

# Overcoming Apartheid-Era Education System in South Africa

The post-apartheid order in South Africa has tried to redress the socio-economic injustices of apartheid, but old fissures and strata remain stubbornly prevalent. A good number of previously disadvantaged individuals have joined the ranks of wealth and privilege, but the majority remain trapped in persistent poverty. The [persistence](#) of an unjust educational system, to the detriment of the long-suffering black South Africans, contributes a great deal to South Africa's lopsided society.

When the Afrikaner-led National Party won the 1948 election in South Africa, the circumstances of the long-suffering black South Africans became even more desperate, and racism in South Africa became even more barefaced. In [Long Walk to Freedom](#), Nelson Mandela describes apartheid as a new codification of an old idea. Even when South Africa was under the British Crown, racial injustice was the zeitgeist. What the National Party did was to formally stratify long-standing racial divisions.

Education, the general acquisition of knowledge, is one of the most important tools for one's emancipation. Thus, withholding it is an effective way of maintaining edifices of segregation, such as apartheid. The National Party knew this, and so in 1953 it introduced the [Bantu Education Act](#). With the aid of this pernicious edict, the South African government [wrestled](#) mission schools from churches and forced them under government control. After the Act was passed, churches were confined to providing religious instruction. This was a well-calculated ruse to limit the influence of the church on black education.

Moreover, language was always a vexed issue in South Africa's

education as it was used to cement settlers' cultural domination of the country. Unsurprisingly, the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction sparked the famed student-led Soweto protests of 1976.

What is more sinister about Bantu Education was the racially essentialist undertones that formed its basis. This brand of education was aimed at preparing black people for employment opportunities that were more suited to menial exertion, as drawers of water and hewers of wood, as is popularly described. In other words, their skills had to reflect the lowly esteem in which state laws held them. Hendrik Verwoerd, the brain behind Bantu Education, [justified](#) a separate education for black people, arguing that there is no place for a black African "in the European community *above the level of certain forms of labour*. Within his own community, however, all doors are open [emphasis added]." An evil justification for Bantu Education was the impression that an adulterated version of education was more suited to the intellectual limitations that were thought to be intrinsic to black minds. The fact that apartheid came only three years after the collapse of the Nazi regime demonstrated the resilience and, yes, the allure of racial chauvinism. From this unfortunate backdrop, it was expected that the post-apartheid order would seek to redress past injustices as a substantial way of ending time-honoured inequalities.

One of post-apartheid South Africa's success stories is enrolment for basic education. According to the Department of Basic Education's [Action Plan 2024](#) "in recent years 99% of children of compulsory school-going age – ages 7 to 15 – were enrolled at school." Effectively, this means that South Africa reached the United Nation's [Millennium Development Goal number two](#) in terms of universal enrolment in primary education. However, the impressive enrolments are belied by a troubling reality, which is that despite increased uptake of learners, clear-cut differences in the educational system persist. For

instance, while the literacy rate stands at 87%, school-going statistics paint a bleak picture. Still, less than 40% of learners who enrol for primary education go on to pass their matriculation examinations, and still less go on to earn a degree in record time. In terms of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), South Africa usually [ranks](#) at the bottom of the various rankings, vastly behind some of its African counterparts, such as Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Sadly, it is learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (predominantly black communities) who bear the brunt of the country's persistently unequal education system.

Several factors are responsible for the educational inequalities that continue to bedevil South Africa. First, inadequate and total lack of transport continue to haunt low-income learners in South Africa. An education advocacy group called [Equal Education](#) supported 12 schools in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial High Court that lamented the lack of transport from learners in schools from poor communities. The High Court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs and enjoined the provincial departments of education and transport to start providing safe and reliable transport by 1 April 2018. Even though this was one case, it represents a general lack of reliable transport for learners from poor and rural backgrounds, thereby typifying inequalities that have been longstanding between urban and affluent schools, and their rural and impoverished counterparts. For rural learners, especially those in primary school, reliable transport could not only improve class attendance, but protect learners from hazards such as rivers, wild animals, and human ambushes.

Secondly, the current teacher-training system in South Africa is not fit for purpose. For one thing, the current training does not take into cognizance the educational background of learners and, thus, does not address the inequities that pervade the education system. Since teachers are typically moved from one placement to another, this reality calls for

adaptable skills (taking into account the background of learners) which could be garnered with the help of lifelong learning in line with the [Sustainable Development Goal](#) number four (SDG4) that calls for inclusive and equitable education accompanied by lifelong learning.

Thirdly, in South Africa's rural and low-income areas, the dearth of good infrastructure occludes the attainment of quality education. According to a parliamentary school infrastructure mid-year [report](#) for 2019/20 expenditure of the Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG), which funds the government's Provincial Schools Build Programme, was 41% of the allocated budget, and some provinces were underspending. Maintenance of mid-year spending was 32% of the total budget. This is hardly encouraging for a country that still has overcrowded classrooms, a deficit in science laboratories and library materials, and a lack of electricity for some schools.

To make matters worse, the onslaught of Covid-19 has put into sharper relief the need for using technology and non-physical modes of teaching. For learners and students who come from low-earning backgrounds and societies, the off-site learning that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced education into has added to the existing challenges. While teachers and learners from traditionally more affluent backgrounds and institutions are more likely to access the internet and hence lessen the blow of non-contact instruction, the same has not been the case for those with limited or no internet access at all.

Clearly, South Africa's post-apartheid dispensation deserves plaudits for some admirable efforts made to redress inherited inequalities. However, education remains a sore point despite increased spending. As far as low-income and rural communities are concerned, a substantial transformation still eludes long-suffering groups.

*This article was extracted from Africa's Health and Education Magazine that's currently on the stands.*