

# Education in the BRICS countries and the likely impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

One of the key features of the contemporary world is the project of massive global education expansion, driven by high expectations related to the role of education as the most powerful instrument available to humanity to meet the challenges of the contemporary era. However, three quarters of a century after the beginning of this global education expansion project, it is still far from proper completion, facing immense challenges in terms of quality, inclusiveness and equality. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated and accentuated the deficiencies of this project. The present position paper claims that the experience of the BRICS education systems during the COVID-19 pandemic presents a valuable lesson for the rest of the world. The BRICS countries were able to provide equitable quality education for all, and also ensure that education contributed to their economic development and economic development of the Global South at large. This paper argues that the pandemic presents an opportunity and a compelling need to restructure education globally, developing education models suitable for the Global South. The constellation of BRICS countries, as the vanguard of the Global South, has a crucial role to play.

## Keywords

BRICS; education; education quality; equality in education; Global South.

**JEL:** I23, I25.

## Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, humanity has come to regard education as a major instrument to achieve a wide range of desired social changes, in order to create the envisaged kind of society. Yet, despite this trust in education, and despite massive investments in education worldwide, the state of education in the world leaves much to be desired. An almost total societal disruption that occurred during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, presents an opportunity to rebuild society and therefore the system of education. In the global education expansion project, the BRICS group of countries constitutes a community originally based on their contribution to the global GDP growth in the 2000s. These countries have very different systems of education and the paper explains how this education diversity, in the Global South contexts, may prove most beneficial.

The aim of this article is to map the probable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the BRICS countries and to prove that the experience of their educational systems during the pandemic presents valuable lessons for the rest of the world. It is further argued that within the scope of study of the economies of the BRICS countries, it is necessary to pay attention to the education effort of these nations. This paper is a position paper. According to the accepted definition, a position paper describes and defends a position with respect to an issue, presenting an argument based on evidence and authoritative sources for that position (Xavier University Library, 2014). This article starts with an overview of what education has been called upon to accomplish by early twenty-first century, contrasting these expectations with the state of education in the world. Then it explains the significance of the BRICS countries' educational systems in the kaleidoscope of the world education and attempts to describe the probable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the BRICS countries, specifying the opportunities to improve education that this impact may have created worldwide .

## The assignment that the twenty-first century world has given to education

One of the tectonic shifts characterizing and remaking the world today is the project of a massive global education expansion and reform. In his Presidential Address to the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), followed by a monumental book, the leading Comparative and International Education scholar David Baker (2014a, 2014b) has coined the term "schooled society" to typify this new society that has come to fill the whole world. Over the past 150 years, a massive industry of education has cultivated a powerful culture, transforming the lives of individuals and having a major impact on all facets of society (Baker, 2014a: 1). This has not always been the case.

Schools appeared relatively recently in human history. For most of the past several millennia, schools and other educational institutions existed at the fringes of society

and public discourse and affected the lives of very few people, in terms of size of enrolments and education levels of the populace.

A drastic change came after the Second World War. A sudden appreciation of the value of education and its power in the lives of individuals and in re-shaping society developed. The threshold year was 1955, when the majority of adults in the world for the first time could read and write, giving rise to an appreciation of education which resulted in the expansion of education. A virtuous circle was set in motion, of appreciation of the power of education and the expansion of education. But the reasons for and scope of the estimated power of education were broad and complex. These reasons will now be discussed by focusing on each sector of the societal context shaping education systems. These sectors (to use the analytical framework accepted in Comparative and International Education, (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2021) are: geography, demography, social system, economy, politics, and religion and life and world philosophy.

To commence with geography, two trends gave impetus to the rising appreciation of the value of education. The first is the ecological crisis. At the present point in history, the humanity is facing an ecological crisis threatening not only the survival of the human species, but even the survival of the planet. The main components of the ecological or environmental crisis are air pollution (of which global warming is one result), depletion and pollution of fresh water resources, pollution of the oceans, deforestation, soil erosion, and the destruction of bio-diversity. To come to terms with this challenge, humanity as a collective has formulated the notion of “sustainable development” and has formulated Seventeen Sustainable Goals as vision for 2030. The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are the lodestar of the global community for its path to 2030. One of these goals (Goal 4) deals with education: equitable, lifelong, inclusive quality education being the goal. This goal differs from all the others in that it is not only a goal in itself, as all the other goals, but is seen as instrumental towards the attainment of all other 16 goals. Hence, Goal 4 takes on special significance (Wolhuter, 2022: 1).

Secondly, concerning geography, Thomas Friedman (1992, 2009) characterises the contemporary world as a “flat world”, that is where globalization, particularly in the information, communications and transport, has cancelled out the advantages that geography bestowed upon a country; national power therefore increasingly depends on the quality of human resources. One implication of this shift is that education has moved to the front line of the tough competition amongst nations in a globalised world (see Carnoy, 2016).

Turning to demography, since the mid-twentieth century the earth has been the scene of a population explosion. The annual global aggregate population growth rate reached a maximum of 2.1% per year in 1968 and currently stands at 1.0% per year. Still, every year, 81 million people are added to the global population, dropping from the 93 million peak reached in 1988. On 15 November 2022, the global population reached the 8 billion mark. Education is widely looked up to as a solution to unchecked population growth (Idenburg, 1975: 89), the belief being that higher levels of education will result in lower fertility levels (cf. Coetzee, 1988). In a recently published book, development analyst Greg Mills (2021: 90) puts it like this: “The only conceivable

and sustainable way to bring down these rates of population growth is ... education". (It should be noted here that the issue at hand is not whether the author underwrites or contests the suggestion that education should be used to curb population growth, this citation has been included to demonstrate the widespread belief in education to effect desired societal changes).

On the social system and dynamics two exigencies should be highlighted. Firstly, education is seen as a way to effect social mobility, to create a more egalitarian society, or a meritocratic society replacing the historical dispensation of ascriptive (or hereditary) social status (see Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). Secondly, in view of the more diverse, heterogeneous societies that evolved worldwide replacing the erstwhile relatively homogenous societies, Multicultural Education, later superseded by Intercultural Education, was devised to pave the way for peaceful coexistence (see Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2022).

On the economic front, at least two developments created the need for and appreciation of a massive education expansion, and also made possible such an education expansion project. After centuries and millennia of being perceived as a luxury for the idol rich or as a consumer item, according to Theodor Schultz' Theory of Human Capital which he formulated in 1961 and for which he was given the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1979, education became a factor in the production process resulting in accelerated economic growth (see Sobel, 1982). Secondly, the global education expansion project has been driven by economic circumstances, namely the postwar miracle, attaining full momentum during the decade of the 1960s, and then once again with the economic upswing which commenced in 1990. The world entered one of the most forceful, longest, and sustained phases of economic upswing since 1990. In the ten-year period between 2005 and 2015, the global annual economic output had more than doubled, increasing from US\$29.6 trillion to US\$78.3 trillion (World Bank, 2016). This rise proceeded apace, reaching US\$ 84.4 trillion in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). In the long run the COVID-19 Pandemic appeared to have made no impact, as in 2022 the global economic output reached a new all time high US\$ 96.1 trillion (World Bank, 2022). These higher levels of affluence made possible an increased private and public funding of education.

Then, turning to the religion and philosophy of life and of the world as societal shaping force of education, towards the end of the Twentieth Century, the Creed of Human Rights became legitimized as a new moral code in a globalised world (Prozesky, 2018). Human Rights Education was crafted as a way of entrenching this code. Section 2 of the United Nation's Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, dated 20 December 2011. Article 2 of this Declaration describes Human Rights Education as entailing education *about* human rights, education *for* human rights, and education *through* human rights:

(a) Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;

(b) Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;

(c) Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others (United Nations 2011).

Thus, education became what society looks on to solve any challenge and an instrument to effect any desired societal change (*cf.* Lutz & Klingholz, 2017). Brezinka (1981: 2) expresses this as follows:

“... When someone wants to do something for peace, he introduces ‘peace education’, the person wanting to reduce the number of traffic accidents recommends ‘traffic education...’

## The state of education globally

This boundless belief in the power of education, beneficial to the lives of individuals in society, forms the basis for the massive education expansion project which has been developing globally since the middle of the twentieth century. A measure of its success is the size of enrolments at all levels of education globally. These are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Global Growth in Enrolments (millions)

Year Level	1950	1960	1980	2000	2020
Primary education	177.1	243.4	541.6	654.7	750.1
Secondary education	38.0	68.9	264.3	543.5	613.1
Higher education	6.3	11.1	51.0	99.5	235.3

(Source of Statistics: UNESCO, 1971, 1983, 2022).

Even after taking into account the population increase during the period, the expansion of education remains massive, as can be seen from the growth of gross enrolment ratios, presented in table 2.

**Table 2.** Global Gross Enrolments Ratios in Education (percentages)

Year Level	1950	2000	2020
Primary education	59	98.77	101.85
Secondary education	13	57.93	76.80
Higher education	5	19.08	40

(Source of data: UNESCO, 1971, 2022, World Bank, 2022).

However impressive these figures may be, the state of education in the world leaves much to be desired. The assessment of any type of education should be carried out in three dimensions: quantitative, qualitative, and the equality dimension (Wolhuter, 2014). To begin with the quantitative dimension, school attendance is far from universal. Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 258 million school-age children across the world (that is 17% of the cohort) were not attending school (UNESCO, 2020b).

Turning to the quality dimension, it should be stated first of all that education quality is no simple notion to define or to measure. A manageable approach to these tasks might be to compile a catalogue of the key components of the quality of education. Wolhuter (2020) suggests the following list: input quality, process quality, output quality, and product quality. Input quality refers to the quality or the level of the financial investment or physical facilities of a school or education system and is relatively easy to measure. Process quality is the quality of teaching and learning taking place in educational institutions; it is essentially the quality of administrative substructure, curriculum, teacher-bound factors (training of teachers, experience of teachers, input of teachers, and teaching methods), school-bound factors (leadership, school climate, organisation culture), family-bound factors (family and home environment, parental involvement in schools), and learner-bound factors (initial situation regarding the level of knowledge and development when learners enter the school, learner input) (Wolhuter, 2020).

Output quality is the outcome or end result of the learning process, activity or cycle, such as the learners' achievement levels at the end or any other point of the learning programme. Output quality can be measured by the scores received in the International Programme of Student Assessment (PISA) tests, the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Tests) tests, the TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) tests, the IELTS (International English Language Test System) tests and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) score and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores

Product quality refers to the effect of education – or its impact – both at the level of the individual (such as the income generating chances of the graduate) and society (such as the impact of education on economic growth). Ways of measuring product quality include rates of return analysis (calculating the impact of education on individual income levels) and establishing a coefficient of correlation between investment in education and economic growth at the national level (as an example of the impact of education at societal or national level).

On all fronts, education quality in the world is very far from being perfect, especially in the Global South, which can be illustrated by the student-teacher ratio at primary school (an indicator of input quality can be taken). According to World Bank (2022) data, the aggregate students per teacher ratio in the high-income countries is 14, in the case of the middle and low-income countries, to which the Global South roughly corresponds, this figure is 25. According to the British government statistics, around eight million adults in England have the numeracy skills of primary school children and 60% of disadvantaged pupils in England do not have basic mathematics skills by the age of 16 (Isgin, 2023). The quality of education is thus not guaranteed at all. For example, while aggregate figures, nationally and globally, may boast impressive rates of return for education, schooled unemployment and even graduate unemployment is a growing problem in many parts of the world.

Equality or equity in education is, as education quality, a concept defying attempts to encapsulate it in a universally accepted and simple definition. However, no matter



how it is defined, it is generally accepted that inequalities exist worldwide at the levels of access to education, progress through education programmes or institutions, certification, and life chances after certification. Inequalities are also observed in the socioeconomic dimension of the so called trinity of inequality (i.e., gender, race, ethnic status), in geography, ability and age. For instance, Abdourahmane (2021: 15) reports the following remuneration differences among men and women of equal education levels in Saudi Arabia: for those who have completed primary school education: men on average receive 5901 Saudi Riyal per month, women 4063 (the difference of 1838 Saudi Riyal per month); those with completed secondary education as highest qualification: men 8874 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 5 202 (the difference of 3 631 Saudi Riyal per month); those with bachelor degrees: men 13 148 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 10 257 (the difference of 2 891 Saudi Riyal per month); those with masters degrees: men 18 720 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 11 805 (the difference of 6 716); and those with doctorates: men 26 701 versus women 23 372 (the difference of 3 321 Saudi Riyal per month).

It is obvious that the global education, despite its impressive expansion over the past seventy five years, has also had major lacunae in all the three areas: quantity, quality, and equality.

## **Unexpected disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic**

The unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated the state of education in the world, but, at the same time, created opportunities for restructuring education systems. In early 2020, the global community was caught off-guard by the unexpected and rapid outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. After about one year since the outbreak, by 9 March 2021, a total of 117.7 million people globally had already been infected by the virus, 2.6 million people had died of Covid-19-related diseases, and the numbers of new infections were rising by 410 000 per day (Worldometers, 2021). A year later, on, 4 April 2022, indicators reported a loss of 6 176 628 lives worldwide, with 491 870 635 cases of which 426 859 271 people have recovered (Worldometers, 2022a).

According to Ensign and Jacob (2021), schools tend to be among the worst institutional casualties of complex disasters. The ensuing commentary on the impact of the pandemic on education should therefore be read against the background of the global state of education outlined above, which, even before the pandemic had been facing a wide range of problems.

The immediate reflective reaction to the outbreak of the Pandemic in the education sector was to close educational institutions. Statistically, this affected about 91% of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c). At its high water mark, the coronavirus shut 1.6 billion students out of school, the biggest education disruption since World War II. Even a full year after the outbreak, by March 2021, the educational institutions of 26 countries were still in full closure (UNESCO, 2021). The general

response then was that education should move towards a distance education model, with teaching on-line and learning at home.

The pandemic deepened existing inequalities in society and, in many ways, appears to have reversed the gains achieved over the past decades. The International Monetary Fund reported that in 2020 the global economy had contracted by 4.4% (Jones et al., 2021). The United Nations Women (2020) report *From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of Covid-19* details how women have been disproportionately badly hit by the pandemic. A LinkedIn United Kingdom study found that 62% of employment opportunities in the United Kingdom in April 2020 went to men (West, 2021: 6). The Pandemic was estimated to throw 96 million people into severe poverty, out of which 47 million are women and girls (United Nations Women, 2020: 8).

All this has, apparently, resulted in the end of education opportunities for many students and lower quality of education for those who received it. It is also clear that the students who suffered most, were those who, even before the pandemic, had been disadvantaged in terms unequal access, survival, certification and life chance. So the inequalities in education have been aggravated.

Notwithstanding the claim that online education is available in four out of five nations with school closures, at least 500 million learners worldwide do not have access to this educational alternative. (UNESCO, 2021).

J.F. Hodgson (2021: 15-16) carried out a research on pre-Covid-19 inequality in South African schools. As an example of such inequality he reported the following: it was found in 2018 that out of the 23 471 state schools, only 28% had internet access; i.e. only 28% could realistically consider launching an on-line based or on-line supported system of teaching and learning.

The Pandemic thus catalized a movement towards more technologically supported or technologically enhanced teaching and learning, at the same time even more threatening the quality and equality of education. These problems are especially acute in the Global South. In charting a future course of education development after the pandemic and beyond, it is essential that societal and educational contexts be carefully and thoroughly factored in. It is here that the global significance of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) constellation comes into play. The next two sections, first, examine the role of BRICS in the present world and, second, focus on education in the BRICS countries and its place in the global education expansion project.

## **Growing global presence of BRICS**

The contemporary world is indeed dynamic as it is characterised by rapid change, with many simultaneously rising challenges and opportunities; it is also mercilessly competitive (Friedman, 2009; Harari, 2015; Ord, 2020; Rosa, 2005). This creates the imperative for all nations to seek possibilities for cooperation and learning from each other, benefitting from each other's experience, especially when resolving



the urgent national challenges (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). One recently formed supra-national cooperation bloc is the BRICS association, a group of five developing countries with emerging market economies, which, given their geographic and demographic weight, and current demographic and economic trends in the world, are well placed to develop into powerful players in the global politics.

The BRICS countries together cover 29.6 million square kilometres, or 19.9% of the total land area of 148.9 million square kilometres. This is a significant part of the world, laying open an impressive territory for being the terrain of research in all scholarly fields, natural, social sciences and humanities, and also education. Furthermore, a large part of the natural resources of the earth are located in the BRICS countries. These include natural forests, biodiversity, mineral deposits, and freshwater resources. The two largest (by discharge) rivers on earth, the Amazon and the Ganges, are in the BRICS countries, as are nine of the ten largest (by discharge) rivers on earth.

The demographic strength of the BRICS countries in the global pool is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Demographic Strength of BRICS

	Population (millions)	Percentage of World Population	Annual Growth Rate (percentage)
Brazil	212.5	2.7	0.72
Russia	145.9	1.9	0.04
India	1380.0	17.7	0.99
China	1439.3	18.5	0.39
South Africa	58.3	0.8	1.28
Total	3236.0	41.6	

(Source of Data: Worldometers 2022b, Date of Access: 31 December 2022).

Taken together, the BRICS countries are home for 41.6% of the global population. The first and second most populous countries on earth, China and India are BRICS countries. The aggregate global population growth rate for 2022 was 0.84% (down from 1.05% in 2020) (Worldometers, 2022b) and it seems probable that in the foreseeable future, the percentage that the BRICS countries' share in the global population will increase.

Economic weight of the BRICS countries in the global pool is presented in table 4.

**Table 4.** Economic Weights of the BRICS Countries in the Global Pool

	GDP 2022 (US\$x000)	Estimated real growth rate for 2023 (percentage)
Brazil	1 609	1
Russia	1 779	-2.3
India	3 176	6.1
China	17 734	4.4
South Africa	419	1.1
Total/Global Aggregate	96 513	2.7

(Data from IMF, 2023).

It appears that the total BRICS Gross Domestic Product made up 25.66% of the global GDP. Given the BRICS countries' geographic and demographic weight, their growth rates, compared to the global aggregate, suggest that BRICS already account for a quarter of the global economic output.

Regarding the social and cultural development of the BRICS, some social science scholars, such as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) and Connell (2007) have advanced the thesis that in many respects the Global South (of which BRICS have come to be the leaders) has been assuming the vanguard position in many global sociocultural trends. It can be proved by the diversity or heterogeneity of Global South societies, while societies in the Global North are becoming less diverse culturally, linguistically and religiously.

The world is also changing politically. The unipolar global order, with the United States of America as its sole and undisputed leader, which has held sway since the postulated end of the Cold War thirty years ago, is giving way to a multipolar world, with at least two centers of power, namely the United States of America and China. In this new geopolitical situation, the nations of the Global South, BRICS in particular, are assuming a special significance.

Finally, as far as religion and philosophy are concerned, Samuel Huntington (1996) outlined the global patterns in religion, philosophy and life in general after the end of the Cold War era, as related to the following civilisation blocs: The Western (Western Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand), The Orthodox (Eastern Europe), Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Shintoist, Islam, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin American. Although this view of the world is certainly oversimplified, it is interesting to note that the BRICS represent the vanguard of five of these blocks thanks to their utmost significance in the advancement of interculturalism as the philosophical and moral basis for the twenty-first century world.

## Education effort of the BRICS countries

The global education expansion was not greater than that in the BRICS countries.

Enrolments and gross enrolment ratios at primary, secondary and higher education level in the BRICS countries, according to the latest available data at the time of writing (June 2019) are presented in Tables 5 (enrolments) and 6 (enrolment ratios)

**Table 5.** Enrolments in BRICS Countries at Different Levels of Education (x000)

Country Level of Education	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
<b>Primary</b>	15 367	7 123	122 028	107 730	7 716
<b>Secondary</b>	22 162	10 543	138 364	90 919	5 101
<b>Higher</b>	8 987	5 697	38 874	54 147	1 184

(Source: UNESCO, 2023). It should be mentioned that in the case of Russia these figures do not tally with official figures. According to the Federal State Statistical Service, Russia (2021:185), the total number of enrollments in primary and secondary schools in Russia is 16.8937 million.

According to Wolhuter & Barbieri's analysis of adult literacy patterns and trends in the world, three of the BRICS countries, India, China and South Africa, are among the 58 countries with more than one million illiterate adults: India with its 256 million has the largest number of illiterate adults, China has 41.57 million illiterate adults, and South Africa 2.17 million illiterate adults (Wolhuter & Barbieri, 2017). On the other hand, none of these or the other two BRICS countries are among the 31 countries where the number of adult illiterates is growing. (cf. Wolhuter & Barbieri, 2017). On the contrary, in South Africa (see Wolhuter, 2002), Brazil, India and Russia, impressive strides had been made during the twentieth century to reduce the incidence of adult illiteracy. In books on twentieth century history it is often mentioned that at the time of the 1917 revolution, about 20 percent of adults were literate – this puts into perspective the advancement of adult literacy in Russia during the twentieth century (Mironov, 1991). Brazil is known for Paulo Freire's (1921-1997) "Alphabetisation in 45 days" course which, during the Goulart rule, taught 2 million illiterate adults in Brazil to read and to write (Tag:#Education, 2023). The programme attracted global attention, Freire took it abroad and taught some 300 million illiterate adults worldwide to read and to write (*Ibid.*). In terms of enrolments at primary and at secondary school level, India and China have respectively the largest and second largest education system in the world, while China has the largest higher education system and India the second largest higher education system in the world.

An indication of the resilience of the BRICS countries, in the face of the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic is that from 2019 to 2020, ie., amidst the outbreak of the pandemic, the total primary school as well as secondary enrolments have grown in India, China and South Africa (UNESCO, 2023). Brazil had a 1.4% decline in primary school enrolments, and a less than 1% decline in secondary school enrolments, which may be ascribed to a slowdown in population growth. (The data for Russia are not yet available on the UNESCO database.) In the case of higher education, enrolments have increased in all the BRICS countries during the years of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2023).

**Table 6.** Gross Enrolments Ratios in BRICS Countries at Different Levels of Education (Percentages)

Country Level of Education	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
<b>Primary</b>	105.50	104.17	102.05	104.12	97.41
<b>Secondary</b>	104.13	103.60	77.98	unknown	100.10
<b>Higher</b>	55	86	31	64	24

(Source: UNESCO, 2023).

The education systems of the BRICS countries also have achievements in quality. Table 7 shows the registration numbers of BRICS universities according to the most recent, the University of Shanghai-based Academic Ranking of World Universities, which is a concise indicator of the process quality at higher education level.

**Table 7.** Registration numbers of BRICS Universities according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

Country	Number of universities among top 1000 universities in the world	Name and rank of top university
<b>Brazil</b>	21	University of Sao Paolo 101-150
<b>Russia</b>	10	Moscow State University 101-150
<b>India</b>	14	India Institute of Science 301-400
<b>China</b>	181	Tsinghau University 26
-Hong Kong	7	University of Hong Kong 96
-Macau	2	University of Macao 401-500
<b>South Africa</b>	9	University of Cape Town 201-300

(Source of data: ARWU, 2023).

The data presented in Table 7 testify the existence of a pocket of excellence. While in all the BRICS countries there are universities which made it to the top echelons of universities in the world, these countries are rather sparsely represented in the top 1000 universities in the world, given the demographic strength of the BRICS countries, and the size of their education effort (in terms of enrolments).

Inequalities in education are rife in the BRICS countries but efforts to equalise education are being taken and they start to be visible on the international scholarly radar screen. In Comparative and International Education, China is seen as the epitome of rural-urban inequality in education, with urban-rural residence being the main axis of social stratification. (see Hao *et al.*, 2014). South Africa has long had a reputation of a country with huge racial inequalities, including those in education; these inequalities persist and education reform strategies aim to erase racial inequalities in education (see Wolhuter, 2021).

## Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, the humanity selected education as a vehicle to meet the challenges of the future. The belief in education, which has been gaining ground since the mid-twentieth century, has given rise to a massive education expansion project covering all parts of the world. The track record of this expansion, in terms of bringing quality education to all on an equal basis, as well as meeting the expectations of society has been far from unqualified success. Furthermore, the shortcomings of this global education expansion project have been aggravated and accentuated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. However, this less than perfect

track record of education cannot not be ignored, as there is no known alternative that could help to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions in the conventional mode of providing education and, at the same time, created opportunities to reconstruct the system and especially to promote technology enhanced education. To grasp the opportunities and attain these goals, every aspect of national education projects and the societal contextual ecology needs to be thoroughly factored in, as failure to do so may result in wasting resources on failed reforms. While it has been widely recognised that the pandemic catalysed the movement towards harnessing technology for education, the adverse effects of the pandemic in terms of enhanced working demands and the risk of burnout of teachers, academic staff and others working in education, had been overlooked by those mapping a post-pandemic research agenda (Oleksiyenko, Blanco, Hayhoe, Jackson, Lee, Metcalfe, Sivasubramanian and Zha, 2020). In this regard research into the BRICS education processes can be trailblazing. It should be emphasized that education models developed within the contextual ecology of the Global North, will hardly be suitable for the Global South. In this regard, the BRICS countries as the vanguard of the Global South in the post-pandemic world could become a laboratory for the designing models of education best-suited for Global South countries. This paper has shown that the BRICS countries have had significant achievements and also problems that beset education in both the Global South and the Global North. The registration of the BRICS universities on the Global Rankings is evidence of that. The BRICS countries are an important part of the world and there is an urgent need to carry out comparative study of their activities that aim at harnessing contemporary technology to promote equitable quality education for all and using education to boost economic development of the BRICS countries and the rest of the Global South. Studies on ways of financing education and equalizing access to it would be very useful.

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