

Education & Injustice in South Africa



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Education has the potential to play a key role in addressing societal injustice by equalising opportunities, facilitating development, and strengthening democracy. Unfortunately, in contemporary South Africa, this role remains almost entirely unrealised. Instead, three key features of the South African educational system – low quality, high inequality, and deep segregation – combine to further skew the distribution of resources, delay development, and prevent effective participation in democratic governance. This article explores these features of the South African educational system, and how each of them relates to injustice at both the individual and societal levels. While identifying the myriad injustices associated with education in South Africa is relatively easy, finding solutions is not. Particularly over the short term, efforts to address injustice of one type may well incur injustices of another. For this reason, the educational reform that is so urgently needed must be guided by an open, explicit and honest examination of the implications for justice, at the societal and individual levels, and over both the short and long terms, of any policy decisions.

Quality & Justice:

The poor quality of the majority of public education in South Africa¹ is in itself a major injustice. At the individual level, it blocks the formation of skills and capabilities, preventing South African youth from realising anything approaching their full potential. Poor education condemns them to lives with fewer opportunities, lower incomes, and a more limited capacity for self-determination. Low quality education is also an injustice to the broader society, causing the loss of an enormous amount of human potential. This slows development, making the eradication of poverty more challenging, and probably more distant. Over the longer term, it also damages national capacity for the provision of all forms of public services, including education itself. A population with high proportions of people having limited skills and opportunities, economic and otherwise, is also likely to be more susceptible to a range of other social ills such as violence and crime.

Inequality & Justice:

Most would agree that at least some level of equality, defined in terms of either access to opportunities or of outcomes, is essential to justice. However, the nature of the relationship between equality and justice is quite complex. In South Africa, extremely high levels of inequality in both the education system and society at large make equality a pressing issue. While greater educational equality is likely to be



Courtesy of Samancor.

Schoolchildren from Tirelong Intermediate School, North West.

good for development in the long term, in the shorter term it may entail a reduction in quality, slowing the pace of development. In a context of limited resources, the tradeoffs between equality and quality are likely to be particularly substantial, and the full range of justice implications of any decision need to be carefully weighed².

While most public education in South Africa is poor, some is extremely good³. Unlike most other middle-income countries, and particularly those with high inequality, most South African middle-class children continue to attend public schools, and the private sector remains very small⁴. However, competition over access to 'good' public schools can be substantial, and appears to be growing, while 'poor' schools, particularly in township areas, are often undersubscribed⁵. Inequality in access to high quality educational opportunities has harmful long and short-term implications for the individual. Over the short-term, individuals at low-quality schools are likely to receive fewer resources and less effective teaching. They are more likely to be subject to violence or abuse at school, and are more likely to repeat classes, fail, or drop out, and are far less likely to access tertiary education or training⁶. Over the longer term, those who receive poorer education, or spend less time enrolled in school, are likely to have lower incomes, fewer opportunities, poorer health, and shorter life expectancies. At the societal level, the injustice of what is effectively a 'two-tier' public sector, with public resources supporting the persistence of individual inequality, is clear.

Discussions around educational injustice are complicated even further by the question of whether equality in access to educational resources (broadly defined) is sufficient for justice. Genuine educational justice might instead require that all children are provided with opportunities sufficient to enable the attainment of substantively similar outcomes⁷. It is well-established that, all else being equal, it costs more to educate a disadvantaged child to a particular level than it would cost to educate his or her more advantaged peer⁸. Obtaining equality of educational outcomes would therefore tend to require explicitly unequal government spending, with much higher levels of investment in the poorest children. This inequality in public spending would need to be particularly substantial in South Africa, which has extremely high and deeply rooted levels of income inequality. In contemporary

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South Africa, despite efforts to introduce a pro-poor bias in public educational spending with the National School Norms and Standards Act (1996), overall (public and private) educational spending remains highest in those public schools educating the most advantaged children⁹.

Neither complete equality in access to educational resources or in educational outcomes are really feasible policy goals, and indeed, societal demands for justice may best be met by finding a balance between the two. Even with a clear understanding of exactly what the pursuit of educational equality means, however, the possibility of tensions between the pursuit of equality and high quality remain. Maximising quality in the educational system would likely require a completely different pattern of investment than efforts to maximise equality. While over the long term, equality and quality are likely to be mutually reinforcing, over the shorter term, tensions are almost certain.

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Equality in access to opportunities, equality in educational outcomes, and efficient resource use to maximise quality, are all closely tied to a just society, but appeal to different aspects of justice. In a context of limited resources, decisions inevitably need to be made about how to balance these competing imperatives. The ideal solution is likely to be extremely context-specific, depending on a broad range of economic, social and cultural factors. Arriving at the most just solution for a particular context requires not only a great deal of information, but also broad participation from those who stand to be affected by the decisions made.

Segregation & Justice:

The need for participatory debate and decision making in a just society brings us to a third concern about the justice of South African education: the extremely high levels of segregation. Segregation has typically been understood as racially-based exclusion, particularly in South Africa with its history of defining access to educational opportunities on the basis of race. While race remains a strong predictor of educational access in contemporary South Africa, this obscures an underlying shift to socio-economic status as the major determinant of access to high quality education¹⁰. Understanding that South African educational segregation is now driven by SES, even though racial differences remain substantial, is critical to understanding the interaction of educational segregation with quality, equality and justice. Segregation is deeply linked to both quality and equality, and further deepens many of the concerns already raised about education and justice. One connection between education and justice which has not yet been raised, however, is the role that common education can play in developing democracy and participatory governance.

Much of what children learn about the nature of their country and what it means to be a citizen occurs in school¹¹. This is particularly the case in a country where the large majority of education is provided through the public sector, as is the case in South Africa. While some of this learning may be explicit, much is implicit, occurring through immersion, absorption and observation. When education is segregated, along any line, children obtain a skewed image of who comprises their nation, as well as what citizenship means. By contrast, the mere fact of desegregated education, with children from a diversity of backgrounds integrated on an equal footing, plays an illustrative role in teaching the concept of common humanity, and respect for difference. Similarly, it builds understanding of the fundamental notion that all citizens share certain rights, such as access to education of a particular



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level of quality, regardless of their backgrounds. These ideas are central to generating a national community which is fundamentally accepting of democratic and participatory decision-making and governance.

Democratic and participatory governance also requires a populace to be well-informed and able to express their views and opinions. This requirement comes back to the need for a certain level of quality in the educational system. Desegregated education ensures that unavoidable variations in educational quality are distributed randomly across the population – that no one group receives a particularly advantaged education. This stands in stark contrast to the South African status quo, where schools serving advantaged children benefit from the additional resources contributed by parents, better qualified teachers attracted by more amenable working conditions, and a student body that is generally far easier to educate¹². By contrast, while segregation is not complete, a large majority of the disadvantaged children whose effective education is most costly, and whose parents have the fewest resources to contribute, are clustered together in those schools with fewest resources, poorest facilities, and weakest staff. This segregation limits the access of these children to opportunities for upward social mobility, and helps to ensure that they remain trapped in poverty.

Desegregated education also ensures that all children are schooled together with similar groups of peers. The socio-economic status of the other children enrolled in a school is one of the single most important predictors of a child's academic outcomes¹³. Surrounding a child with advantaged peers enhances his or her academic performance. By contrast, the same child surrounded by disadvantaged peers will do less well. The impact of these academic peer effects are increased by the opening up of privileged social networks that are associated with socio-economically desegregated education¹⁴. In a desegregated classroom, the social network of an advantaged child becomes at least partially available to his or her less advantaged peers, offering them connections and opportunities that would

otherwise be unavailable. As long as schools remain socio-economically segregated, the education of advantaged children will be further enhanced by their advantaged peers, while disadvantaged children will be deprived of this opportunity.

Educational segregation, particularly along socio-economic lines, clearly has significant implications for justice, as it constrains not only who has access to high quality educational opportunities, but also who has an audible voice in the discussions and debates around the restructuring of public education. However, while educational desegregation would be likely to improve educational equality and even quality over the longer term, in the short term, substantial tensions between desegregation, equality and quality are likely to remain. Once again, identifying the optimally just balance is likely to be extremely context-specific, and will require the involvement of all citizens.

Conclusion:

As illustrated above, the concurrent existence of low quality, high inequality, and deep segregation in South African schooling has serious implications for justice. Particularly alarming is the tendency of these three properties to work together to reinforce societal injustice, creating what is effectively a self-reinforcing poverty trap, ensuring that the most disadvantaged members of society have few ways of improving their situation. Over the longer term, addressing all of these issues is the only way to create an educational system that is itself just, and that supports social justice at a broader level. Our more immediate challenge, however, is to identify, within a context of limited resources and divergent public demands, the most appropriate set of short-term actions to ensure, as soon as possible, an educational system that is perceived as just by all those who it serves.

NOTES

- ¹ See for example Reddy, 2006; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Fleisch, 2008
- ² See Patel & Crouch, 2008
- ³ See Fiske et al., 2004
- ⁴ See Hofmeyr & Lee, 2004; Fiske et al., 2004
- ⁵ See Msila, 2009; Msila, 2005
- ⁶ See Lam, Ardington, & Leibbrandt, 2008; van der Berg, 2008
- ⁷ See Fiske et al., 2004, He provides an extremely useful discussion of this issue
- ⁸ See Reschovsky, 2006
- ⁹ See Reschovsky, 2006; Fiske et al., 2004
- ¹⁰ See Fiske et al., 2004; Lemon, 2005
- ¹¹ See Kahlenberg, 2001
- ¹² See Fiske et al., 2004
- ¹³ See Kahlenberg, 2001
- ¹⁴ See Kahlenberg, 2001

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