



**M**uch has been achieved in mitigating South Africa’s race, class, and gender inequalities since the country became a democracy in 1994. Most of the worst racial disfigurements that gave apartheid its brutal character have been removed. Where schooling was structured on deeply unequal racial lines, the country now has a single nonracial education system. Policy measures have been instituted and have increased opportunity for many previously disadvantaged people. These reforms notwithstanding, a combination of factors has not only impeded the process of change, but, in critical ways, has deepened the country’s challenges. These factors have 1) both reproduced and amplified old inequalities and disparities, particularly those of space and race, and 2) introduced new socioeconomic inequalities overlain with challenging cultural and linguistic markers, such as the dominance of English and the loss of indigenous language capacity.

The emergence and presence of new social dynamics are dramatically reordering the wider society and the field of education in particular. The tightly coupled



cial scientists such as Francis Nymanjoh, Gerard Hagg, Vasu Reddy, and Ingrid Woolard, this essay acknowledges the primacy of the economic.<sup>9</sup> Nyamnjoh and Hagg argue, however, that “inequality goes far beyond access to services or opportunities for employment and includes, **b** , the sociopsychological state of inequality and poverty, the way people experience inequality and its impact on their everyday life.”<sup>10</sup> As I argue throughout this essay, racism is central.<sup>11</sup> Economists Francis Wilson and Vaun Cornell make four points about the state of South Africa in the first decade of the new millennium:<sup>12</sup>

1. Poverty is widespread and severe. In 2008, over half the population lived below the “\$1.90 a day” poverty line.<sup>13</sup>

firmed the shift toward greater vertical inequality: “While there is still a staggeringly high between-group share [of income], [there was] an increasing importance of within-race group inequalities in understanding inequality in South Africa.”<sup>18</sup> Harvey describes the differentiation within the Black community in the following way: “what both BEE (black employment equity) and affirmative action did was to vastly expand the social and class divide in the Black community to the extent that inter-racial divides [between white and Black] are dwarfed by the intraracial class divisions that opened up from the late 1990s within the Black population.”<sup>19</sup>

**I**t is important to understand what inequality in education looked like when South Africa became a democracy in 1994. While schools, even ~~in~~ the country’s separate racialized communities, were not homogenous, inequality and discrimination were structurally built into the system. The apartheid constitution of 1983 was determinative, and effectively divided the system into sixteen subsystems based on apartheid’s racial categories of “white,” “coloured,” “Indian,” and “African,” with the last further divided into ten ethnic or “homeland” subcategories.<sup>20</sup> The Department of National Education held the system in place with the overarching power to determine the general policy for the country in terms of salaries, conditions of service, professional requirements for teachers, and norms and standards for syllabi.<sup>21</sup>

Schooling for children classified as African was inferior. Teachers were under-qualified. Classes were crowded with half of all African schools in the country running double sessions—mornings and afternoons—right up until the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Children, moreover, were not only forced to learn through the medium of English or Afrikaans, but the quality of what they learned was ideologically ordered to produce subservient subjects ready for the labor market.<sup>23</sup> A major debate about this experience pivoted on whether schooling was for class domination or racial repression.<sup>24</sup> It did both. Black children had their perceived inferiority drilled into them. As educationists J. M. Du Preez and Hanneke Du Preez explained: “Black teachers and pupils rely heavily on the school textbook. They view the textbook as a source of knowledge to be mastered or even memorised for the examinations. The textbooks, however, are written by whites[,] consequently the contents reflect the symbolic system of the whites.... The textbooks [have] very little relevance for the black child.”<sup>25</sup>

While some degree of autonomy was granted to the subsystems, the finance function was managed centrally, determining how budgets were allocated. In 1994, this produced the following per capita expenditure figures: R 2,110 (USD 620) for African children outside the homelands, R 1,524 (USD 448) for African children in nonindependent homelands, R 4,772 (USD 1,403) for white children, R 4,423 (USD 1,300) for Indian children, and R 3,601 (USD 1,058) for colored children. This meant that the government spent over three times more on white

schools than on Black schools even though white learners only made up 17 percent of the learner population.<sup>26</sup> Pupil-teacher ratios in 1994 stood at 37:1 for African children in urban areas, 40:1 for African children in the former homelands, and 22:1 for white children.<sup>27</sup> Schools serving African learners did not have the means to spend their finances on school infrastructure and the maintenance of the existing buildings and, as a result, lacked the most basic facilities such as space, toilets, laboratories, libraries, and playgrounds. School safety itself was compromised. This was decidedly not the experience of children who were classified as white.

**I**n describing the reform process initiated by the new government in 1994, it is important to acknowledge the significant changes in the education system that were already underway before 1994. The National Party government had abolished what was called petty apartheid. It opened up schools racially in 1985. The democratic government made concerted efforts to accelerate these changes and to transform (and reform) the inequalities it had inherited from apartheid. It embarked on an extensive legislative overhaul after 1994 and devoted considerable attention and resources to dealing with the internal stabilization of the system, such as the [Education Act of 1994](#).<sup>28</sup> The then minister of education, Kader Asmal, was aware of the scale of the challenge: “the plans reflect,” he said, “what we can realistically expect to achieve in the time we have set ourselves.”<sup>29</sup>

4. While a key provision in the SASA and the Norms and Standards regulations granted parents the right to price and charge school fees (through school governing bodies), the government realized that this would exacerbate inequalities. The state introduced a school classification system that graded schools into five socioeconomic quintiles, from most poor (quintile 1) to least poor (quintile 5), based on the income levels of the communities in which the schools were set.<sup>35</sup> Quintile 3 schools were relieved from the burden of collecting fees from parents and were awarded higher per capita subsidies.
5. The apartheid curriculum, which had focused on rote learning for Black children, was replaced by Curriculum 2005 and its 2012 update, the Revised National Curricular Statements. A new qualifications framework was also put in place to provide learning pathways for young people. In tandem, mechanisms were established to improve the quality of the teacher corps for all children.

Considerable political and ideological challenges accompanied these interventions. The African National Congress and the civil society organizations supporting it, such as teachers' unions like the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, in combination or by themselves, impeded or weakened the reform process through insufficient funding or by overlooking corruption in important administrative measures.<sup>36</sup> The introduction of these measures, however, significantly improved access. Gross enrollment ratios reached 100 percent in 2001 in the compulsory phase of schooling.<sup>37</sup> Important progress was registered in meeting the goal of ensuring access to education. In 2015, more than six hundred thousand children were enrolled in grade R (a reception year before grade 1) and approximately 1.2 million in grade 1. Significantly, as Table 1 reflects, with the fee-exemption policy, the government was acknowledging disparities in the country's income and wealth profiles and recognizing that the majority of its children's education required additional resources and support to make up for the damage that apartheid had caused. More than 60 percent of the country's children were in no-fee schools by 2012.<sup>38</sup> And by 2016, the levels of annual per capita subvention for quintiles 3 were significantly higher/Lang (en-US)/MCID 117707(e p/Lat31 (ePmichoc (tucw

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Government Funding per Learner by Socioeconomic Quintile

Quintile or Threshold	2016	2017
Quintile 1	R 1,177	R 1,242
Quintile 2	R 1,177	R 1,242
Quintile 3	R 1,177	R 1,242
Quintile 4	R 590	R 622
Quintile 5	R 204	R 215
No-fee threshold	R 1,177	R 1,242

Source: Angelina Matsie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, Government Gazette No. 40065 (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2016), 5.

was shuttling over fifty thousand learners at no cost throughout the country and subsidizing the travel costs of a further fifty thousand scholars by 2012. Further support to low-income learners came in the form of Child Support Grants for children up to age fifteen in families earning household incomes up to R27,600 (USD 3,406), revised means testing, and removal of urban and rural threshold differences. In 2015, there were 11,703,165 children receiving a Child Support Grant.<sup>40</sup>

There were several positive outcomes of these interventions. The expenditure per capita between the lowest and highest quintiles was not simply equalized; it was distributed equitably. In 2017, the poorest children received almost R 1,000 more per capita than their most wealthy counterparts. In the process of opening schools, critical gender parity was achieved.<sup>41</sup> Between 1996 and 2016, the number of people aged fifteen years and older who completed grade 12 increased from 3.7 million in 1996 to 11.6 million in 2016.<sup>42</sup> In addition, there was a significant improvement in pupils' results on the school-exit Senior Certificate Examination. Where overall pass rates stood at 58 percent in 1994 and 47.4 percent in 1997, by 2003, they had improved to 73.3 percent.<sup>43</sup>

In undertaking these programmatic interventions, the government legally met the constitutional mandate set out in the constitution's bill of rights in section 9 and section 29 (1) (a), the latter of which stipulated that "Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education."<sup>44</sup> This stipulation was ratified by a constitutional court that ruled it was the state's duty to provide basic education to all citizens.<sup>45</sup>

Significant as the government's program of reform has been, the question remains whether it made a significant impact on inequality. The education system continues to be characterized by egregious inequality.<sup>46</sup> It is now widely recognized that the principal driver of this inequality is the policy reform that granted parents, through their control of school governing bodies, the power to control their schools' admission and fee-generating policies.<sup>47</sup> This power, I argue, is being played out in two ways: a push from below through the new middle-class moving its children into schools that had not been, by law, previously available to them, and a push from above with elites playing what sociologists Rob Gruijters and Benjamin Elbers and economic development researcher Vijay Reddy describe as a "hoarding" exercise in keeping their privileges to themselves.<sup>48</sup>

The ~~the~~ is, in its essence, a social reaction to the emerging class system in South Africa. The social demography of the system has fundamentally changed from apartheid times. All schools now have significant proportions of children who would have been classified Black, African, colored, and Indian in terms of apartheid's classifications, but many schools are inaccessible to the country's poor.

The study I conducted for the Department of Education in 2003 produced the racially defined distribution of learners shown in Table 2. By 2003, close to half of all children in historically white schools, former House of Assembly, were not white. The important work of Gruijters, Elbers, and Reddy shows that, almost twenty years later, these trends have intensified.<sup>49</sup> Working with the Department of Basic Education's 2021 annual survey, they found that children classified as African under the apartheid classification regulations now constituted the majority in all schools in the country (see Table 3).



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Learner Distribution by Racial Group at Historically Segregated Schools  
in Gauteng Province, 2003

ics and Science Study provides clearer actual expenditure profiles, with the bottom 10 percent of income earners spending 1.5 percent of their income on education compared to 3.3 percent for parents in the top 10 percent.<sup>53</sup> The University of Cape Town's Institute of Strategic Marketing, which has been tracking Black middle-class growth, found that spending on education was a priority for this new class, with 65 percent of them having their children in former white or private schools.<sup>54</sup> By 2013, more than half of this new Black middle class was sending its children to private schools, which had grown by 2022 to just under one-tenth of all of schools in South Africa (2,282 of the total of 24,871 schools).<sup>55</sup> With more than half of the quintile 4 and 5 schools now being majority Black, this group of parents is willing to devote between R30,000 and R60,000 (between USD1,881 and 3,762) each year to keep their children in the top end of the public school system and be-

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school to admit a Black child. Successive appeals and counterappeals ultimately led to the school being compelled to admit the child, but the point is that the parents resisted the process intensely.<sup>70</sup>

As a result of these pushes from below and above, the country now has a two-tiered system: one for the rich and another for the poor. Schools during apartheid were structured fundamentally in racial and ethnic terms. They are now essentially racial and class projects. The differences in the quality of education provided in formerly Black and formerly white schools are stark. In a recent contribution on the democratization of education in South Africa, referencing an Amnesty International report on school inequality in South Africa, I explained that “at the beginning of the 2019 school year there were nearly 4,000 schools still using pit latrines, 20,071 had no laboratories, 18,019 had no libraries, class sizes experienced among the poorest 60% of the school population grew from 41 to 48 learners between 2011 and 2016 while those for the wealthiest grew from 33 to 35.”<sup>71</sup>

The inequality in resourcing expresses itself clearly in the very different learning performances of rich and poor students. Illustrating these differences are the results of successive Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS). The 2015TIMSS found that 75 percent of grade 9 learners in no-fee schools could not attain scores above 400 points, the international midpoint for the test, compared to 60 percent of their counterparts in privileged schools who scored above 475, the intermediate benchmark or better, and 14 percent who achieved the

high international mark of 625 points.<sup>72</sup> In the 2019 TIMSS there was a 75-point gap between learners from disadvantaged and privileged backgrounds.<sup>73</sup>

**H**ow has the COVID19 pandemic impacted inequality in the system? It is important to acknowledge that the South African government was aware of how unequally the pandemic landed on the South African schooling system, and how carefully it needed to respond to the vulnerability of the poor. It observed in 2022, for example, that “since its outbreak two years ago, the COVID19 pandemic has disrupted education systems globally, affecting the most vulnerable learners the hardest. It has increased inequalities and exacerbated a pre-existing education crisis.”<sup>74</sup> It acknowledged the large inequalities that existed across schools and grades, and particularly the reality that at the height of the pandemic in 2020, historically disadvantaged schools had lost approximately 70 percent of contact time in 2020 while more privileged schools had been able to keep this challenge down to an absolute minimum. In response, it drastically trimmed the curriculum and mobilized important educational nongovernmental organizations to put in place stabilization, remedial, and catch-up initiatives. These initiatives deliberately targeted learners and parents in no-fee schools. Their schools were provided with emergency relief resources, water and sanitation, and the sustaining of the school-feeding program, but also educational affordances such as expensive digital equipment.<sup>75</sup>

Well-intentioned as these plans were, there was little evidence in the publicly available material on how the Department of Basic Education (DBE) intended to realize its objectives. The result was to leave the undercapacitated sections of the system all to themselves. While the advantaged sections were able to take up *Lives (antaged)* 0.

attainment. Only 11 percent of learners in South Africa attained the low international benchmark of between 400 and 474 points (the ability to locate and retrieve explicit information); 6 percent attained the intermediate benchmark between 475 and 549 points (the ability to interpret and identify reasons for events in text); 2 percent attained the high benchmark between 550 and 624 points (the ability to

endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> No Sizwe, *Black Power in South Africa* (Zed Press, 1979).
- <sup>2</sup> See Roger Southall, *Black Power in South Africa* (Jacana Media, 2016); Tendai Chikweche, James Lappeman, and Paul Egan, "Revisiting Middle-Class Consumers in Africa: A Cross-Country City Based Investigation Outlining Implications for International Marketers," *Journal of Business Ethics* 29 (4) (2021): 79–94 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069032111028589>; and Neesa Moodley, "SA's Maturing Black Middle Class Weathers the Storm of COVID-19," *Business Day*, October 7, 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> Moodley, "SA's Maturing Black Middle Class," 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Light: Skin, Style, and Politics in the Fashion Industry* (Duke University Press, 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Black Power: Politics and the Problem of Race* (Routledge, 1986); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Victor Sulla, Precious Zikhali, and Pablo Facundo Cuevas, *South Africa's Economic Outlook* (World Bank Group, 2022), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099125303072236903/649270c02a1f06b0a3ae02e57eadd7a82>
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Hesse, "Income Report Highlights Inequality in South Africa," *Business Day*, August 5–6, 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> Julian May, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa," *Journal of Business Ethics* 15 (2) (1998): 53–58.
- <sup>9</sup> Poobalan Govender, Nilen Kambaran, Nicolene Patchett, and Andrew Ruddle, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa and the World," *Journal of Business Ethics* 7 (2007): 117–160 <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC7122>; Francis Nymanjoh and Gerard Hagg, "General Introduction," in *Black Power in South Africa: A History of the Struggle*, ed. Francis Nymanjoh and Gerard Hagg, and Francis Nymanjoh (Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2013), 1–12; and Crain Soudien, Vasu Reddy, and Ingrid Woolard, "The State of the Discus

<sup>16</sup> See Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Harry Mashabela, Shaun Mackay, et al., *South African Institute of Race Relations* (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1995), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Murray Leibbrandt, Ingrid Woolard, and Christopher Woolard, "Poverty and Inequality Dynamics in South Africa: Post-Apartheid Developments in the Light of the Long-Run Legacy" enS



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<sup>52</sup>Pundy Pillay,

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<sup>71</sup> Amnesty International