Chapter 4
An Intersectionality Perspective on Rural Adolescent Access to Digital Technology in South Africa

Amy Sarah Padayachee
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6021-6642
University of the Free State, South Africa

Fumane Portia Khanare
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1707-9179
University of the Free State, South Africa

Delin C. Louw
University of the Free State, South Africa

Ntombizandile Gcelu
University of the Free State, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore compounding disparities in the South African education system. The world at large has suddenly been faced with the challenge of blended learning given that COVID-19 has reconstituted the traditional form of education delivery. Much emphasis has been placed on global education, yet due to compounding inequalities stemming from the effects of apartheid, the South African education system has been left further entrenched in the digital divide. It is for this reason that the authors of this chapter illuminate the lack of digital technology, its subsequent effect on adolescents in rural areas, and how it impacts on their ability to learn and compete in the global education sphere. The perspective of Intersectionality theory highlighted in this chapter is used to address the inequalities perpetuated by digital technology on adolescents in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for basic and higher education on a global level has been elevated since the recent pandemic which took the world by storm. According to Bonilla-Molina (2020: 2), "in just few months, educational neoliberalism has mainstreamed tensions between face-to-face education in schools and virtual education at home in global public discourse." The glaring disparities became more evident when a significant number of schools fell behind the wheel in delivering the curriculum due to lack of technological infrastructure.

The effects of globalisation on education brings rapid developments in technology and communications (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012) placing emphasis on the shift in education meeting global standards. The outbreak of pandemics, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown that teaching and learning are not confined to the traditional four walls of a classroom but have shown how education and technology are becoming increasingly intertwined (Wargo, Chellman, Budge, & Davis, 2020). Yet despite the shift to blended learning, the digital divide in the South African education system remains apparent. According to Steele (2019):

[d]igital inequality is evident between communities living in urban areas and those living in rural settlements; between socioeconomic groups; between less economically developed countries and more economically developed countries; between the educated and uneducated population. Individuals with access to a broadband connection can be digitally split. How? Low-performance computers, limited broadband speeds and limited access to subscription-based content widen the gap.

A quarter century later, yet the digital inequalities still continue. Several of the initial schisms that were identified in the year 1995 are still relevant today (Robinson et al., 2020). This is especially true in numerous schools across South Africa. Access to digital communication technologies and the ability to use those technologies remain a challenge for many schools. The lack of resources, specifically in township schools, has failed to redress the historical marginalisation of learners who attend these schools and Ndimande (2016) argues that the lack of resources in these schools directly contribute towards poverty in the lives of the learners.

The effect of apartheid on the South African education system can further be seen in the inequities in accessing online learning platforms and software which are compounded by differences in cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Despite numerous attempts by the Departments of Education and Higher Education to narrow the digital gap, South African rural adolescents are still susceptible to falling behind the academic wheel. The infrastructure of a school also affect the sustainable use of mobile technology, as some institutions, especially those in rural areas in South Africa, lack basic equipment like desks and many computer facilities at these schools are under-serviced and dysfunctional (Terhoven & Fataar, 2018:24). Whilst tertiary institutions attract students from various demographic areas, including rural and township areas, where students might lack digital fluency as they might not have prior exposure to information and communication technologies in education (Mbodila 2020).

However, lack of access to digital technology and it subsequent requirements to be an effective tool for teaching and learning are not the only problem faced by rural students. Petrie et al. (2020) maintain that it is also essential for teachers to have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices into instruction and also develop creative initiatives like play-based collaborative learning. Notwithstanding, it is imperative that teachers be trained in the skilful use of fourth industrial revolution tools in order to make learning meaningful.

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