The Quest for Educational Equity in Schools in South Africa

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The quest for educational equity in South Africa takes its impetus from the country's transition to democracy in 1994. The country faced the challenge of overcoming deep systemic inequality – both racial and class-based – caused by three hundred fifty years of colonialism and apartheid. The African National Congress undertook a process to equalize the educational system and expand opportunities for students. Significant progress has been made in addressing issues of race, class, and gender in the thirty years since 1994, but a combination of factors has both reproduced and amplified old inequalities and disparities, particularly those of space and race, and introduced intense new socioeconomic inequalities overlain with challenging cultural and linguistic markers, such as the dominance of English and the loss of indigenous language capacity. Two elements have been pivotal: stubborn legacy effects of apartheid such as poverty in a context of a weakening economy; and complex and contradictory arrangements made at the transition in 1994 that have left privilege, predominantly but no longer only white, largely intact. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened these inequalities.

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Much 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 disfigurations 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

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relationship between race and class, which had historically determined the primary experience of education for all South Africans, described by theorist Neville Alexander as a caste-like phenomenon, has been loosened.[1] While stubborn legacy effects of apartheid, such as racially based poverty, persist, the most critical new development has been the rise of a sizeable Black middle class.[2] This new middle class, precarious in its hold on its newfound privilege, has moved into positions of influence and power.[3] It has taken its children into historically white schools and, by doing so, contributed significantly to the process of these schools' deracialization. Inequality, as a consequence, looks and is experienced in different ways.

In this essay, I analyze policy documents to develop an intersectional perspective. My approach seeks to hold in iterative juxtaposition the structural factors of race, class, and gender, but keeps their discursive valences in close view. To understand these valences, the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins is useful.[4] She talks of sites of power as being saturated. Saturation is, I argue, the rhizomatic penetration of structure's justifications of itself – race, class, and gender in the main – into the everyday as commonsense. Saturation produces widespread "sensibility." Inequality has its starting points, often but not always in structural drivers. It requires, however, discursive legitimations. Race and gender, for example, are produced as structural realities. They cut into society as categorical lines of difference. But, as an established body of literature has shown, these differences are almost definitively *not* physical.[5] They subsist on belief. Power permeates social space simultaneously, structurally, and discursively. To show how these dynamics come to give the struggle for equity in South Africa its distinct character, I offer a brief explication of the nature of inequality in South Africa. From there, I move to the substance of the essay: the complex and contradictory arrangements made in and for education at the transition in 1994, and the difficulties that have confronted the democratic government. I draw from my research projects and the full range of administrative and policy materials that are publicly available. Official documents such as laws and regulations are important here, but records of public consultations are too. I also examine the extensive sociological and political literature that has been generated around the process of education reform in South Africa.

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world.[6] Economics journalist Martin Hesse has noted that "almost a quarter (23%) of adult South Africans rely mainly on government grants for income and another third (32.1%) do not receive any income in cash."[7]

Many scholars attempting to explain how this inequality is experienced locate the character of poverty and inequality in the economy.[8] Less frequently articulated is the relationship between the economic, the political, and the social. Building on the work of South African commentator Poobalan Govender, actuaries and data analysts Nilen Kambaran, Nicolene Patchett, and Andrew Ruddle, and so-

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

1. Poverty is widespread and severe. In 2008, over half the population lived below the poverty datum line of R 515 per capita per month.
2. Poverty levels fell marginally between 1993 and 2008, from 55 percent to 54 percent of the population.
3. The South African Gini coefficient, the international statistical measure of inequality in a community, was 0.70, the highest in the world.
4. Inequality appeared to be on the increase after 1994, largely due to widening inequality within previously disadvantaged groups. Horizontal inequality between the putative "races" remains large. Vertical inequality within racially defined groups, however, has emerged as an important social driver.

These conditions have continued into the current period. The World Bank explains that "at the end of 2022, there were still close to half a million fewer jobs than at the end of 2019, with women and youth persistently more impacted. Inequality remains the highest in the world, and poverty was an estimated 63% in 2022 based on the upper-middle-income country poverty line."[13] Referring to the country's 2018 consumption expenditure Gini coefficient of 0.67, the World Bank's report also says that "inequality in wealth is even higher [than in previous years], and intergenerational mobility is low, meaning inequalities are passed down from generation to generation with little change over time."[14]

An important change in these dynamics, as indicated earlier, has been the rise of the African middle class. As finance journalist Nessa Moodley explains, using a household monthly income of R 22,000 (approximately USD 1,220 in August 2024) as the benchmark, this class now includes 3.4 million people in a population of approximately 48 million African people.[15] It had fewer than 250,000 people in 1993 when the population of people classified as African numbered 31,088,600.[16] Relatively small as this middle class is, its rise has contributed significantly to the growth of inequality in South Africa. In a trend already evident in 2001, economists Murray Leibbrandt, Ingrid Woolard, and Christopher Woolard found that "the Gini coefficients for each population group [continued to rise]...[but] are highest for the African group."[17] These trends continued after 2015. A study conducted by Hiroyuki Hino, Murray Leibbrandt, Ratjomose Machema, Muna Shifa, and myself con-

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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."[18] 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 interracial divides [between white and Black] are dwarfed by the intraracial class divisions that opened up from the late 1990s within the Black population."[19]

It is important to understand what inequality in education looked like when South Africa became a democracy in 1994. While schools, even *within* 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.[20] 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.[21]

Schooling for children classified as African was inferior. Teachers were underqualified. Classes were crowded with half of all African schools in the country running double sessions – mornings and afternoons – right up until the 1970s.[22] 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.[23] A major debate about this experience pivoted on whether schooling was for class domination or racial repression.[24] 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."[25]

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

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schools than on Black schools even though white learners only made up 17 percent of the learner population.[26] 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.[27] 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.

In 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 *Implementation Plan for Tirisano*.[28] 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."[29] At least twelve significant steps were taken by the new government.[30] Among the five most critical for equity were:

1. *The merger of the sixteen racialized education departments into a single national education department*. This was the first step of the democratic government in 1994.
2. *The promulgation of the Constitution and the South African Schools Act (SASA)*.[31] The Constitution articulated the principles of equality before the law: "Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law."[32] The SASA constituted the schooling system administratively as a single nonracial and equitable system. Importantly, it made schooling compulsory up to grade 9 and authorized the establishment of school governing bodies through which parents had the majority say for their schools' admission and language policies.
3. *The development of norms and standards to redress imbalances inherited from apartheid*.[33] They reset imbalances in teacher-pupil ratios between schools that were formerly segregated for white students and Black students, and further specified what school infrastructure a school should have. The Norms and Standards for School Funding stipulated that 60 percent of education expenditure had to be allocated to the poorest 40 percent of schools within each province.[34]

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4. *The provision of fee-free schools.* 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.[35] Quintile 1–3 schools were relieved from the burden of collecting fees from parents and were awarded higher per capita subsidies.
5. *The revision of the curriculum.* 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.[36] The introduction of these measures, however, significantly improved access. Gross enrollment ratios reached 100 percent in 2001 in the compulsory phase of schooling.[37] 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.[38] And by 2016, the levels of annual per capita subvention for quintiles 1–3 were significantly higher than those for children in the schools of the wealthy. Important equitable steps were made in bringing them toward the minimal standards defined in terms of the Norms and Standards prescripts.

Other important interventions included the establishment of the National School Nutrition Program in 1994 as one of the first one-hundred-days projects of the new president, Nelson Mandela, and the scholar transport program.[39] The School Nutrition Program currently provides daily meals to more than nine million children in over two thousand public schools, while the transport program

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Table 1
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, *Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding,* 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 R 27,600 (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.[40]

There were several positives 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.[41] 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.[42] 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.[43]

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."[44] This stipulation was ratified by a constitutional court that ruled it was the state's duty to provide basic education to all citizens.[45]

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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.[46] 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.[47] 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.[48]

The *push from below* 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.[49] 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).

Racially diverse as schools have become – in some respects, they no longer reflect their historical beginnings, since many formerly white schools are now entirely Black – class distinctions still feature prominently in the makeup of schools. Interesting manifestations of this include children classified as African becoming the majority in all the formerly racialized subsystems – except for former colored schools, where children classified as colored remain in the clear majority. Those schools share many of the historic inadequacies of schools catering for children deemed to be African. This suggests class choices being made by African parents who do not see these schools as being better than the schools with which they were historically associated during apartheid. At the same time, at the upper end of the privileged spectrum, middle-ranking (in terms of prestige) former white schools have seen white flight. Many of those schools are now entirely Black. As geographer Mark Hunter describes in *Race for Education*, white children from modest working-class backgrounds are seeking places in more prestigious white schools.[50] As a result, as Gruijters, Elbers, and Reddy make clear, children classified as white still predominate in elite former white public schools, occupying 62 percent of the places available.[51]

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Table 2
Learner Distribution by Racial Group at Historically Segregated Schools in Gauteng Province, 2003

School Designation	Ex-DET (African)	Ex-HOA (White)	Ex-HOR (Colored)	Ex-HOD (Indian)	Total
Black	828,666	138,516	37,718	35,295	1,040,195
White	16	241,784	9	31	241,840
Colored	2,793	20,399	48,380	2,287	73,859
Indian	231	14,177	156	17,399	31,963

Source: Christina E. N. Amsterdam, Mokubung Nkomo, and Everard Weber, "School Desegregation Trends in Gauteng Province," *Africa Education Review* 9 (1) (2012): 27–46.

Table 3
Learner Distribution by Racial Group at Historically Segregated Schools, 2021

School Designation	Ex-DET (African)	Ex-HOA (White)	Ex-HOR (Colored)	Ex-HOD (Indian)
Black	98.8%	54.4%	33.2%	73%
White	0.5%	29.4%	0.2%	0.5%
Colored	0.5%	12.5%	66.3%	3.2%
Indian	0.2%	3.6%	0.3%	23.3%

Source: Rob Gruijters, Benjamin Elbers, and Vijay Reddy, "Opportunity Hoarding and Elite Reproduction: School Segregation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Social Forces* 103 (1) (2024): 21.

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Black middle-class parents clearly want their children in what they perceive to be better schools. While the data on household expenditure on education is scanty, indications are that the cost of schooling is high for all parents. In 2000, a survey conducted by South Africa's National Treasury found that "although the poorest fifth of all households pay low fees of around R 50 per year in absolute terms, this constitutes a high proportion of household income. The very poorest spend, on average, 2% of income on school fees, while the figure for middle- and high-income groups is around 1%."[52] The Trends in International Mathemat-

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.[53] 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.[54] 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).[55] With more than half of the quintile 4 and 5 schools now being majority Black, this group of parents is willing to devote between R 30,000 and R 60,000 (between USD 1,881 and 3,762) each year to keep their children in the top end of the public school system and between R 100,000 and R 200,000 (between USD 5,553 and USD 11,107) in the private school system, where they are now also in the majority.[56]

The *push from above* is more political. These politics take their impetus from the country's foundational educational "equalizing" piece of legislation: the South African Schools Act. SASA provided that a "governing body of a public school must take all reasonable measures within its means to supplement the resources provided by the State in order to improve the quality of education provided by the school to all learners at the school."[57] This power had been accorded essentially to keep the middle class in the public school system.[58] The result was that schools in economically privileged areas, almost all of them white, charged high fees, while those in poorer areas, could not. The government became aware of this problem in 2007 and introduced the quintile system, which exempted poorer schools from charging fees and, as described above, put in place a subsidy per capita framework that significantly shifted funding on an equitable basis from the rich to the poor.

Devised as South Africa's primary equalizing instrument in preserving parents' rights to determine their schools' fee levels, the quintile system allowed wealthier parents to raise levels of quality provision in their schools beyond those that existed during apartheid. Schools in quintiles 4 and 5 were able to charge fees that turned them into quasi-private institutions. While their levels of state subvention were significantly reduced – they received R 389 per learner in 2008, compared to the sum of R 738 allocated to learners in quintile 1 – the collection of school fees produced a per capita annual expenditure of R 4,022 on their children.[59] This produced per capita expenditure disparities that were even greater than those experienced under apartheid.[60] Currently, 75 percent of all learners in the system are in no-fee schools, many of which carry the legacy disadvantages of being largely Black and poor, and 25 percent are in privileged schools, largely formerly white, serving the expanded postapartheid and no-longer-only-white middle class.[61]

The government has recently proposed a set of amendments to SASA to curtail parental authority over admissions and language policy.[62] Its justification for this

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curtailment is to act, as it says, in "the best interests of the child, with emphasis on equality as provided for in Section 9 of the *Constitution* and equity."[63] Important as these proposed amendments are, the draft legislation continues to protect parental rights to improve the quality of education provided by the school. Parents have and will continue to use this protection to determine the fee structures of their schools and thereby make available to their children the best teachers, facilities, and other educational affordances they can provide and, importantly, control who is admitted into the school. They do so by taking control of school governing bodies (SGBs).

As the chair of a Ministerial Review Committee, I conducted a 2003 study of the historical racial group makeup of SGBs. The study found that while many former white schools had become majority Black, they were still largely governed by white parents.[64] Most SGBs were also dominated by the elite within most communities. In seventeen case studies we included in the study, "it remain[ed] the case, that middle-class or emerging middle-class people tend to be dominant, if not in the majority.... Very evident in the 17 schools were university lecturers, educators ... lawyers and a scattering of other professional occupations."[65] Writing some years later on how SGBs are functioning in affluent schools, education scholar Jan Heystek argued that white parents continue to dominate the membership and running of school governing bodies.[66] Table 4 provides an indication of how SGBs are constituted in schools in terms of their historical racialized departmental designations. Note the overrepresentation of white parents in the SGBs of former House of Assembly (that is, formerly white) schools. While Black learners constituted up to 30 percent of the learner profile in 2003, their parents made up only 11 percent of their SGBs' membership.

It is, however, not only race that is at play in the composition of the SGBs. Class factors play an important role in the ability of parents to participate in these governing bodies. The major scholarly studies of parental profiles in SGBs suggest there is much greater middle-class representation in SGBs than there is representation from poorer parents.[67] Ruijters, Elbers, and Reddy argue that this development constitutes "elite capture" of schools.[68] The elites, a coming together of white families with generational wealth and Black families new to the status, use the SGBs to hoard opportunity. Ruijters, Elbers, and Reddy say that what is taking place here does not require political power.[69] It may be so, but I would suggest that it operates off deliberate political and social attitudes of superiority – both those of race and class. Their intent is to keep Black and, more pointedly, poor children out of the country's privileged schools. This attitude was evident in a 2011 court case brought by a Johannesburg primary school, Rivonia Primary, a former white school that challenged, drawing on Section 5 (5) of SASA, which secures the power of parents to determine their schools' admission policy, a decision of the South Gauteng High Court that the Gauteng Department of Education could compel the

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Table 4
Racial Group Distribution in School Governing Bodies of Historically Segregated Schools

School Governing Bodies	Ex-DET (African)	Ex-HOA (White)	Ex-HOR (Colored)	Ex-HOD (Indian)	Total
Black	96%	11%	8%	72%	60%
White	2%	79%	3%	0.2%	24%
Colored	1%	6%	81%	1.2%	8%
Indian	0.4%	4%	1%	27%	7%
Other	0.15%	0%	5.75%	0%	0.6%

School Governing Bodies include parents, educators, support staff, and learners. Source: Department of Education, *Review of School Governance: South African Public Schools, Report of the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance* (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2004), 60.

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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.[70]

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."[71]

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 2015 TIMSS 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.[72] In the 2019 TIMSS, there was a 75-point gap between learners from disadvantaged and privileged backgrounds.[73]

How has the COVID-19 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 COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education systems globally, affecting the most vulnerable learners the hardest. It has increased inequalities and exacerbated a pre-existing education crisis."[74] 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.[75]

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 and work with what the DBE intended, the poorer were not. Strikingly, in appraising levels of learning in the system, the DBE's annual report stated that there had been a marked increase in underperformance among learners in 2020:

> there was an increase in the number of schools that achieved below 65 percent passes (in the number of students sitting for the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examination) which is a benchmark for underperformance as stipulated in Circular D2 of 2017. The number of underperforming schools increased from 1363 in the 2019 National Senior Certificate examinations to 5367 in 2020.[76]

The highest number of underperforming schools came from provinces with the highest number of schools serving the poor and those with large proportions of rural schools: that is, the Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, and Limpopo provinces. The DBE did not attribute this collapse to the pandemic, but there was little doubt that it had played an important role. The impact, more directly attributed, was seen too in the 2021 Progress in International Literacy Study results for grade 4 South African learners.[77] The results showed a systemwide collapse of reading

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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 make intricate connections between events); and 1 percent attained the advanced benchmark of 625 and above (the ability to integrate ideas). Markedly, 81 percent scored well below the lowest benchmark to produce an average score for the country of 288 points, more than 40 points below the score of 320 attained in 2016.[78] The result is that COVID-19 has compounded the inequalities of an already deeply unequal system.

After thirty years of democracy, South Africa is in a distinctly different place from where it had been during apartheid. While the specter of race, performed and felt in a range of ways, from the crude to the subtle, continues to haunt the country, the factor of class has changed to configure discrimination and inequality in significantly more complex terms. The combined effect of these developments, in a context of weakening global economic conditions, has been to keep privilege/disadvantage and superiority/inferiority as the distinguishing marks of South Africa's social character, but to do so in distinctly new forms. Privilege remains racial but now also has clearer class features. How the country will better live up to its commitment to produce greater equality is more easily said than done. We need more than rhetoric. South Africa has to understand the new conditions in which it finds itself, and to develop practical policies that can be implemented in ways that hold the administrators of the system – both officials and parents – accountable.

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