

The blended approach as an avenue for equity amid covid-19 and future emergencies: Refining pedagogical approaches in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Education systems around the world have been faced with unprecedented challenges as the delivery of education massively shifted to online learning solutions due to the sudden and widespread closure of schools following the outbreak of covid-19 in December 2019. Using Bourdieu's lens, this qualitative case study employed observations and WhatsApp discussions to analyse the university student's narratives on the rise of social and cultural reproduction in HE; and the prospects of the blended approach as an avenue for equity amid covid-19 and future emergencies. Ten students, drawn from one purposively selected Zimbabwean university, residing in diverse geographical areas and from different socio-economic backgrounds participated in the study. Findings submit that while the online teaching presents itself as a reasonable alternative in the middle of covid-19 pandemic and beyond, this reinforces the social position of the elite while the poor anchors the base. The study implores the governments of developing countries through their Education Departments to refine pedagogical approaches in higher education by using the blended approaches to level the learning terrain dominated by the rich. The rationale for this article is thus to contribute towards the need for consistent equality of opportunities in HE considering the impact of covid-19 and possible futuristic emergencies.

KEYWORDS

blended approach; equity; covid-19; higher education; social-cultural reproduction

1. Introduction

This study was motivated by the need to recover from the setback, and adversity set by covid-19 in higher education institutions in the context of equalities of opportunities. Since the impact of the pandemic on higher education (HE) was abrupt, and in the majority of cases, there was no contingency plan other than to attempt to continue classes online, it was important to conceptualize a way out of this crisis, ensuring inclusion and equity in institutions of higher learning (Maule-ffinich et al., 2020). This is important, to address what Jansen (2011, pp. 10-11) acknowledges, and warns of the crisis of having two generations in a sea of inequality in Africa wherein "a small, elite, well-functioning system for the rich classes, and a massive, dysfunctional, impoverished system for the majority of poor children."



Very little, in the context of inequality, is established regarding the effects, and efficacy of the covid-19-induced online teaching, and the capacity to successfully learn digitally. Wilson (2020) affirms that digital exclusion has thickened the wall of division between the children of the rich, and the poor, in the society in general, and education in particular. This unjustifiable situation has caused those in already susceptible situations –the poor, a regrettable setback than they were before the covid-19 pandemic.

With the socio-economic divide already extant in societies, the impact of the pandemic aggravates the rich, and the poor dichotomy, the privileged and the less privileged, especially so in HE (United Nations, 2020; Wilson, 2020). Covid-19 has underlined the extent to which students in HE suffer together as one, but also how the experience of a global pandemic has been very different, and unequal. This has had a woeful impact on the already marginalised, and dispossessed students, further evidencing those institutions of higher education that they are not equal in their ability to provide for, and protect, their students from exclusion. Therefore, until normalcy returns to the education sector, which, however, cannot in the immediate future, online teaching alone, as a means to address future emergencies may entrench, and perpetuate the interests of the elite and disadvantage the poor. Global scholarship is scant, and silent, on issues to do with the upsurge of social-cultural reproduction in HE during covid-19, and other future emergencies. This study provides insightful contributions in this unexplored territory given that nobody in the education sector has been left untouched by the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, and that great change has been forced upon us all.

Considering that covid-19 is unlikely to be the last large-scale school disruption, it is imperative to build a more resilient education ecosystem based on combination of the online teaching, and face-to-face interaction, because the blended approach provides learners with an adequate number of benefits, and among them, “accessibility, pedagogical effectiveness, and course interaction” (Johnson, 2002 p.5). Employment of the blended approach is thus tempting. As noted by Serrate-González et al. (2021) the circumstances currently affecting HE worldwide due to the covid-19 pandemic have demanded teaching staff to necessarily, and forcibly, implement methodologies that permit combining learning ambits. This is because the roles of students, and lecturers during covid-19, and beyond, changed at a very short notice; evolving into a terrain that threatens equity issues in education.

This article is a sociological analysis of the Zimbabwean university student’s narratives on the rise of social and cultural reproduction in HE; and the prospects of the blended approach as an avenue for equity amid covid-19, and future emergencies. The research was designed to take up Bowden’s (2021) call for the need for HE institutions to understand how student success can be supported in the wake of covid-19, and the sudden shift by institutions to emergency online teaching. As noted by Yosso (2005) that institutions of Higher Learning can begin to address institutional inequities, and disrupt patterns of cultural reproduction by being more responsive to the valuable forms of capital as possessed by diverse students.

2. Social and Cultural Reproduction

While social reproduction is a term coined by Bowles and Gintis (1976) to mean the various ways that are used to maintain the social relations of production in the world of work, Bourdieu (1974) is associated with the term cultural reproduction. This is a concept which refers to the various ways through which the cultures of the *haves* are maintained or reproduced by the

education system due to the possession of cultural capital.

In the context of this study, the covid-19 induced online teaching, presents challenges to efforts directed towards flattening social stratification in societies leading to the reproduction, and maintenance of social and cultural reproduction which is founded on the people's earlier possession of cultural capital. As argued by UNESCO (2013, p. 14) inequalities stemming from the advances in technology despite several interventions made, continue to persist, and widen in many cases of which this must be seen in the context of "persistent and considerable disparities between the rich and poor, both within and among countries, and about the adverse implications of these disparities for the promotion of human development throughout the world." Without considered and targeted interventions, the online models being used during the covid-19 in poor African states may serve to exacerbate existing inequalities. Even in many affluent countries, disadvantaged students may not have reliable access to devices and connectivity, making them less able to participate in online education than their peers (Rigall, 2020).

Evidence of unequal access to internet connectivity during covid-19 in institutions of Higher Learning is evident from recent researches (Bernadi, 2020; Kgari-Masondo & Chimbunde, 2021). Singh's (2014, p. 6) confirms that "the difference between the poor man's schooling, and the rich man's schooling is becoming starker with each passing year", despite the claim made by Scheidel (2017), the economic historian, who argues that lethal pandemics can revolutionarily transform society, resulting in the flattening of economic inequality. Critics like Bernardi (2020), who after experiencing the covid-19 pandemic, question this hypothesis, and argue that the covid-19 pandemic outbreak has negative implications for equality. This is because socio-economic status has created a societal phenomenon where those with greater economic resources have access to more opportunities than those of lesser financial means (Herbert, 2018). Those who enjoy these opportunities are stratified and placed on the top layer of society because the chances they get permit them to venture into the field of work with exceptional ease, thereby improving their socio-economic status and continuing to enjoy the stratification benefits unabated. This paper argues that social stratification has been there prior to the outbreak of covid-19 but had been entrenched by it.

Indeed, while the world was not completely on track to achieve equity, in HE, because the "No one is left behind" philosophy is still a pending agenda, this covid19 pandemic has particularly exacerbated disparities worldwide, with vulnerable students, who are usually more at risk of being discriminated against, are at higher risk of being left behind. Bennel (2021) aptly argues that there is the rapid emergence of new social class relations which are closely related to key educational developments in many countries. As such, while pedagogies in HE has greatly evolved, new challenges have appeared too.

In line with the vision of education for all whose objective is of 'leaving no one behind', HE institution could envisage to renew its pedagogical approaches towards ending inequalities in accessing education by giving further momentum to reshape their infrastructures and teaching methodologies, in order to reflect the new challenges of the 21st century. As suggested by Yosso (2005) that institutions of Higher Learning can begin to address institutional inequities and disrupt patterns of cultural reproduction by being more responsive to the valuable forms of capital possessed by diverse students, families, and communities. Thus, an expanded understanding of student and community assets can be leveraged to promote student success while providing more

equitable learning opportunities. Providing such opportunities demand reconfiguration of the Higher Education teaching approaches that support inequitable access to rigorous, and engaging instruction, as well as the norms, assumptions, and expectations that propagate their use. One such approach is the employment of the blended approach during COVID-19 and other contexts of similar nature like natural disasters and forced displacements.

3. The blended approach

The blended approach in HE had been on the cards in line with the Fourth Industrial Revolution which requires the use of technology in the teaching and learning not only during pandemics like covid-19 but rather in line with the demands of the digital society in which the world is now engaged. Serrate-González et al. (2021) define blended approach as a teaching-learning model that includes face-to-face classes and e-learning, reinforcing the advantages they both provide.

The approach involves the incorporation or combination of the conventional face-to-face teaching with online learning. Daskan and Yildiz (2020) explain that it is the integration of online with face-to-face instruction in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and not just a combination (addition) of online with face-to-face but a trade-off (replacement) of face to-face time with online activity (or vice versa).

As explained by Muhuro and Kange'the (2021) it entails thoughtful integration of face-to-face teaching in tandem with online modalities, such as, radio and web-based technologies or mobile learning, with the strength of each mode mutually and reciprocally reinforcing one another. Most significantly, blending pedagogical approaches offers the opportunity to invigorate the curriculum, introduce new pedagogies, personalise learning, and allow more flexibility for lecturers, and students in course delivery (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

4. Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory informed this study. According to Bourdieu (1986) individuals enter the educational system with different legacies of cultural capital and cultural know how, based on their social background. These initial differences in cultural capital are not equalised over the educational career, and beyond, but rather are exacerbated. From his analysis of society, Bourdieu defines capital as "accumulated, human labor which can potentially produce different forms of profit" (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 241).

It can be viewed as accumulated history, transferred through time in either objectified, that is, material form or embodied in a person (Svendsen, 2001). Further scrutiny and refinements of the theory of capital reflects that Bourdieu identified four forms of capital that accounts for differences that exist among individuals and groups. These are cultural, economic, social and symbolic (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013), and possession of these forms of capital determines an individual or group's position in society and defines the probabilities of success of that individual or a group. According to Bourdieu (1986) these forms of capital are either inherited or acquired and their possession is passed on from one generation to the next. In this way, a vicious cycle occurs in which the "disadvantaged remain cocooned in their plight" (Giddens & Sutton, 2013 p. 543).

Cultural capital refers to those accumulated experiences which students bring from home to school which assist them to decode educational mysteries (Gwirayi, 2010). These manifests in different forms, namely, material objects such as textbooks, laptops and smartphones; activities such as visiting cinema, art

galleries, and places of historical interests; and dispositions, attitudes and behaviours which are commensurate with the demands of education. According to Bourdieu's theory, children from middle class families are advantaged in gaining educational credentials due to their possession of cultural capital. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural reproduction posits that the educational system awards and advantages students who possess these forms of cultural capital. In this way, patterns of social capital might match with patterns of cultural capital in schools and then later in life will similarly predict privileged access to opportunities of jobs.

Income and wealth in such forms as shares, land or property, and income, from employment becomes economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, students bring their social-class backgrounds into school with them. This suggests that the form of capital can be inherited by children from parents. Given the challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic, some university students inherited wealth from their families, and hence, were better prepared for schooling using online platforms than others. In that view, students from affluent groups enjoyed the use of well-advanced Information Communication Technology (ICT) gadgets while their counterparts from non-affluent groups had redundant and problematic tools.

Social capital as advanced by Bourdieu connotes social connections in the form of acquaintances, friends, relatives, including a support network of people on whom the individual can rely in need and that are in fact in a position to offer material and other assistance of real benefit (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Closely related to social capital is symbolic capital which refers to status (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Whenever students from different regions and ethnic groups converge, there is a natural tendency to compete for respect and honour. The fundamental premise in Bourdieu's capital theory is that students from the rich families arrive at school with resources, knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are in correspondence with the dominant culture and thus are considered more valuable within the educational setting (Wilson & Urick, 2021) which in turn will determine the life chances of the individuals in later life.

I made use of the theory by Bourdieu to assess the rise of social and cultural reproduction in one Zimbabwean university considering that the students attending the university were from different social classes and possessed different forms of capital. According to Bourdieu the major function of the education system is to maintain and legitimate a class-divided society. In his analysis, schools are middle-class institutions run by and for the middle class. With this in mind, Bourdieu's lens shed light on the intricate of the impediments which instigated social stratification during covid-19, and beyond. It also became handy in discerning how universities could be empowered to avert the creation of social classes based on the socio-economic status.

5. Methodology

Using Bourdieu's lens, the study used the university students' experiences to reconnoitre the rise of social and cultural reproduction in HE and establish the feasibility of the blended approach as an avenue for equity in HE amid covid-19 and future emergencies. The case study deeply engrained in the qualitative approach made use of observations of the student's work and their reaction time to attend to task to generate data on how they were managing the learning activities considering the effects of covid-19 and the ecological context of their home backgrounds.

The study was framed from the qualitative approach to obtain a deep and comprehensive description of the students' experiences, grounded on the argument

that the major features of it are meanings and the settings (Yin, 2015). The students' views, and their experiences, could not be subjected to numerical analysis hence the appropriateness of the qualitative approach in the current study.

The study was set to find meaning in text (Creswell & Poth, 2017); hence, it searched for an understanding of their experiences. I adopted an interpretive case study where I borrowed from Yin (2015) who regards a case study as being endowed with multiplicity of perspectives which are entrenched in a particular context and also from Cohen, et al., (2011 p. 289) who view it as a "unique example of actual people in genuine locations."

Accordingly, I sought to get different views from different students from different geographical locations of Zimbabwe. One Zimbabwean university was selected as the case. The university was chosen basing on the fact that it is one of the emerging universities whose vision was to ensure education for all in university was realised by enrolling students with diverse backgrounds from all corners of the country. I made use of observations of students' work and a WhatsApp platform - an online platform to generate data.

I made observations of the students' work and how they managed time and tasks given. Thereafter, I engaged them on a WhatsApp platform because it was the only way I could solicit data given the lockdown restrictions imposed by the government of Zimbabwe to curb the spread of covid-19. The tenacity of the online discussion was to establish and reconnoitre students' lived experiences as students from different ecological settings. I provided the online prompts which were intentionally designed to allow open-endedness in terms of answers. As such, the study interrogated the context in which the lectures were conducted using observations and discussions to discern how covid-19 impacted on equality with regard to the provision of education materials.

Ten students participated in this study. I purposively selected a single class of ten students, for convenience, from one university endowed with all traits that showed the shadings of students in Zimbabwean universities. That allowed findings to be juxtaposed to other analogous universities in identical positions in Africa. The ten students were selected by virtue of the fact that they were in the same class undertaking a module on Education and Social Change and that they came from different geographical areas and possessed different forms of capital. The choice of the class was premised on the context that the course they were doing was related to the spheres of social change and how these spheres were interrelated. Covid-19 provided a perfect example of how social change could affect education. In addition, the students came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and were Africans trying to shake the constraints of inequalities.

Ethical clearance was sought from the university before selecting participants. Participants completed consent forms to show their willingness to take part in the study. Issues of privacy and confidentiality were explained to the students. For concealment of identities, pseudonyms were used and recording of their responses as text were also sought. The key issues which emerged from the discussion, and observations in line with the focus of the study were then analysed thematically. The data generated from observations, and discussions, were thus recorded, sieved and categorised into themes before analysis.

6. Findings and Discussion

Data generated through the WhatsApp discussions and the observations made on the way students worked, and the time they took to attend to tasks given were analysed in line with the themes that emerged from the study as per the locus of

the research. As such, I reduced the amount of data by sieving the most relevant data and categorising related and significant patterns concerning the students' experiences on their online learning of their work during COVID-19, and how that relates to the emergence of social and cultural reproduction in HE.

Thus, the data were recorded, read several times, reduced to recurring themes and then presented and analysed thematically. The main themes are shown in Table 1.1 below

Theme	subthemes
1. Escalation of Cultural Capital Reproduction	1.1 Online approach advantages students from the rich. 1.2 The rich maintain the status quo.
2 Rise of Social Capital Reproduction	2.1: The online teaching disconnects the poor from the rich. 2.2 The online learning was an avenue to connect with old acquaintances.
3. The blended approach as an avenue for equity	3. Usage of face-to-face strategies to compliment the online learning.

Table 1.1 showing themes and subthemes

6.1 Escalation of cultural capital reproduction

From the discussions on WhatsApp and observations, the study revealed that while the online was an option during the covid-19 pandemic, it presented insurmountable challenges of equity as reflected in the differentiated access to internet connectivity and the cost of internet data bundles. As narrated by Student A that:

I appreciate the university' effort to introduce online teaching and learning during this pandemic. However, rather than making all students access the same content, assignments and related materials, I feel the online approach is skewed towards those who can access the internet and afford the data bundles. This is because when online learning was introduced, I was in an area where mobile network connectivity was a challenge. It adversely affected me in joining the Google class platform. More so, with poor network connectivity, it is taxing to do research for my assignments yet I am expected to meet deadlines for submission just like anyone else who is better placed in terms of location and finance.

Student F also said:

The online learning is a blessing to those who have ICT gadgets during this pandemic. I have no laptop except for an old and unreliable smart phone that I use during this period. Remember a good laptop and a modern phone are a preserve for the affluent. I wish the pandemic can be contained anytime soon. If it continues, then learning at university will be for the rich who possess the electronic resources. Then the concept of leaving no one behind in education is a myth.

Observations on student responses on tasks given also revealed that while some students were quick to attend to the tasks, others took over a week just to join the online class which was created for them. The time one took to join the google classroom was an indicator of one's social class and the ecological location.

The sentiments by the two students above together with the observations made, confirm several studies (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Kgari-Masondo & Chimbunde, 2021) which crisply pointed that lack of internet connections was a hurdle encountered by the poor in learning using the online platform particularly for those, living in rural setup and in marginalized communities. This view supports Bourdieu's capital theory which argues that those who are deprived of both cultural

and economic capital were disadvantageded in schools whereas the affluent enjoyed because of what they inherited from parents. Students who found themselves on the negative side of the ledger were impacted by inequities already present in the system. In this case, covid-19 has not created new problems but highlighted longstanding ones (Mutch, 2021). This suggests that online learning reinforced the social classes that is evident in any society and maintains the status quo. This is because the online learning had resulted in completely different learning experiences for students in one university and their future uptake of work will depend on that differentiated education (Kgari-Masondo & Chimbunde, 2021).

The study agrees with Rigall's (2020) observation that in other regions of the world, high-educated parents have better access to internet and laptops, tablets, and so on, as well as the knowledge and non-cognitive skills to support their children's home schooling. They also have the economic resources to hire tutors and purchase the best online options for course materials. The observations and discussions support the cultural reproduction perspective by demonstrating that students who have more access to normative education-based resources outside of school and academically aligned to resources tend to report more opportunities for jobs later in their lives (Wilson & Urlick, 2021).

Drawing from observations and WhatsApp discussions, university students who did not have access to high speed or reliable internet services at home were thus struggling with online learning. Such a struggle driven by Covid-19 could exacerbate their fragile condition and force them to drop out, perpetuating a situation of exclusion as a result of the inequity to access of educational materials which were delivered online. Such an inequality dents the 'No one should be left behind' philosophy in terms of knowledge construction and consumption. I agree with Maule-ffinck et al., (2020) that poor households often lack the equipment and connectivity that richer households take for granted, compounding the problem. Online pedagogies were thus viable when mobile network providers improve coverage and connectivity across the nation but low connectivity in households in low- and middle-income countries remained a challenge. As such, university students from such poor families could leave university not competent enough to compete globally. Seen this way, social and cultural reproduction is a ghost that will continue to haunt the poor in the social strata.

In consequence, covid-19 had exposed the weaknesses of some developing countries like Zimbabwe in addressing issues of equity in terms of how knowledge is distributed in universities. The pandemic served as a warning that the scales had been tipped too far in the favour of a single class and had produced scarcity as a means to empower some, while disempowering others. As put by Bennel (2021) that there will be new social class, new forms of educational competitions – intensifying competitions for the formal sector jobs. This paper is not asking for abandonment of technology driven pedagogy but rather implores the developing nations to at least provide access to internet, tablets and data bundles to even the disparities which Covid-19 had exposed and other future emergencies will show.

6.2 Rise of social capital reproduction

Observations and WhatsApp discussions indicated that the online teaching and learning induced by covid-19 led to the rise of social capital reproduction since it left students both poorly socialised and connected. Unlike Students B and E who made no mention of problems Student C reported that:

Online learning unleashed a myriad of challenges to me since I am used to face to face

interaction with my colleagues and lecturers. Since the introduction of online learning, the lecturers' non-verbal cues and gestures which used to give us hints on whether the topics under discussion are important or not are no more. The online teaching presents a shock with regards to interaction with the lecturers online whom I am not familiar with. There is that shock of interfacing with a lecturer I am not familiar with them in terms of what they dis/like. As a student I cannot engage in group projects with others. The help we used to share among ourselves is immediately cut off. My friends, lecturers and relatives are not reachable because of the lockdown and I cannot get any help from them because I am poorly connected to them.

While some students expressed discomfort with online learning, Student G had this to say:

I have no challenges with regards to getting information on what I am learning at university. Instead, the online learning has opened more opportunities for me to connect with my former lecturers, old friends from high school, parents and even relatives who all show empathy and willingness to assist me in learning online. So COVID-19 is a blessing in disguise for it rejuvenates my old acquaintances for the advancement of my knowledge at university.

The above shows that not all students had difficulties like lack of interaction with the lecturers in the absence of traditional classroom socialisation. Only those who had poor social networks could not enjoy the online learning. However, lack of on-campus socialisation implies that students could not socialise, and carry out group activities, in distance learning mode. Consistent with this finding was Adnan and

Anwar's (2020 p. 46) observation that lack of proper interaction with instructors is another "major concern associated with online learning." Bourdieu's lens reflects that the absence of social capital in the form of acquaintances, and support network led the students not to get emotional support and other academic assistance from friends and tutors. I also agree with Bao (2020) that in traditional in-class teaching, body language, facial expressions, and teachers' voice are all important teaching tools. These assisted in communicating messages to students. Owing to the absence of body language, students' anxiety which rose during the online teaching induced by covid-19 were to be relieved in various ways to ensure that they could actively and effectively engage in learning (Bao, 2020).

6.3 The blended approach as an avenue for equity

It emerged from observations, and WhatsApp discussions, that overnight decisions on online learning was difficult to embrace without the combination of the new, and the old approaches. Student H had this to say:

The online teaching works well for the rich. We from poor backgrounds are more comfortable with the face-to-face lectures we are familiar with. 2 to 3 days of face-to-face interactions with lecturers where social distance can be maintained is also possible considering that the sizes of universities classes are small. Otherwise, the rich are at an advantage, and university education then can be seen as a privilege of the upper class. To mitigate that inequality, there is need to introduce a regulated face-to-face interaction with lecturers which can then reinforce what could have been learnt using the online modes such as WhatsApp lessons, radio-based lessons and virtual classrooms. This can flatten inequalities in universities, and the society.

The significance of this finding was that there was a stronger need for academic institutions to rethink, and reclaim, use of face-to-face strategies to compliment the online learning. This suggests the use of the blended approach wherein HE institutions need to be more responsive to the students and communities that they serve. This means that there is need to revert to some old pedagogy which was in use years before covid-19. From the verbatim of the student, who suggested the

combination of online teaching and traditional methods of face-to-face, it was evident that use of online teaching remained the preserve of the affluent unless serious interventions are formulated, and embraced. I agree with Yosso (2005) who challenges the traditional interpretations of cultural reproduction theory and argues for community cultural wealth as an alternative concept that reflects the assets, or capital, possessed by historically marginalised students, and communities.

Insights from Bourdieu's capital theory reveals that possession of the forms of capital determined the student's position in education, and defines the chances of success in accessing educational materials. This suggests that if covid-19, and the online teaching, continued without some balances and checks, then the underprivileged will remain confined in their poverty. Once redress fails, in this context, the rich could maintain and entrench their interests, and then, the poor could face striking exclusion of both the mind and their employable chances as they could not compete with the rich in the world of work after completing the uneven university education.

Considering the covid-19 induced online teaching, those advantaged by the high economic status before the pandemic enjoyed on the pretext of their cultural inheritance to do their university work, thereby positioning themselves in upper rungs of the society which confirms the cultural reproduction theory. Those historically advantaged by virtue of being rich continue to benefit from educational developments that arise due to emergencies. This was particularly so when we listen to the voices of the poor student in the educational activities during covid-19 period as emerged from the WhatsApp discussions and observations in this study.

In order to increase participation of the student from the poor, this article argues that there is need to look into these inequalities and formulate learning strategies where students enjoy access to HE without alienation. This can be done through the employment of the blended approach which takes into consideration both the context of the poor and rich. As explicitly explained by Rigall (2020) the digital divide remains a pressing issue, which will require significant attention to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, can benefit from emerging models for education provision. It has been reported that unequal access to online learning can lead to inequalities between socio-economic groups within society (Petrus, 2018).

The employment of the blended approach, as argued in this study, is guided by equitable approaches in favour of the marginalised, in particular, the students from poor families during pandemics and future emergencies. As opined by Muhuro and Kange'the (2021) that in cases of natural disasters such as storms, floods and cyclones, blended learning is the best option. This is so because blended learning is flexible, user-and-diversity-friendly (Castro, 2019). As such, blended learning has thus become important during the current outbreak of diseases such as covid-19 where face-to-face teaching is prohibited as a means to combat the spread of the disease. While online teaching per se relies on good internet connectivity, there are many opportunities during covid-19 which are context-driven like using controlled faced to face interactions that respect social distancing and offline technology, such as basic cell phones or radio in remote locations.

7. Recommendations

From the study, there are many gaps in the development of online teaching and learning during covid-19, and future emergencies, due to lack of equal access to internet and affordability of data bundles by students from different socio-economic statuses, especially for the students from poor families. It is, therefore, high time to

ensure the realisation of the right to education in all contexts. For equality of opportunities in HE, it is imperative for the developing countries together with their education departments to provide all enrolled students with internet access, tablets and subsidised data bundles. HE institutions can, in collaboration with the government, disburse low interest loans to students from poor families to bridge the lacuna between the poor and rich. Governments of developing countries need to take policy measures to effectively put an end to all kinds of exclusion and ensure equality of opportunities in education.

It was a finding of this study that online teaching on its own is not enough to cater for diverse students who are drawn from different social-class. There is a greater need for educational institutions to rethink and re-use the old face-to-face approaches to complement the online approach in the context of covid-19 and future emergencies. This blended approach will go a long way in abating the gap between the rich and the poor which is imminent in the face of covid-19 and other futuristic emergencies. The traditional face-to-face approach, however, must instigate the social distancing principles so as not to endanger the students from the risks of covid-19 pandemic, and other emergencies.

8. Conclusion

This study argued that the time to rethink, and reimagine, is now as the world attempts to regroup, and rebuild, what has been exacerbated by covid-19. Furthermore, forged by adversity, the global pandemic has forced us to look forward and prepare higher education for futuristic emergencies other than covid-19.

The paper demonstrated that while covid-19 had brought more harm than good in HE, it sent a clear statement that education was now propagating inequalities though unintentionally as students from the affluent are advantaged in accessing online education while the poor cannot afford the cost of online learning unless other strategies are employed to assist them.

An underlying premise of this study is that addressing the rise of social and cultural reproduction, and inequities, in HE calls for a shift in teaching approaches that challenge the mechanisms of cultural reproduction. The article confirms that HE during covid-19, and beyond, represents an arena for contestation between the *haves* and the *have-nots*. The poor students' experiences during covid-19 in HE reflects social stratification in the making since it continues to cast its shadow over education. As such, education through online pedagogy alone remains an enterprise which entrenches and perpetuates the interests of the rich rather than propagating equity in society.

The pandemic has also created questionable narratives and false dichotomies in pedagogical approaches used in HE to solve the myriad problems of equity that covid-19 has either caused or exacerbated. The study implores governments of developing nations and their education departments to redesign their pedagogical approaches and employ the blended approach as an alternative to create equal access to HE by all students from all walks of life. The paper further argued that the blended learning approach should be deliberately designed for inclusion by considering the differences in individual circumstances but without endangering the students.

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