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When the Streets Burn, the Classrooms Empty: The Educational Costs of Service Delivery Protests in South African Schools

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Abstract : *Service delivery protests have become a prominent feature of South Africa's socio-political landscape, particularly in townships and informal settlements where access to municipal services remains inadequate. Although these protests represent a form of civic engagement, they can also disrupt the functioning of schools and the continuity of education. This study examines the educational costs of service delivery protests, focusing on teacher absenteeism, learning disruptions, assessment delays, and institutional vulnerability. A desktop review approach was employed, drawing on peer-reviewed articles, government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports, and relevant media sources. The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Five interconnected themes emerged: mobility barriers, teacher absenteeism, assessment disruption, institutional vulnerability, and coping and resilience strategies. The study adopts the political economy of public services as its theoretical framework to explain how educational disruption is connected to governance deficits, accountability failures, and socioeconomic inequalities. Comparative evidence from Brazil, India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana provides an international perspective while highlighting the specific vulnerabilities of South African schools. The findings indicate that the effects of protests are particularly significant for marginalised learners who depend on walking or public transportation and have limited access to digital learning alternatives. The study highlights the need for school-level contingency planning, improved attendance management, flexible assessment arrangements, expanded access to digital learning, and stronger coordination between municipal and educational authorities. It concludes that protecting the right to education requires both institutional resilience and systemic governance reforms that address the structural conditions underlying recurring service delivery protests.*

Keywords: ***Service Delivery Protests; Educational Disruption; Teacher Absenteeism; Institutional Vulnerability; Political Economy; South Africa.***

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major features of South Africa's democratic landscape has been service delivery protests. Such demonstrations have been most visible in urban townships and rural settlements, where residents continue to experience inadequate access to water, electricity, sanitation, and road maintenance. These protests are not merely spontaneous expressions of public dissatisfaction but are rooted in historical inequalities, governance failures, and struggles for citizenship rights. Service delivery protests, therefore, represent an important form of political participation through which marginalized communities demand accountability from government institutions, particularly when formal decision-making channels remain inaccessible (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2015). These conditions demonstrate that public service delivery problems extend beyond administrative concerns and have broader consequences for community welfare, including access to essential educational services.

Schools are particularly vulnerable to service delivery protests because their operations depend on predictable schedules, safe transportation, accessible infrastructure, and consistent teacher attendance. During periods of civic unrest, learners may experience difficulties reaching schools because of road blockades and transportation disruptions, while teachers may be unable to attend their workplaces. Consequently, learning activities may be interrupted, examinations postponed, and instructional time reduced. Mahaye et al. (2023) highlight the negative consequences of public protests for educational activities in South Africa. Such disruptions are particularly concerning for schools in disadvantaged communities, where limited resources and inadequate infrastructure reduce their capacity to maintain learning continuity. Unlike well-resourced schools, which may have access to alternative transportation and digital learning facilities, township and rural schools often have fewer institutional resources to respond to prolonged disruptions.

International studies also demonstrate that the relationship between civic protests and educational disruption is not limited to South Africa. Research from Brazil, India, and the Philippines illustrates how public demonstrations and social conflicts can affect educational access and learning continuity (Snider, 2017; Thapliyal, 2012; Piñgul, 2015). These international experiences provide a comparative perspective for understanding the vulnerability of educational institutions in contexts characterized by social inequality and governance

challenges. However, the specific consequences of service delivery protests for ordinary schools in South Africa require further examination, particularly regarding teacher absenteeism, learner mobility, assessment continuity, and institutional resilience.

Despite the growing body of research on service delivery protests in South Africa, previous studies have predominantly emphasized political participation, municipal governance, public accountability, and the causes of community unrest (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2015; Ngcamu, 2019). Comparatively, the educational consequences of these protests, particularly their effects on everyday school operations and the capacity of disadvantaged schools to sustain learning activities, have received less systematic attention. This creates a research gap concerning how governance failures and socio-economic inequalities translate into educational disruptions and institutional vulnerability.

To address this gap, the present study examines the educational costs of service delivery protests in South African schools through a desktop review of relevant scholarly publications, government reports, non-governmental organization documents, and other publicly available sources. Its novelty lies in connecting the political economy of public service delivery with educational continuity and school-level resilience. Rather than examining protests solely as political events, this study analyzes how their consequences affect educational access, teacher attendance, assessment processes, and institutional capacity. It also considers resilience strategies that may help schools maintain educational services during recurring periods of civic unrest.

The findings are expected to contribute to educational policy and practice by highlighting the importance of coordination between schools, communities, municipal authorities, and education departments. Ensuring the right to education in contexts of recurring protests requires not only school-level contingency planning but also broader governance reforms that address the structural inequalities underlying service delivery failures.

Research Aim

This study aims to investigate the educational costs of service delivery protests in South African schools by examining how governance deficits and socio-economic inequalities contribute to teacher absenteeism, disruptions to learning activities, assessment interruptions, and institutional vulnerability. It also seeks to

identify school-level and systemic resilience strategies for maintaining educational continuity during recurring civic unrest.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

a. How do service delivery protests disrupt schooling processes, particularly teacher attendance, learner mobility, and assessment continuity?
b. In what ways do governance and accountability failures increase the vulnerability of schools during recurring protest cycles?
c. What school-level and systemic resilience strategies can be developed to safeguard learning continuity in contexts of recurring civic unrest?

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The research employed a desktop review as its primary research design to examine the educational consequences of service delivery protests in ordinary schools in South Africa. This approach enabled the researchers to synthesize existing evidence from various publicly available sources without conducting direct fieldwork, which could present practical and ethical challenges in areas experiencing civic unrest (Mouton, 2001). The review focused on identifying, examining, and synthesizing relevant information concerning teacher absenteeism, learner mobility, assessment disruption, and institutional resilience. It also incorporated selected international studies to provide a comparative understanding of educational disruptions associated with civic unrest.

2.2 Data Collection and Source Selection

Data were collected from publicly available academic publications, government documents, non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, and relevant media sources. Academic literature was identified through [insert databases or academic search platforms actually used], while institutional reports and supplementary information were obtained from relevant organizational websites and credible media publications. The search covered publications from [insert starting year] to [insert final year].

The search process used combinations of keywords related to the research focus, including "service delivery protests," "educational disruption," "teacher absenteeism," "school closures," "learner mobility," "assessment disruption," "school resilience," and "South Africa." These keywords were combined to identify

sources addressing the relationship between public protests, governance challenges, and educational continuity.

Sources were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to service delivery protests, civic unrest, or educational disruption; (2) direct or contextual relevance to South African schools and comparable international settings; (3) availability of sufficient information to support thematic analysis; and (4) publication through identifiable academic or institutional sources. Sources were excluded when they lacked relevant information, provided insufficient methodological details, contained unverifiable information, or focused on contexts unrelated to the research objectives.

From the initial pool of identified materials, twelve sources were selected for in-depth analysis. They were chosen because they provided relevant evidence concerning protest dynamics, teacher absenteeism, educational access, and institutional resilience. The selection process involved examining titles and abstracts or executive summaries, assessing the relevance of the full documents, and determining their contribution to the research questions. The final twelve sources were then organized according to their relevance to the main analytical themes.

The review also acknowledged several methodological limitations, including the uneven availability of recent region-specific research, differences in research approaches across publications, and variations in the quality of institutional and media reports. To address these limitations, priority was given to sources with identifiable authorship, clear publication information, relevant evidence, and direct connections to the research focus.

2.3 Data Analysis

The collected information was analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach was selected because it enables the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns across different documentary sources.

The analysis followed six systematic phases. First, familiarization involved reading and reviewing the selected documents to understand their content and relevance. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying statements and information related to the educational consequences of service delivery protests. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure their consistency with the collected evidence and research

questions. Fifth, the themes were refined and clearly defined. Finally, the findings were organized and presented through an analytical narrative.

The analysis identified five main themes: mobility barriers, teacher absenteeism, assessment disruption, institutional vulnerability, and coping and resilience strategies. These themes were developed through an inductive coding process, allowing recurring patterns to emerge from the reviewed materials rather than imposing predetermined categories. The researchers also compared evidence across sources to identify similarities, differences, and contextual variations in the educational impacts of civic unrest.

Through this analytical process, the study examined how protests affect school operations, how teacher absenteeism contributes to instructional disruption (Bipath, Venketsamy, & Naidoo, 2019), and how schools respond to challenges in maintaining educational continuity. The thematic analysis also supported the interpretation of broader organizational and governance challenges associated with educational disruption (Ngcamu, 2019).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

As the study relied exclusively on secondary data and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, ethical considerations focused primarily on source credibility, accurate representation of information, and respect for intellectual property. Academic publications, government reports, NGO documents, and media sources were appropriately acknowledged to maintain academic integrity and prevent plagiarism.

The researchers also ensured that information concerning protest events was presented objectively and accurately, without exaggeration or misrepresentation. Only publicly accessible materials were considered, and no confidential personal information was collected or disclosed. The use of documentary sources also avoided the potential safety risks associated with direct observation in areas experiencing civic unrest. These considerations were consistent with the principles of responsible research and non-maleficence (Mouton, 2001).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the political economy of public services perspective (Vil Nkomo, 2018), which provides a critical understanding of how governance structures, resource allocation, and accountability influence public service delivery and educational institutions. From this perspective, service delivery protests are not isolated events but reflect underlying structural inequalities and

institutional failures. Inadequate municipal services, including water, sanitation, electricity, and road maintenance, can generate public dissatisfaction and collective demands for government accountability (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2015).

Schools located in service-deprived communities are particularly exposed to the consequences of these governance failures. Road blockades, public demonstrations, and safety concerns can restrict the movement of learners and teachers, interrupt classroom activities, and force schools to postpone examinations or temporarily suspend operations. These circumstances demonstrate the dependence of educational continuity on reliable public services and effective local governance (Mottiar & Bond, 2012; von Holdt, 2013).

The political economy perspective therefore provides an analytical foundation for understanding the relationship between municipal governance failures and educational vulnerability. It also highlights that protecting children's right to education requires more than school-level emergency responses. Effective protection depends on institutional accountability, equitable resource distribution, community participation, and coordination between education authorities and municipal governments.

By applying this perspective, the study connects the structural causes of service delivery protests with their consequences for school operations and institutional resilience. It further emphasizes that educational continuity should be understood not only as a pedagogical concern but also as an issue of public governance, social equity, and institutional capacity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The findings indicate that service delivery protests disrupt the daily functioning of ordinary schools in South Africa through several interconnected mechanisms. The analysis of the selected sources identified five main themes: mobility barriers and access to schooling, teacher absenteeism and instructional continuity, assessment disruption and learner progression, institutional vulnerability, and coping and resilience strategies**.** These themes demonstrate that educational disruption is not limited to temporary school closures. Rather, protests can affect attendance, instructional time, assessment schedules, and the capacity of schools to maintain educational services. The extent of disruption varies according to schools' geographical location, available resources, institutional capacity, and relationships with surrounding communities.

3.1. Protest Dynamics and Governance Deficits

The reviewed sources indicate that service delivery protests are associated with broader governance challenges, including inadequate public services and limited accountability. Schools located in townships and informal settlements are particularly exposed because these communities frequently experience service delivery grievances. Previous research identifies protest activity as an indicator of tensions surrounding municipal service provision and accountability (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2015). Consequently, disruptions to schooling should be understood within the wider context of local governance rather than as isolated educational incidents. This perspective is consistent with political economy approaches that connect the quality of public services with the conditions under which educational institutions operate (von Holdt, 2013; Tapscott, 2017).

Comparative studies also describe educational disruptions associated with community unrest in other countries. In Nigeria, protest-related violence has reportedly damaged educational infrastructure and interrupted classroom activities, with school closures implemented in some urban areas for safety reasons (Inusa, Orji, & Ibrahim, 2024). In Kenya, community protests have also been associated with school closures and interruptions to learning, particularly in areas where learners have limited access to alternative educational facilities (Matiangi, 2025). These cases suggest that the effects of civic unrest on education may extend beyond the immediate protest location, although the scale and duration of disruption depend on local conditions and institutional responses.

3.2. Mobility Barriers and Access to Schooling

Mobility barriers emerge as one of the most immediate mechanisms through which protests disrupt access to education. Road blockages, transport interruptions, and safety concerns can prevent learners and teachers from reaching school, particularly those who depend on walking or public transportation. Spaull (2013) highlights the importance of instructional time for learning outcomes, indicating that interruptions to school attendance may have consequences beyond the days on which protests occur. Schools in disadvantaged communities may experience greater difficulties in maintaining attendance because learners and teachers often have fewer transport alternatives. This concern is also reflected in discussions of educational access and inequality in South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2019; Human Sciences Research Council, 2025).

Comparative evidence illustrates similar relationships between mobility and educational continuity. Studies concerning water-related protests in Accra describe how disruptions to transport routes can restrict students' access to educational institutions (Arthur, 2018; Buabeng & Amo Darko, 2024). Research from India also discusses the difficulties faced by rural learners who depend on road access and long-distance travel to attend school (Hazary, 2012; Thapliyal, 2012; Godara, 2025). Taken together, these findings identify mobility as an important condition for educational continuity. When access routes become unsafe or unavailable, schools may be unable to maintain normal attendance and instructional activities.

3.3. Teacher Absenteeism and Instructional Continuity

Teacher absenteeism represents another mechanism that can intensify educational disruption during periods of community unrest. Safety concerns, transport interruptions, and uncertainty surrounding school operations may prevent teachers from attending school. Previous research has associated teacher absenteeism with reduced instructional time and difficulties in maintaining learning continuity (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Where teachers cannot attend, schools may experience interrupted lesson schedules, curriculum backlogs, and reduced opportunities for revision and additional learning support. These consequences may be more difficult to address in schools with limited staffing and fewer resources for reorganising instructional activities (Spaull, 2013; Department of Basic Education, 2019).

The reviewed comparative studies also indicate that teacher attendance is an important factor in maintaining instructional stability during periods of unrest. Snider (2017) discusses challenges associated with teacher attendance in urban communities affected by civic disturbances in Brazil. Similarly, Piñgul (2015) describes educational difficulties associated with teacher absenteeism during community protests in the Philippines. These cases reinforce the importance of teacher availability in sustaining classroom instruction. However, absenteeism should not automatically be interpreted as unauthorised absence, since safety risks and transport disruptions may provide legitimate reasons for teachers' inability to attend school**.** Distinguishing between these circumstances is important when evaluating institutional responses to protest-related disruption.

3.4. Assessment Disruption and Learner Progression

The findings further indicate that protests can interfere with assessment schedules and learners' academic progression. School closures and interruptions

to normal school activities may require examinations to be postponed or rescheduled. Such changes can reduce available revision time, create scheduling difficulties, and increase uncertainty for learners and teachers (Booysen, 2015). The consequences may be particularly serious for disadvantaged learners who have limited access to additional learning support or alternative educational facilities. Repeated interruptions may also affect learners' motivation and confidence when assessment arrangements become unpredictable.

Evidence from Kenya and Nigeria illustrates how unrest can affect assessment and academic schedules. Studies concerning post-election and service delivery protests in Kenya describe disruptions to educational activities, including examination-related arrangements (Ngina, 2024; Simiyu, 2024). In Nigeria, research has also discussed the effects of community protests on university examination schedules and the organisation of academic activities (Inusa, Orji, & Bello, 2024; Akari, 2025). These findings suggest that assessment disruption is not merely an administrative inconvenience. It can affect the continuity of learning, the organisation of academic progression, and learners' confidence in the reliability of school arrangements.

3.5. Institutional Vulnerability

Institutional vulnerability influences the extent to which schools can withstand and recover from protest-related disruption. Schools with limited staffing, inadequate facilities, and insufficient organisational resources may have fewer options for maintaining educational activities during periods of unrest. A lack of contingency arrangements, alternative learning spaces, and adequate supervision can prolong interruptions and make recovery more difficult. These challenges are consistent with research highlighting the unequal institutional conditions experienced by schools serving disadvantaged communities (Vandeyar & Swart, 2019).

The comparative literature also suggests that institutional capacity is unevenly distributed. In India, differences in access to digital learning and educational resources may influence the ability of private and rural government schools to respond to disruptions (Thapliyal, 2012; Srivastava, 2007). Research on Brazil similarly describes differences in the resources available to schools in wealthier communities and those located in marginalised urban areas (Snider, 2017). These comparisons indicate that resilience is not equally available across educational institutions. Schools with stronger infrastructure and greater organisational capacity

may be better positioned to adapt, whereas under-resourced schools may experience longer interruptions and fewer opportunities to compensate for lost learning time.

3.6. Coping and Resilience Strategies

The reviewed sources identify several responses that schools and communities may use to manage educational disruption. These include adjusting school timetables, rescheduling assessments, organising additional learning sessions, coordinating safe transport, and mobilising support from parents and community organisations. However, the availability and effectiveness of these strategies depend on the resources, leadership, and community relationships that schools can mobilise. In many cases, responses are implemented after disruptions have occurred rather than through established preventive arrangements.

Community relationships also appear to contribute to schools' capacity to recover from unrest. Schools that maintain communication and cooperation with parents, local organisations, and municipal authorities may be better positioned to obtain information, coordinate safety measures, and resume activities. Evidence from the Vuwani protests in South Africa highlights the role of community relationships in the reopening and recovery of affected schools (Netshitangani, 2018). Research from Ghana and Nigeria also points to the importance of trust and cooperation in responding to educational disruption (Arthur, 2018; Inusa, Orji, & Bello, 2024). These findings suggest that resilience involves not only material resources but also the quality of relationships and coordination among schools, families, communities, and public authorities.

DISCUSSION

3.1. Educational Disruption as a Governance and Public Service Issue

The findings demonstrate that the educational consequences of service delivery protests are closely connected to the broader political economy of public services in South Africa. The disruption of schooling is not simply a consequence of temporary disorder; it reflects the dependence of educational institutions on public infrastructure, transport accessibility, community safety, and effective local governance. When these services become unreliable, schools may struggle to maintain regular attendance and instructional activities. This interpretation supports the view that educational continuity is influenced by governance arrangements beyond the immediate authority of individual schools (von Holdt, 2013; Tapscott, 2017).

The relationship between protest activity and educational disruption also highlights the unequal distribution of public service failures. Schools in disadvantaged communities may face overlapping challenges involving inadequate infrastructure, limited transport alternatives, and fewer institutional resources. Consequently, protests can intensify existing educational inequalities because schools that already operate under constrained conditions have less capacity to absorb additional disruption. The comparative evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, India, Brazil, Ghana, and the Philippines provides further context for understanding how civic unrest can affect educational access and institutional operations. Nevertheless, these cases should be interpreted as contextual comparisons rather than evidence that protest dynamics are identical across countries.

3.2. Interconnected Effects on Educational Continuity

The five themes are interconnected and should not be considered as separate consequences. Mobility barriers can prevent learners and teachers from reaching school, while teacher absenteeism can further reduce the instructional time available to those who are able to attend. When these interruptions continue, schools may need to reorganise lesson schedules and assessment activities, potentially affecting learners' academic progression. The effects may be more pronounced in institutions with limited staffing, infrastructure, and administrative capacity.

Assessment disruption and institutional vulnerability can also reinforce one another. Schools with established contingency arrangements may be able to reschedule examinations and provide additional learning support, whereas schools with fewer resources may struggle to compensate for lost instructional time. This relationship indicates that the educational costs of protests are shaped not only by the duration of disruption but also by the capacity of schools to respond and recover. Thus, educational resilience should be understood as an institutional and community-based capacity rather than simply the ability to reopen after a protest.

3.3. Institutional and Community-Based Resilience

The findings suggest that school resilience depends on the interaction between institutional leadership, available resources, and community cooperation. School-level responses, such as flexible timetables, alternative learning arrangements, and additional instructional sessions, may help reduce the effects of temporary closures. However, these measures cannot fully address disruptions caused by unsafe roads, damaged infrastructure, or prolonged failures in public

service provision. Effective responses therefore require coordination between school management, education authorities, municipalities, parents, and community organisations.

Community participation is particularly important because local networks can support communication, identify safety concerns, and help schools determine when educational activities can resume. The experience of Vuwani, as discussed by Netshitangani (2018) illustrates the potential importance of community relationships in school recovery. Nevertheless, community cooperation should complement rather than replace the responsibility of public authorities to ensure reliable services and safe conditions for education. Sustainable resilience requires both local capacity and institutional support.

3.4. Recommendations for Policy and Educational Practice

The findings have several implications for educational management and public policy. At the school level, school management teams should develop contingency plans that specify procedures for temporary closures, timetable adjustments, alternative learning arrangements, and the rescheduling of assessments. Attendance monitoring should also distinguish between unauthorised absence and absence caused by safety risks or transport disruption. This distinction would support more appropriate responses to teacher and learner attendance problems during periods of unrest.

At the district and provincial levels, education authorities should establish communication procedures with schools and local municipalities to provide timely information about safety conditions and possible disruptions. Assessment policies should allow reasonable flexibility when protests prevent schools from implementing scheduled examinations or other academic activities**.** Where feasible, schools should also strengthen access to digital learning resources. However, digital learning should not be treated as a universal solution because unequal access to devices, connectivity, and electricity may reproduce existing educational inequalities.

At the local governance level, municipalities should strengthen communication with affected communities and improve accountability in the provision of essential public services. Education authorities and municipal administrations should develop coordinated response arrangements so that decisions about school safety, transport access, and the resumption of learning are informed by reliable local information. Ultimately, reducing the educational costs of service delivery protests

requires both school-level preparedness and broader improvements in public service delivery, governance, and accountability.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that service delivery protests disrupt the educational activities of ordinary schools in South Africa by reducing instructional time, interrupting assessment schedules, and exposing institutional vulnerabilities. These disruptions are not isolated incidents but are closely associated with broader governance challenges and socioeconomic inequalities. The findings identify four interconnected mechanisms through which protests affect education: restricted access to schools, teacher absenteeism, assessment delays, and limited institutional resilience. Together, these findings highlight the relationship between educational continuity and the reliability of public services within the communities where schools operate.

The study further indicates that protecting the right to education requires a combination of school-level preparedness and broader governance responses. At the institutional level, contingency planning, flexible learning and assessment arrangements, and stronger community engagement can help schools manage immediate disruptions. At the systemic level, improving public service delivery, municipal accountability, and coordination between education authorities and local communities is essential to addressing the conditions associated with recurring protests. Neither approach is sufficient in isolation; educational continuity depends on the interaction between institutional capacity and the wider governance environment.

Comparative evidence from Brazil, India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana places the South African experience within a broader international context of educational vulnerability during civic unrest. However, the South African case also reflects context-specific challenges, particularly the persistence of spatial inequalities rooted in apartheid-era patterns and the difficulties associated with local governance and service provision. These conditions may intensify the exposure of disadvantaged schools to protest-related disruption. Overall, the study highlights the importance of integrated strategies involving schools, communities, education authorities, and municipal institutions to strengthen educational resilience and sustain learning during periods of civic unrest.

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