Poverty, race and children's progress at school in South Africa

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Executive summary

This briefing hopes to provide information that will contribute towards education policy development in South Africa. It arises from a collaboration led by the School of Development Studies (SDS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and is based on the analysis of the 2008 National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS). It aims to explore the inequalities in children's schooling in South Africa.

Evidence from the study, Timaeus, I., Simelane, S., & Letsoalo, T. (2011). *Poverty, race, and children's progress at school in South Africa,* shows that in South Africa, great progress has been made in enrolment of children into school at the appropriate age but there remains differentials in school grade progression by race and geographical areas. The research suggests that the difference in educational outcome in South Africa will only see improvements if policy concentrates not only on continuing to ensure that students remain at school but also on developing complementary strategies to change the poverty landscape of the country.

Background: importance of the problem

Education is one of the indicators of human development and wellbeing. In South Africa, progress in educational attainment is linked to the historical and social difficulties inherited from the Apartheid era when education policies were weighted in favour of the white minority. This previous fragmentation of the education system continues to shape the current education system. The South African Department of Basic Education has noted that the inequalities that emerge can be beyond the scope of the department itself.

The post-1994 government has made a deliberate effort to bridge any inequalities between the previously white schools and schools previously designated for other races by giving all schools an equal amount of resources. However, the achievements of students in previously Bantu education schools is strikingly worse than those of other minority groups[1] and children in formerly non-white schools are still more likely to repeat a class. This illustrates the extent to which the political history of South Africa has created structural challenges that are entrenched within the Department of Basic Education.

The socio-economic and demographic backgrounds of children are among the main factors behind disparities in school progress among population groups. Policy interventions should therefore address these factors which are creating inequitable opportunities in the lives of these children.

Critique of policy options

A number of policies have been put in place by the democratic government in an attempt to change these inequalities through education:

- The bill of rights in the constitution states that every citizen has a right to basic education, including adult basic education and further education.
- The country's overarching socioeconomic policy framework views education as an important mechanism through which inequities that were inherited from the Apartheid era can be addressed[2].
- The new government has integrated the schooling systems and homeland administrations that were once separated along racial lines into a single system with a unified resource allocation mechanism and equal pay structure for teachers.
- The government's commitment to education is evident in its spending: Since 1994, spending on education has accounted for substantial proportions of the country's Gross Domestic Product.

[1] Bhorat and Oosthuizen, 2009 *Determinants of Grade 12 pass rates in the post-Apartheid South African schooling system.* Journal of African Economics, 18(4): 634-666.
[2] African National Congress, 1994 *The Reconstruction and Development Programme: A Policy Framework.* (Johannesburg: Umnyango Publications).

Despite the considerable dedication and financial investment that has been channeled into the education system, it has failed to ensure consistent acceptable standards throughout the country, particularly in relation to the following:

Basic facilities: Many schools still operate under difficult conditions, lacking basic facilities such as buildings, electricity, clean running water or phone lines.

Poor training: Many teachers in previously Bantu education schools are a product of the teachers' colleges where they were given poor training during the Apartheid era. This problem makes it difficult to establish the professional skills needed for the education system and to equip teachers with effective techniques to perform high quality work.

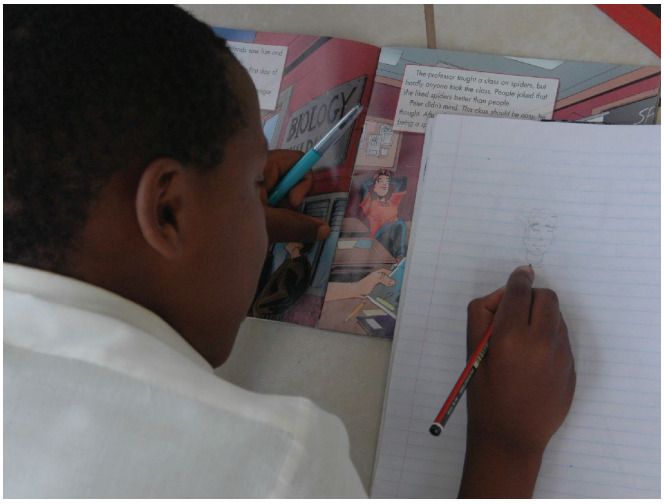
Access to extra funds: While all schools are allowed to raise extra funds through school fees and other charges, it is the Model C Schools which have been successful in this. The parents of children enrolled in these formerly white schools are largely middle income earners. The extra funding has enabled such schools to employ extra teachers and enjoy complementary facilities where students are equipped with necessary skills to do well in their school subjects.

African student's performance levels are lower than other racial groups in part because of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, comparative research[3] indicates that variation between schools in the reading and mathematical skills of children who complete primary school in South Africa are wide and diverse.

One can therefore conclude that so far policies in education have failed to address the underlying inequalities which remain between racial groups, inevitably reproducing the same trends found during the Apartheid era.

Evidence from data

Data from the 2008 NIDS was used to analyse the relationship between the socioeconomic status and school progress among South African children. NIDS is the first nationally-representative household panel study to be mounted in South Africa. The baseline wave of NIDS in 2008 conducted interviews on 7 305 households and collected data on more than 28 000 people[4]. This dataset is relevant to this study because it contains basic demographic information on all household members; information on their dwelling and access to utilities; and detailed income and expenditure data; as well as information on enrolment progress through school.



Earlier research on schooling outcomes in South Africa analysed school-based datasets and surveys. These either lack individual-level information on the socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds of the children attending the schools, or obtained it by asking children in school about their domestic circumstances. While school-based datasets provide rich information on children's schools, they produce limited data on their homes. An analysis of the 2008 NIDS therefore provides a unique opportunity to update this previous research and investigate the extent to which poverty continues to hold back children's progress at school in South Africa and in particular, the inter-related effects of socioeconomic status, race and environment.

Results[5]

Enrolment

The results show that at the time of 2008 NIDS, there had been a substantial improvement in the enrolment of children in school at the appropriate age as compared to 15 years earlier when the 1993 Living Standards and Development Survey was conducted. Late enrolment had become far less common and more than 95% of children remained in school until the statutory school-leaving age.

[3] Van der Berg, S. (2008) *How effective are poor schools: Poverty and Education outcomes in South Africa.* Studies in Educational Evaluation, 34(3): 145-154

[4] Leibbrandt, M., Woolard, I. and de Villier, L. (2009) *Methodology: Report on NIDS Wave 1.* NIDS Technical Paper 1. (Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town).

[5] Results reflected are from NIDS 2008.

School Progress

- Educational progress was far worse in the rural areas than the urban ones.
- The progress of African students at school was worse than Coloured, Indian and White students, but this is largely explained by their lower socio-economic status and location of residence.
- Girls not only progressed better at school than boys, but their parents were also significantly more likely to have enrolled their daughters at the correct age than they would their sons.

What also emerged from the results was that, as expected, children from relatively well-off households were progressing better at school than those from poorer households. Moreover, the children of educated women were doing much better at school than the children of uneducated women.

Matriculation

Essentially, socioeconomic status had most influence on the eventual outcome of children's schooling with very large differentials in matriculation according to the income measures of poverty of the households. In other words, African learners were not different from White, and Indian children with regards to matriculation when controlled for being of the same socio-economic status and local residence.

When looking at those from more privileged home backgrounds, White children were less likely to start school on time than African children and Africans were about twice as likely to matriculate successfully from school as young people from other racial groups but with a similar socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even after the collapse of the Apartheid regime, huge inequalities still exist in children's educational outcomes in South Africa. Although enrolment has improved across the country, African children remain more likely to repeat grades than children with similar household and socio-economic backgrounds from other groups.

One success of the post-Apartheid period is that race in itself is no longer a constraint on how well children are educated. However, poverty is still a factor that prevents all children from enjoying an equal educational opportunity.

This policy brief is based on a research paper, Timaeus, I., Simelane, S., & Letsoalo, T. (2011) *Poverty, race, and children's progress at school in South Africa.* It summarises the research and analysis done by the project team based at the School of Development Studies, UKZN, University of Cape Town and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. This policy brief has received the financial support of the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), a partnership programme of the Presidency of the Republic of South Africa and the European Union. The content of this policy brief can in no way be taken to reflect the views of these partners.

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