

Educational Inequality: The Dark Side of South Africa's education system

South Africa is a land of hope, opportunity and most glaringly, a land of stark inequality. This inequality could not be more prevalent than in our education system. Leafy suburbs like Sandton boast world class institutions with top-of-art facilities, whilst neighbouring Alexandra township schools are often victims of violence, poor infrastructure and a lack of resources.

This inequality manifests in the extremely poor results produced by – mostly dysfunctional – schools across the country. While the Department of Basic Education can boast vast amounts of bachelor passes – 172 043 in 2018 – the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) tells a different story around quality education.

Data from the study showed that almost 8 out of 10 South African children in Grade 4 cannot read for understanding. This begs the question: what prospects do these youth face post-school with the poor quality education received for years?

There is however, a much darker side to the inequality in schools across South Africa that goes far beyond below par pass rates and learner achievement. The socio-economic status of children is one of the most important factors influencing learner outcomes. Senior economics lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch, Dr Nic Spaull, states that a child's race, birth province and parental wealth determine the child's educational opportunities.

While access to education has been universally granted to each child in South Africa, the quality of the education has not been guaranteed, particularly for black children. Public schools in peri-urban and rural areas make up 75% of the schooling system in South Africa – populated by poor black children mostly – and continue to be overcrowded, under-resourced and downright dysfunctional.

What's more, children who come from these backgrounds often do not have the family support to carry them through their vital years of schooling. The Coleman Report of 1966 set the standard for the study of public school education, and indicated that a child with better educated parents and more educational resources at home is bound to succeed at school and later on in life.

Given that the legacy of apartheid still lives on very strongly in most facets of South African life, it comes as no surprise that the parents of current black school-goers have poor educational outcomes because of the dysfunctional schools they themselves attended, some in the former Bantustans. Results from the 2015 TIMSS shows that only 48% of black Grade 3 learners pass mathematics, while 85% of white learners succeed in passing.

Since educational outcomes directly determine labour market participation, black parents with low levels of education are victims of “sustained unemployment” as Nic Spaull phrases it.

Without regular employment, a regular wage cannot be guaranteed and thus it is almost impossible to consistently invest in your child’s education. This means that children from poor households are forced to attend no-fee paying schools that are under resourced and dysfunctional. Their educational outcomes are compromised from the day they set foot inside these institutions.

Of the top 200 schools in the country, 185 are former white-only schools and all 185 charge significant fees, keeping the majority of black learners locked out of these quality schools. The former white urban areas are still more prosperous with well-resourced schools, while townships have to contend with under-performing schools. While race was the determining factor of educational opportunity during apartheid, nowadays both race and class are key determinants.

The following statistics from TIMSS 2015 help put things into perspective: 84% of Grade 5 learners attending independent schools can do basic mathematics in accordance with international norms, compared to 67% in fee-charging public schools and only 25% in no-fee public schools.

It is clear that fee-paying schools drive the inequality wedge even further between the majority of black learners and other races who are privileged enough to be attending well-resourced, fee-charging schools. Those who can afford fee-charging schools are able to set their children on a trajectory of success.

Fee-charging schools are also able to attract higher qualified educators and principals, thus building on the credibility of the institution. These well-resourced schools are much more appealing to teachers with their sizeable pay checks, manageable class sizes and numerous perks such as subsidised housing and fee exemptions for educators’ children.

A study carried out by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in 2007 showed that South African Grade 6 teachers with high disciplinary knowledge in mathematics are largely employed in top performing schools. Poor schools are then left with the leftovers of teachers who hold very limited disciplinary knowledge. The knowledge that these educators are able to pass down to their learners is rudimentary at best, thus fuelling the inequalities that already exist in learners’ attainment of educational outcomes.

So where does this all leave the majority of children and young adults around the country who exit this dual schooling system that clearly continues to cater for the privileged whilst leaving the impoverished none the better? The 2018 Quarterly Labour Force Survey reported a NEET (not in

education, employment or training) rate of 39% for South African youth – that is 39% of youth in the country who have not found the light at the end of the tunnel.

What's more worrying is that these exit numbers only represent only a fraction of learners who were in the system in previous years. Only half the learners who enrolled in Grade 1 in 2007 wrote the National Senior Certificate exam in 2018.

The government needs to act fast by amending policies and restructuring schools before we tread further down this dark path. In conclusion I quote leading educationalist in South Africa, Jonathan Jansen, from a book he is co-authoring with Nic Spaull: "Put plainly, a black child born to poor parents in a deep rural area while attending a dysfunctional school on average has little to no chance of escaping a life of poverty despite the education received."

What is clear is that current school goers in disadvantaged areas are victims of their circumstances, having only committed the crime of being poor.

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