

A society divided

How unequal education quality limits social mobility in South Africa

Background

Social mobility is the phenomenon whereby social class or income group changes from one generation to the next, or in a person's lifetime from one period to another. The term is often used to refer to upward movement that is sustained in the longer term. Intergenerational mobility reflects the degree to which children's outcomes (in the labour market and in life) cannot be explained by family background.

Objectives

The central focus of this research project was to investigate the role of education in promoting social mobility for the poor in the highly unequal South African economic landscape. This is particularly relevant in a country where the rapid expansion of educational attainment since the 1970s has not produced the desired labour market outcomes for many South Africans, for the most part perpetuating patterns of poverty and inequality along the apartheid dimensions of race and geography.

Specifically, the project aimed to understand the extent of social mobility, and the extent and nature of performance above expectations of schools and individuals; identify how individuals who break out of poverty do so, and in particular how education assists them in escaping from poverty; and develop tangible policy proposals to accelerate educational improvement and consequent social mobility.



Findings

- 1. Education quality is still poor:** International and national standardised assessment results show that while educational attainment has converged dramatically over time between races, poor schools still lag far behind their affluent counterparts in learning outcomes. By Grade 9, learners in poor (mostly black) schools, have a backlog of approximately 3.5 years relative to their rich school counterparts.
- 2. Large and early learning gaps:** Substantial learning gaps between learners in different schools are observable as early as the middle primary school years, making a strong case for decisive intervention as early as possible in a child's schooling career. As early as Grade 4, fewer than 30% of learners in the poorest 40% of schools are performing above international low learning benchmarks.
- 3. Importance of post-matric education:** Educational attainment is an important predictor of labour market outcomes, with years of education completed beyond Grade 12 offering extraordinarily high returns to educational investment, both in terms of employment probabilities and wages earned. In 2007, the wage per hour of someone who had achieved a degree was three times as large as for someone who had achieved only a matriculation.
- 4. Centrality of school quality:** New empirical evidence suggests that school education quality, usually omitted from earnings functions because of lack of data, is also strongly positively associated with future earnings. Therefore, learners who attend poor quality schools generally earn substantially less than those who attend good quality schools, even when they have the same education levels.
- 5. Unmet expectations:** The consequences of unequal education opportunities are particularly dire for many of South Africa's black youth, who despite having more education than previous generations and no longer facing discriminatory labour market legislation, have no better employment probabilities than older labour market participants. Thus, despite having achieved objective social mobility in terms of education, subjectively young black South Africans have not achieved as much as they would have liked relative to older generations who were less educated and subject to discriminatory labour market legislation.

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Conclusion

The findings are indicative of a dualistic education system that limits social mobility for the poor and perpetuates apartheid-era patterns of labour market inequality. The majority of South African learners essentially follow a learning trajectory that ultimately leads to poor access to tertiary education and poor labour market outcomes, which in turn perpetuate a cycle of desperation for generations to come that is almost impossible to escape from through the education system in its current state.

The persistence of deep inequality two decades after apartheid is a powerful indictment of the South African education system's failure to overcome past injustices, despite considerable shifts in government spending to poor schools. It is therefore of utmost importance that South Africa addresses inequalities in educational opportunity as early as possible to promote social mobility for the poor.



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