Recovering Education: Using the Experiences and Learning Acquired to Build New and Better Education Systems 89
BCES Conference Books, 2023, Volume 21. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society
ISSN 2534-8426 (online), ISSN 1314-4693 (print)
ISBN 978-619-7326-13-0 (online), ISBN 978-619-7326-14-7 (print)

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The Impact of the Racial and Economic Divides on Access to Quality Education in South Africa and the United States

Abstract

Struggles for educational equity in the United States (US) and South Africa (SA), particularly with regard to race, class, and ethnicity, remain significant and have become even more critical during and following the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Many scholars have focused on the daily struggles of school-aged children, indicating that millions in each nation are homeless, food insecure, and without health care. Moreover, schools often serve critical social reproduction functions in addition to their primary role of advancing learning by providing feeding schemes, computers and internet connectivity, and, in many cases, essential childcare for workers. Since 2020, the pandemic and lockdowns negatively impacted the education delivery system in both countries by enhancing the socio-economic and digital divides. Both countries struggled to provide equitable access to quality education for all children, regardless of their socio-economic status (SES) or geographic location. Through a comparative lens, we analyze attempts by the US and SA to address racial and economic divides over the past decades, and particularly during the pandemic and its disruptions, to better understand the mechanisms education systems used to address stakeholder inequalities. After a brief overview of the historical paths to greater social and economic equality made by both nations the paper explores the significant roles that race, ethnicity, and SES continue to play in determining access to quality education, especially during times of disruptions such as the recent pandemic. It also asks if the economic divide has become the more powerful and consistent factor determining access to well-resourced schools. The paper concludes by asking if patterns of historical racial and ethnic inequalities are now being replaced by an even greater economic divide that continues to provide patterns of unequitable education for children based on their race, ethnicity, SES, and access to supportive resources.

Keywords: COVID-19, educational equity, social reproduction, South Africa, United States

Introduction: What is educational inequality?

Worldwide there is a myriad of inequalities, such as income inequality, inequality of opportunity, political inequalities reflected in power relationships, and social inequality based on an individual's class, race, ethnicity, gender or language. Moreover, educational inequality can be imposed by many factors such as gender, social stratification, or differences in parental income and/or occupation. Unfortunately, much educational inequality is attributed to economic disparities, which often reflect racial or ethnic categorization and the often-accompanying factor of geographic location. For this paper, we will examine the problem of educational inequality, which may also be a product of those inequalities previously mentioned. Though educational inequality is a very complex phenomenon, it can often be defined as the unequal

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distribution of academic resources which include, but are not limited to, school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, educational books and materials, and inconsistent access to technology through devices and the availability of consistent high-speed internet access. These communities are usually historically disadvantaged and/or oppressed, and often comprise individuals belonging to marginalized groups that are frequently denied access to adequately resourced schools. This inequitable access to quality education often results in significant differences in educational success and can ultimately suppress individuals' social and economic mobility.

The cornerstones of this paper are the racial and economic divides that impact access to quality education, with a focus on two nations, South Africa (SA) and the United States (US). After defining these inequalities and their potential impact on education inequality, it also examines the impact of COVID-19 and the ensuing digital divide that has made accessing quality education for all children an even greater challenge. The paper concludes with suggestions on how educators might include more culturally relevant pedagogy, a belief in student resilience, and the need for decolonization of education.

The impact of the racial and economic divides on accessing quality education

During the 21st century, and particularly during the 4th Industrial Revolution, two factors appear to reproduce and even strengthen inequalities. The first, often termed the "racial divide", perpetuates historic patterns of inequalities based on race or ethnicity, including inequalities in education and life chances. This divide has persisted through colonization and decolonization in South African schools, and through segregation and integration in schools throughout the US.

The second factor, often termed the "economic divide", focuses on the role of socio-economic status (SES) in perpetuating historical inequalities in schools in the US and SA.

The impact of the racial divide on accessing quality education

Though located thousands of miles apart, the US and SA share patterns of social and economic inequalities based on race and ethnicity. First, there is a pattern of inequality visible through continued segregation of schooling despite decades of policies and practices designed to provide equitable education for all children. Moreover, while many US desegregation and SA post-apartheid policies have evolved over time to address these inequalities, there remain institutionalized and sustained inequalities regarding educational opportunities.

The struggles for greater educational equity in the US parallel ongoing decoloniality and the Africanization struggles within SA, though the US began this difficult process in 1954, four decades before SA moved forward with its post-apartheid era in 1994. Unfortunately, whether cloaked in terms of decoloniality, indigenization, or desegregation the struggle to provide equitable access to quality education for all children continues.

For example, Black et al. (2020, p. 48) suggested that:

> *As in South Africa, the U.S. has millions of children who are homeless, food insecure, and without health care. Schools serve critical social reproduction functions for the vulnerable beyond their core role of advancing learning, by providing feeding schemes,*

> *computers and connectivity to those without, and – in many cases – childcare for essential workers.*

For Walker and Archung (2003, p. 25):

> *… the education of Blacks in both countries was embedded in a system of racial segregation, designed to promote Whites into positions of leadership, land ownership, and economic control and to doom Blacks to subservience.*

Moreover, Christie (2020) added that educators also needed to critically analyze and decolonize curricular content by providing children with both culturally relevant and historically accurate content and modes of classroom delivery.

Of course, when attempting any comparisons between education and social issues within the US and SA, it is necessary to acknowledge the significant variance between their education and cultural histories. For example, while African-Americans are a minority within the US and most have family histories dating back to slavery, Black South Africans are the majority within their country and were not systematically enslaved. Nonetheless, there are threads of comparability between the two countries which will now be explored by examining opportunities to provide greater equity for all students.

The impact of the racial divide on accessing quality education in South African schools

Though people have lived in what is now SA for over 100,000 years, the country has only recently moved beyond an entrenched history of colonialism, racial and economic separation, and inequality, including the Native Land Act of 1913 that established "Bantustans" through the forced eviction of thousands of Black Africans from their traditional lands and homes from 1948 until 1994. Unfortunately, until the election of Nelson Mandela as President in 1994, schools and universities within SA remained legally and racially segregated, including unequitable funding patterns.

More recently, through decoloniality and a greater focus on intercultural perspectives, SA continued to address its unequitable history, though as Ntshoe (2017) has noted, "new forms of hidden and subtle discrimination, racism and resegregation are developing in South Africa" (p. 70). These inequalities exist within current patterns of teaching and learning reflected in Outcomes-Based Education and Curriculum and Assessment Policy statements, which continue to focus on broad-based education, rather than on indigenous knowledge and intercultural and diversity sensitive education (South African Department of Basic Education, 2021).

The impact of the racial divide on accessing quality education in US schools

In the US, scholarship (e.g., Ford, 2014) suggests that school districts continue to segregate by race, ethnicity, and SES which reflect both systemic and historic racism within American society and its schools. Reconstruction, which followed the end of the American Civil War in 1865, initially opened schools for freed slaves, though these facilities were racially segregated and of poor quality when compared to schools for White children. This educational inequity endured for more than a century, buttressed by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court ruling that maintained "separate but unequal" – rather than the stated "separate but equal". Walker and Archung (2003) suggest that southern Whites purposefully "segregated African Americans into separate schools that received less money in state expenditures per child, maintained poorer

facilities, had fewer library books and other material educational advantages, and received little or no transportation for students seeking to attend school" (p. 21).

However, almost six decades after the historic 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education (Warren, 1954) ruling that separation was inherently unequal and ordering racial desegregation with "all deliberate speed", school enrollment in the US south, and throughout much of the country, continued to segregate not only by race, but by class, resulting in a growing racial and economic divide.

The impact of the economic divide on accessing quality education

Unfortunately, even with laws meant to move the US and SA beyond historical patterns of dejure educational racial/ethnic segregation, defacto segregation based on socioeconomic class often functions to maintain these inequalities. Economically segregated school systems, often based on economically segregated neighborhoods, perpetuated inequalities.

The impact of the economic divide on accessing quality education in South African schools

When analyzing how the economic divide impacted access to quality education in SA, it is helpful to refer to the Gini Index (which is a summary measure of income inequality), which listed SA as the most economically unequal nation in the world. The most recent Gini Index for SA, 63.0 (where 0 represents perfect equality and 100 implies perfect inequality), is the highest of all nations included in World Bank data. For comparison, the Gini Index for the US is 41.5, the UK is 35.1 and Finland at 27.7 (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, attainment of the highest levels of education within SA, such as tertiary and advanced technical education may ultimately depend on costs (both explicit and explicitly), parental and personal aspirations and perceptions, societal and cultural values, cycles of demand and supply within the labor market, and perhaps most importantly, an individual learner's motivation.

Throughout much of SA, a lack of capacity in high-quality schools that focus on a transformed curriculum for all students, has maintained a classist, if not a racist school system with the continued migration of learners to previously White-dominated schools. Moreover, the use of English as the dominant language of instruction can continue patterns of inequality. Unfortunately, beyond issues of language, other factors can maintain unequitable access to quality education, such as costs for transport, uniforms, extra-mural activities linked to the arts and sports, and parent association fundraising. However, the greatest sources of potential unequitable access to quality education for all South African learners stem from the period of apartheid and the current need for a supply of highly-qualified teachers, regardless of race, class, or ethnicity. To this end, SA needs to focus on developing and maintaining quality teacher education programs that are more inclusive and diverse.

Regrettably, in modern SA, unemployment or underemployment continues to sustain an unequal divide. For example, SA's unemployment rate in 2022 was 36.8% for Black/Africans, 26.5% for Colored, 13.7% for Indian/Asians, and 7.8% for Whites (Statista, 2022). Not surprisingly, unequal unemployment rates were also reflected in unequal school attendance, particularly with regard to the level of family wealth. As reported by UNESCO (2022), the disparity between poor and rich students completing particular levels of schooling became greater as the level of education rose. For example, 72% of students from the poorest families, but 98% from the richest families

completed lower secondary in 2016, while only 21% of students coming from the poorest families, but 80% of those students coming from the richest families completed upper secondary school. Moreover, where a student lives can also impact access to quality education. For example, UNESCO reported that 83% of students from rural areas, but 91% of students from urban areas completed lower secondary school, while 34% of students from rural areas and 55% of students from urban areas completed upper secondary school.

Wealth and location have clearly impacted school attendance and completion in SA, though issues such as the unequal ratios of educators to learners, a lack of trained teachers and quality infrastructure, a dependence on public transportation, and urbanization underscore the impact of the economic divide on accessing quality education in SA.

The impact of the economic divide on accessing quality education in US schools

In the US, as in SA, the disparity between poor and rich students completing their schooling became greater as the level of education rose. While there was relative parity in school attendance through the lower secondary level, patterns of inequality began to appear in completion rates at the upper secondary level, with 89% of the poorest students and 97% of the richest students completing upper secondary. However, the impact of SES becomes quite clear with regard to tertiary completion rates in 2019, which recorded 22% for the poorest, but 74% for the richest students (UNESCO, 2022).

The impact of COVID-19 on school inequalities

As we emerge globally from pandemic lockdowns, it has become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational delivery systems worldwide, including within the US and SA. It enhanced the social-economic divide, including digital inequality, and the ability of families to maintain a supportive home environment (Black, Spreen & Vally, 2020).

Unfortunately, even with heroic attempts by educators, students, and their families to maintain pre-COVID levels of achievement, standardized test scores reflected a decline in pass rates in most countries. The impact of COVID-19 also affected students differently, depending on the level of schooling, their race/ethnicity, and their SES. For example, in the US students of color and low SES students were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, experienced more mental health challenges, and had parents that experienced greater difficulty in adjusting their work life to school closures than the overall student population (Garcia & Cowan, 2022; Gazmararian et al., 2021).

While education in SA was challenged by similar school shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced in the US, Mhlanga and Moloi's (2020) study suggested that these challenges also motivated a digital transformation. The authors described that during the necessary lockdowns, a variety of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) inspired the use of new technological tools from primary through university education where educational activities were switched to remote (online) learning. Though 4IR had its challenges, it presented an opportunity, according to Mhlanga and Moloi for greater access to education for all within SA.

Moreover, it also provided innovations in distance learning and greater involvement of parents in their children's education. During the pandemic, many educational communities searched for strategies methods and tools to help prevent or

reduce gaps in learners' education, with many of these strategies incorporating digital devices and online learning approaches. Moreover, during the pandemic new tools and strategies were developed to assist students as they adapted to new teaching and learning approaches, including asynchronous classes provided from elementary to university levels. Overall, the goal was to keep children safe while systematically reducing or eliminating learning gaps.

Concluding remarks: Moving beyond the racial and economic divides

Moving beyond the racial and economic divides, we need to focus on the need for culturally relevant pedagogy and student resilience, with education again being viewed as the great equalizer. This perspective was underscored by Gorski (2016) and other scholars who suggested adopting a pedagogical approach focused on "equity literacy". For Gorski, this perspective should include select teacher dispositions and skills that allow them to recognize and address conditions that deny some students access to quality education. To achieve these ends, however, we must first focus on revising programs for both pre-service and in-service educators to include concepts that: a) there is a universal right to equitable educational opportunities; b) poverty is often linked to other factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and/or disability; and c) educators should focus on students' resilience, not student deficits.

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