equitable schooling for the vulnerable children have been suggested.

Keywords: *COVID-19; intersectionality; schools; social justice; vulnerable children; Eswatini.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel human coronavirus, COVID-19, has brought havoc to the economic systems of countries worldwide (Doyle, 2020), and predominantly poor countries have been affected the most (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). Eswatini, one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2019), recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 14 March 2020 (Dlamini, 2020). On 17 March, the country's late Prime Minister, Ambrose Mandvulo Dlamini, declared it a national emergency, with the first recorded death from the coronavirus on 16 April 2020 (Mdluli, 2020). As one of the means to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the country's Minister of Education and Training closed all schools on 17 March 2020, and for a year they remained closed. Whilst the economic effects of

COVID-19 on Eswatini are alarming (Ntiwane, 2020), the country's educational system has equally been devastated, with vulnerable children being the most affected and prone to bear the blunt reality of the school closure and this pandemic (Doyle, 2020). Benach (2021) agrees that COVID-19 has come with a potential pandemic of educational inequality, again inclined towards the poor and vulnerable in our communities. Child vulnerability in Eswatini is mostly attributed to child poverty and the very high number of HIV/AIDS deaths experienced by the country for over three (3) decades (Swaziland Ministry of Health, 2017). The Kingdom of Swaziland (2010) defines a vulnerable child as one, with or without parents, who lacks the basic needs for survival, is living in circumstances with high risk and whose prospects for health, growth and development are seriously impaired, mostly due to the effects of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, Mkhatshwa (2017) says, these are children who are orphaned, from child headed households and children from poor family backgrounds. However, these children share one thing in common and that is extreme poverty.

As COVID-19 overwhelms the functioning of educational systems, educational access, experiences and outcomes for the vulnerable children in the country are bound to be greatly affected (Benach, 2021). Yet, the importance of education as one of the means to break their circle of poverty and that of their families (Achoki *et al.*, 2020) cannot be overemphasised. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out by the United Nations advocates that by 2030 all learners will have all the knowledge skills needed to promote and sustain global development (UNESCO, 2015). Achoki *et al.* (2020) warn that, as the world works tirelessly to find a permanent solution for the coronavirus, educational systems of countries should ensure that they do not crumble. One way would be through limiting the educational effects of the pandemic especially on the most vulnerable, considering their desperate need for education. Educational systems need to consider that, improving the quality of life for the vulnerable children, post-COVID-19 or in the "new normal" (Cahapay, 2020), depends largely on the quality and effectiveness of the education they receive (Achoki *et al.,* 2018). Indeed, aligning with the state's initiative to meet Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, even though the narratives in Eswatini point to the glaring economic effects of COVID-19, making it a major topic of debate (e.g. Dhemba & Tatenda, 2020; Ntiwane, 2020), a systematic analysis for its implications on the education of children who are poor and vulnerable is still lacking. The inequalities established by the pandemic in the educational spaces have been neglected and the mitigation of these effects is also woefully absent. The paper therefore seeks to analyse the effects of COVID-19 on the education of the vulnerable children of Eswatini. The aim is to identify and discuss how educational systems and processes amidst the COVID-19 era and school restrictions seek to amplify the already compounded and dominant educational disparities in the educational spaces. That is, providing an intersectional sense and a new perspective in understanding how the government's approaches might have educationally disadvantaged and compromised the vulnerable children in the country, whilst advantaging children not affected by vulnerability. By so doing finding means not only to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and the governments' policies and processes in regard to the vulnerable children's education, but also to encourage social justice in all avenues of their educational lives and spaces, as one of the means towards ensuring they get quality, effective and equitable education.

2. UNDERSTANDING POVERTY, VULNERABILITY AND EDUCATION IN ESWATINI BEFORE COVID-19

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) has a population of slightly above 1.1 million people (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2019), and approximately 72% of the country's people live below the nationally defined poverty level (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2019). Child poverty in Eswatini stands at 56.5% (UNICEF, 2017), and approximately 80% of the country's poor live in the rural areas depending mainly on small-scale subsistence agriculture for survival (Rugube *et al.,* 2019). Besides poverty, Eswatini has also been hard hit by the effects of HIV/AIDS for almost three (3) decades; hence, the escalating numbers of children who have been relegated to extreme poverty and vulnerability (Mkhatshwa, 2017). To ensure the welfare of the vulnerable children, the National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 commits the government of Eswatini and the education sector as a whole to a number of systems strengthening efforts and targeted interventions to care for, protect and support the vulnerable children (The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2018). It provides for the routine monitoring of vulnerable children in schools, at the same time assisting schools in responding to these children's needs.

As one of the means to reaffirm its pledge, in 2010 the state introduced Free Education (FPE) for all primary school going children (Khumalo, 2013). The aim was to eliminate barriers and encourage educational access, participation and achievement with special focus on the poor and vulnerable children in the country. Ensuring institutional flexibility in accommodating the needs of destitute children and to continue rolling out free, equitable and inclusive basic education for all children, especially the vulnerable, underlines government's commitment towards the plight faced by the vulnerable children of Eswatini (The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2018). However, the economy of the country is presently on its knees and has been ailing for the past two (2) decades (Rugube *et al.,* 2019). Maintaining support for the vulnerable children and aligning policies adopted and practice within a difficult public sector fiscal environment has been a mammoth task to achieve.

Over and above, the state was a signatory of numerous UN declarations on children's rights and other policies related to the welfare of vulnerable children. For example, in April 2000, the government of Eswatini endorsed the Dakar Framework for Action, committing the government into taking a different yet inclusive stance by emphasising not only on compulsory primary education but also one that is equitable, free and of good quality by 2015, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged child populations (UNESCO, 2015). In September the same year, Eswatini again committed itself to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), reaffirming its pledge to put more emphasis on poverty and the needs of all children by 2015 (Khumalo, 2013). Later, in 2015 the country was also a signatory of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the commitments towards the SDGs was for every member country to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, ending poverty and also achieving gender equality in all aspects of social life (UNESCO, 2015). With such perfectly crafted policy statements, one would conclude that the educational affairs of vulnerable children in the country are well taken care of. Regrettably, discrepancies between these policies and practice cannot be ignored and their implementation to the desired level remains a dream. Eswatini is indeed not only far from safeguarding the future of its marginalised children but also from achieving its educational goals (Khumalo, 2013). This is with ruinous effects to the vulnerable children who presently live within very challenging economic, educational and welfare situations (Mkhatshwa, 2017).

For instance, vulnerable children still struggle to get food daily (Mkhatshwa, 2017). Educational inequalities remain an endemic problem and a major concern in the school contexts (Motsa & Morojele, 2019). The vulnerable children still have to deal with exclusion, discrimination (Zwane & Malale, 2018) and mostly end up dropping out of school, either because of ill-treatment by teachers and learners, owing school fees (Khumalo, 2013), overwhelming family responsibilities for the boys (Motsa & Morojele, 2019) or pregnancy for the girls (Mkhatshwa, 2017). This is a clear indication that, despite policies to redress the challenges faced by vulnerable children, the state has failed to keep its promises. Inclusivity and educational equity in Eswatini schools has made very little progress if any, as the vulnerable children's quest for education is still compromised. With COVID-19, these inequalities and challenges faced by the vulnerable children are set to reach new and ruinous heights (Doyle, 2020).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE INTERSECTIONALITY FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the intersectionality framework. The intersectionality framework is on the premise that marginalisation and inequalities experienced by people in disadvantaged positions is "intersectional" (Crenshaw, 1989). In other words, most marginalised groups of people have multiple identities, which all carry their systems of oppression, exclusion and subordination (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, social identities such as gender, race and socio-economic status within an individual may map into different levels in the social order, where they interact and simultaneously intwine (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016) in ways that amplify disparities at the same time making individuals' daily life experiences complex and compounded (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality based research therefore seeks to bring about the explicit awareness and recognition of subjugation, inequalities and social exclusion of subordinately positioned individuals coming from all levels of their multiply marginalised social identities (Freeman *et al.,* 2020). That is, acknowledging that the vulnerable children's individual identity in Eswatini is a conjunction of a number of social elements concurrently affecting and affected by one another, in ways that frame their daily educational experiences. In essence, COVID-19 functions not as a distinct separate entity affecting the vulnerable children's schooling, but as a mutually reinforcing phenomenon widening the educational inequalities at the same time acting as a compromise to their education (Crenshaw, 1991).

Trying to address discrimination of intersectional(ly) subordinated groups of people looking from only one level of their subordination will therefore distort their lived experiences and also disregard the root cause of their challenges, discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). For the vulnerable children of Eswatini, their education is already framed within multiple areas of disadvantage. To understand the implications of COVID-19 on their education therefore, one needs to look at their (the vulnerable children) intersecting social identities within the educational spaces. Again, how the government's stereotypical processes and decisions as they imposed school restrictions intersected with the vulnerable children's already vulnerable situations to amplify the prevailing educational disparities in the country (Nichols & Stahl, 2017). Intersectionality was therefore the effective lens through which the paper could interrogate government's educational policies, regulations and processes during the "COVID times" at the same time challenging the invisibility and neglect of the vulnerable children in making these policies. This is in ways that would not only identify how these processes seek to aggravate the subordination of the vulnerable children, but also how such disregard presented compromising and complex educational problems for them (the vulnerable children), requiring

deep enquiry (McCall, 2005). Indeed, the study argues that, whilst these processes privileged children who were not affected by vulnerability (Dennissen *et al.,* 2020), the interaction of such structures and processes within the vulnerable children's identities aggravated their subordination and severed most of these children from educational access and success (Freeman *et al.,* 2020). Hence, violating their rights to effective education.

3.1 Research methodology

To collect data, a systematic literature review was conducted. This was from 20 March 2021, (immediately after the government announced the re-opening of all schools in Eswatini, after closing for a year), until the end of April 2021. Conducting a systematic literature review allowed the researcher to identify, review and synthetise empirical evidence (Atlantis *et al.,* 2013) in trying to align with the aims of the study. Reviewed literature focused on child poverty and vulnerability in Eswatini and how these social identities affected the vulnerable children's schooling, before COVID-19. It then focused on literature about COVID-19 and its educational implications especially for the most vulnerable in the schools. The researcher used electronic databases and only focused on studies published between 2015 and 2021 in order to provide recent information. Finally, approximately fifty (50) publications on COVID-19 and vulnerability that could possibly fulfil the criteria were found. However, twelve (12) of these studies were excluded. Utilising the intersectionality framework, these findings were then discussed in view of the schooling of the vulnerable children of Eswatini and the country's educational restrictions, processes and systems meant to mitigate the educational effects of COVID-19.

4. COVID-19 AND THE EDUCATION OF THE VULNERABLE CHILDREN OF ESWATINI

It is indeed true that the educational effects of COVID-19 on the world's poor and socially vulnerable is devastating (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020) and Eswatini is no exception. COVID-19, coupled with the country's restricted schools' regulations has provided further structural and indeed compromising contexts for the resolve, educational performances and success for the vulnerable children of Eswatini (Mkhatshwa, 2017). It has come as a further threat to their already compromised social and educational life (Raza, 2017; Motsa & Morojele, 2019), at the same time compromising and constraining their equitable participation and success. This is because, for Eswatini the implications of COVID-19 on the vulnerable children interacts with prevailing vulnerabilities and systems of inequality dominant within educational spaces "to create yet another [and intensified] dimension of [vulnerability] disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1991:1249). Issues relating to equitability for the vulnerable children of Eswatini have always been wanting and posed a challenge in the education system. Farkas and Romaniuk say "any discrimination allowed during a time of peace may become a matter of life and death in a period of crisis" (2020:70). Undoubtedly, the outbreak of the pandemic comes as a compromise to the glossy world of the vulnerable children of Eswatini envisioned by the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals of 2030 and the effects are catastrophic. Unfortunately, the country's efforts to ensure children get effective education during the "COVID times" disregarded all systems of the vulnerable children's disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989) and how they all intersected to further worsen their learning experiences. The designed educational processes and procedures were far from being inclusive, but rather oppressive as they were discriminatory and further placed the vulnerable children at a disadvantaged position towards educational access and success (Hart, 2019).

Whilst, the closing of schools on 17 March 2020 was a smart move by the country's authorities to slow down the transmission of the coronavirus, the same cannot be said in regard to the wellbeing and education of the vulnerable children. Such a decision did not only reject, obscure and disregard the vulnerable children's realities and social standing but was also devastating (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020), and this need not be ignored or minimised. Firstly, whilst the affluent were sent back to the comfort of their homes, the poor and vulnerable were sent back to their abhorring life situations and their daily needs as provided by the schools were overlooked. For example, as the vulnerable children were sent home nothing was said on how they would get their daily nutritional meals offered by the schools, yet for most of these children this is the only assured meal for the day (Motsa & Morojele, 2019). The closing of schools therefore not only severed them from their educational resource but also their daily sustenance, hence aggravating their food insecurity. Again, the emotional impact of such detachment from the school contexts for some of the vulnerable children whose only parental figure in their lives is a teacher (Dowd, 2019), was also ignored and no follow up was made to ensure their welfare. Further ignoring the serious psychological effect of being deprived of education (Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma & Singh, 2021) – the one practical means to break their circle of poverty. It is expected therefore that most of these children will not see the inside of a classroom again because most of them were forced to find other means to put food on the table, in ways that ended up compromising their lives and their educational future. For example, the school closure forced boys to withdraw from education and opt for the lucrative business of dagga (marijuana) cultivation to put food on the table for their families (Pitikoe, 2018). The same way girls were taken advantage of by men who promised them food and money and unfortunately, most of them fell pregnant thus putting an abrupt end to their education (Phungwayo, 2020).

The COVID-19 era also introduced a period of technological innovation and digitalisation in the country's education system. The government, through the Ministry of Education and Training, put structures in place as a means to ensure that learners do not completely lose a year. This was done by conducting lessons through the national radio, daily newspapers and the national television stations (TV). However, rather than being practicable, such aspirations remained theoretical for most vulnerable children in the country. These initiatives were not inclusive as they neglected the issues of intersectionality amongst groups of children in the education system. For example, the accessibility of such platforms for the poor, vulnerable children of the country was never considered (UN, 2020). How feasible is it that parents or caregivers of these children can afford to buy newspapers for their children? Let alone radios or even own television sets when they struggle to put food on the table (Mkhatshwa, 2017). Again, as much as television is very engaging and interactive, and probably effective to replace the face-to-face traditional mode of teaching and learning, for many vulnerable children of Eswatini, it remains a far-fetched dream. This points out to the sad reality that, only children with resources and not affected by vulnerability were considered and advantaged to access education (Blundell *et al.,* 2020). It is true therefore that, as these children continued with their education through the set-up platforms, the vulnerable experienced an educational gap and could only wish for the next day at school. Yet instability and a gap in a child's cognitive development, "contributes to patterns of educational stratification […] [amongst learners] … [at the same time] widening the achievement gap" (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007:175). Such highlights the stark disparities between children who had the flexibility to access education and those who were limited by their poor socio-economic conditions.

Again, shifting education from schools to family contexts, meant more responsibilities for the poor parents and caregivers, who are mostly not only illiterate (UNICEF, 2017), but also unquestionably living in the stressful situations that accompany poverty and/or is brought about by the pandemic (Doyle, 2020). In the face of most parents being unemployed in the country, numerous parents with low paying jobs and/or are self-employed have also been deprived of their source of income (Blundell *et al.,* 2020). A situation that is unfortunately bound to worsen, considering that more job losses in the country are projected in 2021 (Ntiwane, 2020). Consequentially most parents in poor families are unable to invest in their children's education physically and financially. They have also not been in a position to "cultivate valued educational skills in their children" (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007:176) or provide educational support at a time when education has moved into the home contexts and these children needed parental involvement in order to achieve. Certainly, these myriads of factors will coalesce to amplify educational disparities and widen an already prominent attainment gap amongst learners affected by vulnerability and those who are not (Blundell *et al.,* 2020). It is without doubt therefore that as these two groups of children finally go back to school, they are further stratified by the effects of COVID-19 and the vulnerable children's system of discrimination is further deepened by the pandemic (Crenshaw, 1991). It is therefore negligent of the government to ignore intersectionality amongst groups of children and only concentrate on the effects of COVID-19 disregarding how these effects are and have been made complex by the effects of poverty and vulnerability.

Undoubtedly, without swift and tactful action, the country might not recover from the educational implications of the pandemic especially for the poor and vulnerable (Blundell *et al.,* 2020). Hence, the urgent need to consider education anew in the light of emerging challenges brought about by the pandemic (Cahapay, 2020) and from the perspective of the vulnerable children. The question therefore is, considering the goals of the country towards education, what can we invest in as a nation to challenge the effects of COVID-19 and to mitigate the compromising implications of the educational systems and processes amidst the COVID-19 era, at the same time trying to meet the goals we set to fulfil?

5. ENGAGING THE EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE WAY

The question of how to provide quality, equitable and prosocial education for the vulnerable children of Eswatini, is an important one to address. As the country's authorities prepare for education beyond COVID-19 and/or characterised by the new normal (Cahapay, 2020), educational stakeholders need to consider how existing inequalities, social structures and the conditions surrounding the pandemic have facilitated vastly different realities for children in the schools with the vulnerable facing a more complex reality (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). Again, how COVID-19 has broadened the vulnerable children's educational needs and further made their disadvantaging situations multifaceted. It is also important for the government of Eswatini to acknowledge how, through designing a "one size fits all" programme in efforts to ensure that children get education even during the schools' restrictions, it stereotypically constructed children in the schools, as one social group, hence obscuring and concealing the needs and realities of the vulnerable. Considering that the vulnerable children have been disadvantaged in similar yet different ways from other groups of children in the schools, this warrants the Ministry of Education and the government of Eswatini to address such variations equitably (Hart, 2019), and ensuring that, the set off risks for widening already dominant educational

gaps is ultimately eliminated and a safe and equitable opening of schools, especially for the vulnerable children is guaranteed.

Indeed, COVID-19 has increased the presence of diverse minority groups in the schools and brought into light a number of advocacy issues in need of addressing. This calls for the adoption and incorporation into practice the principles of social justice approaches as one way to ensure effective education for the vulnerable children. According to Klaasen (2019:2), social justice is entrenched in the structures and practices that integrate those at the subservient as well as the advantaged positions. Social justice "works to undo socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some at the expense of others" (Calderwood, 2003:4). Considering the need for a social change to a curriculum that is flexible enough to compensate for the gaps in the vulnerable children's education, approaching education from the lens of social justice could therefore be one way the government of Eswatini could "right its wrongs" and ensure equitable educational access, experience and success for all Swati children (children of Eswatini) (Hart, 2019). This perspective could enable the government to design new policies and programmes that would help navigate and outwit the exclusionary practices that infiltrated the educational system during the COVID-19 schools' restrictions (Hlalele, 2012).

Furthermore, by embracing social justice the government could also be ensuring "full and equal participation of all … [children in the schools] … that is mutually shaped to meet their needs," (Bell. 1997:3). That is to say, effective help for the vulnerable children, the "high need" learners (Castro, Kelly & Shih ,2010), should go beyond the "ordinal" to help that meets their real needs. As much as schools need resources to reconstruct the damage caused by COVID-19 and the schools' closure for all children, strategies should target and give more support to the children whose education has been hit hard by the pandemic – the vulnerable children. Making more resources and specialised support available to them (Nieuwenhuis, 2010) in ways that would compensate and accommodate their special and different needs. In essence, giving equal educational opportunities for the vulnerable children of Eswatini during the "COVID times" would mean devising policies and programmes that ensures education that is shaped in such a way to consider the dominant structural barriers to their education as further brought about by the pandemic, at the same time addressing their varying levels of need as predicated on poverty and vulnerability (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). That is, not actually giving equal resources to all children in the schools but rather eliminating inequalities in educational access, experiences and opportunities. With the end goal being equitable educational outcomes for the vulnerable children and those not affected by vulnerability (Hart, 2019). Crenshaw (1989:139) agrees that, as opposed to "being harmed by being treated differently, [children in vulnerable situations] … are harmed by being treated the same", being covered by the same governmental processes, because their multiple burdens make them different and in need of specialised support (Nieuwenhuis, 2010).

Considering how the vulnerable children's intersecting identities have driven them further away from the idealised reality of equal educational opportunities (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020), and further blurring their educational success (UN, 2020), it is imperative to note that, disregarding their real life needs, which makes them "different", is prone to perpetuate their circle of poverty and that of their families. Recognising diversity amongst learners would help ensure that children in the schools, from the poorest to the wealthiest, are given equitable opportunities to succeed (North, 2006), increasing the probability to free the vulnerable children

from the shackles of poverty. As a country we therefore, need to discard the centralised, standardised and homogenised education system, as it does not only ignore diversity but also underestimates the realities and needs of the vulnerable children (Ciftci & Cin, 2018), in favour of education that would cater for and also consider learners who have been mostly educationally disadvantaged by the school restrictions.

As the children go back to school, teachers can also help shape the new world of the vulnerable children by being inclusive practitioners. That is, they should move beyond concentrating on their brilliant learners' achievements and making it to "top achieving" schools in the country (Dover, 2013), to meeting the individual learners' needs in the schools/classes at their actual "point of need". Hence, giving every child the freedom and possibilities to achieve (Hart, 2019). Teachers should also take into consideration the contemporary problems in the educational spaces and the vulnerable children's presently changing yet becoming complex realities. With an understanding that children's experiences are diverse and thus context and individual specific solutions are needed towards the creation of equitable educational spaces (Hlalele, 2012). The core value of social justice is associated with the skills and tasks of advocacy and policy reform (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020:71). It encourages and supports teaching that is "built on respect, care, recognition and empathy" (Hlalele, 2012:112). Teaching that "involves how teachers regard the work of teaching, what they consider to be reasonable expectations for various learners, how they incorporate into the curriculum the knowledge traditions and experiences of marginalised groups" with the greater focus of challenging and diminishing inequalities and redistributing educational opportunities (Enterline *et al.,* 2008:270). Linking principles of justice and adopting a complex understanding of their learners' diverse identities could help tailor and guide their pedagogical practices (Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020). With a deeper understanding of the relationship between learners' lived realities and content delivered. In essence, content should be designed in a way that gives attention and attends to the vulnerable children's learning gaps (Upoalkpajor & Upoalkpajor, 2020).

Lastly, the government of Eswatini needs to consider that the vulnerable children's ability to recover from the effects of COVID-19 rests chiefly on their socio-economic resources or lack thereof (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). Effective response would therefore go beyond the education system to catering for the individually fashioned socio-economic needs of these children as a foundation for strategies and reforms aimed at inclusivity and improving their educational access and achievement.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has highlighted the inequalities that exist in the educational system of the country as driven by COVID-19, and the role played by the government of Eswatini in proliferating such inequalities (Bailey, O'Flaherty & Hogan, 2017). As this review has demonstrated, the intersectionality lens could be effective in identifying and understanding how inequality plays out in the educational spaces for diverse groups of learners in ways that further places marginalised children in the subordinate position. Intersectionality calls for the consideration of individual children's social identities that they bring into the schools as one of the ways in any efforts towards the development of policies and processes meant to benefit all children. Bringing into light the need for social change within the education system. Considering the social standing of the vulnerable children of Eswatini, indeed disregarding the intersectional nature of their educational experiences in the development of new educational processes during the COVID-19 lockdown of schools masked their real educational experiences riddled

with challenges, hence failed to meet their specific needs. Unfortunately, this did not only introduce new injustices within the education system but also produced outcomes that are inclined to further compound their marginalisation towards academic access, experience as well as success. Whilst, children not affected by vulnerability obtained more privilege and unfair advantages, the vulnerable children were further relegated and placed at the receiving end of the unjust decisions made by the country's authorities. If any efforts are to be made to address the effects of COVID-19 on the vulnerable children of Eswatini, educational stakeholders should therefore acknowledge their broader disadvantaging nature – their poverty and how it has always framed their educational access, capability and achievement. Hence, adopting the tenets of social justice could be one way through which children in the schools receive equitable education, acknowledging the ways in which both COVID-19 and the governments' decisions have further compromised the vulnerable children's education and resolve towards educational success.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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