

While the rich get education, SA's poor get just 'schooling'

After nearly 21 years of democratic rule, most black children are still let down by an education system that condemns the majority to society's underclass, writes **Nic Spaull**

LOOKING back on the past 30 days in South Africa you cannot help but conclude that the issue of university exclusion on financial grounds has struck a nerve in the national psyche. There are not many issues in our country where there is universal consensus across issues of race or class, but this is one of them.

Deserving students should not be excluded from university because their parents cannot afford the fees. This is unjust, unsustainable and unacceptable, as almost everyone now agrees. How we will pay for this is another story — but we all agree that rationing access to limited university positions cannot be based primarily on parental income. Yet this is exactly what happens in South African schools.

If you can afford to send your child to a former Model C or a private school, there is no question about it, you do. I am willing to bet (and Africa Check please follow up on this) that there is not a single MP who sends their child to a no-fee school in our country. Not one. It is an unspoken truth that no-fee schools are for the poor and "good" schools are for the rich.

To put this in context, no-fee schools make up the vast majority of schools in South Africa, ranging from 66% to 88% of schools (depending on whether you ask pupils or principals, respectively), and almost all of them are dysfunctional, because they do not impart the knowledge, skills and values needed to succeed in life. There are at least 10 independently conducted, nationally representative surveys attesting to this.

The problem here is twofold. First, most parents cannot afford the fees at Model C or private schools since they are frequently as high as university fees (R31 500 a year), and second, there are limited places in these schools. Of the 25 741 schools in South Africa, only 1 135 are former Model C schools and 1 681 are independent (private) schools. Together that accounts for only 11% of total schools. Even if we abolished fees in all these schools — and I'm not sure that is the way to go — you cannot fit 12 million children into 2 816 schools.

I completely agree that a system where access to quality schooling is almost exclusively a function of parental wealth (in other words, our current system) is unjust and must change. But purely from a numbers perspective, we simply have to find ways of improving the quality of the 88% of schools that are free.

So why do we have fees?

The reason we have state schools that charge fees is that policy-makers at the time of the transition were afraid (probably correctly) that if they abolished fees in public schools, all the white teachers and white students would go to private schools and we would be stuck with mostly white private schools and



ROAD TO NOWHERE: While there are exceptions, pupils attending township schools are on the whole destined to remain in the underclass of South African society, regardless of their abilities or aspirations. Picture: DANIEL BORN

exclusively black public schools. Allowing these former whites-only schools to charge fees was the trade-off. To prevent the development of a system split entirely on the ability to pay, the constitution declares that no child may be denied admission to a school because his/her parents cannot pay fees.

Yet this is exactly what happens in the majority of cases. How is it that the majority of fee-charging schools manage to maintain a student body drawn primarily from that small part of the population that can pay fees? Presumably by excluding the ones who can't pay fees, in formal and informal ways. After speaking to some of the principals of these schools — many of whom are incredibly dedicated and committed to social transformation — I am under no illusion that there is a simple answer to this. I believe these well-meaning individuals are trying to maintain a high quality of education on a very tight budget.

Yet the reality remains: the rich get education and the poor get "schooling". The rich get access to universities and well-paying jobs, while the poor get menial jobs, intermittent work or long-term unemployment.

According to Statistics SA's Quarterly Labour Force Survey of

2014, our labour market is split into four groups, with the percentage of the working-age population in each category in brackets:

- Unemployed (broad definition): 35%;
- Unskilled (domestic workers and elementary occupations): 18%;
- Semi-skilled (clerks, service workers, shop personnel, et cetera): 32%; and
- Highly skilled (legislators, managers, professionals): 15%.

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The tragic reality in South Africa is that if your parents are in the "top" part of the labour market (the 15%), then you send your children to the "top" part of the schooling system (for which fees are charged). That gives your children access to university and that same "top" part of the labour market you are in. If you are in the "bottom" part of the labour market (the 85%),

then the only schools that are available are the second-tier no-fee schools. And if you do that, the only way your children get to university is in spite of these schools (with a dedicated teacher or an extremely hard-working student), not because of them. In fact, Grade 8 students attending fee-charging schools are two to four times more likely to qualify for university than those attending no-fee schools.

Yes, there are exceptions. Fee-charging schools do admit some students (perhaps 10%-15%) who cannot pay fees. They also offer scholarships and bursaries.

Similarly, there are some extremely poor no-fee schools that succeed — often because of a resilient principal. But these affect only a small minority.

Although the education crisis that South Africa finds itself in has its roots in the apartheid regime of institutionalised inequality, the current administration is not absolved of its responsibility to provide a quality education to every child in South Africa, not only the rich. After 21 years of democratic rule, most black children still receive an education that condemns them to the underclass of South African society, where poverty and

unemployment are the norm. This substandard education does not develop their capabilities or expand their economic opportunities: instead, it denies them dignified employment and undermines their sense of self-worth.

In short, poor school performance in South Africa reinforces social inequality: children inherit the social station of their parents, irrespective of their own motivation or ability.

Until such time as the Department of Basic Education and the ruling administration are willing to seriously address the underlying issues in education, at whatever political or economic cost, the existing patterns of underperformance and inequality will continue unabated.

● *Spaull, from the Research on Socio-Economic Policy group at Stellenbosch University, is a contributor to the South African Child Gauge 2015, which will be released on Tuesday by the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, and will be available on ci.org.za*

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