

Theme: Education

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The Manifestation of Poverty and Inequality in Education

The South African education system performs extremely poorly along a number of dimensions. A host of research, our own and that of others, has shown that this can be ascribed to a school system that is bimodal, i.e. where the distribution of test scores at every level exhibits sharp dualism between the smaller part of the school system, mainly those schools that historically served whites and Indians, which perform similarly to schools in developed countries, and the bigger parts of the system, historically serving mainly black and coloured children, which performs extremely weakly, also in comparison to most much poorer African countries. A fundamental concern is thus that the learning that takes place in schools is highly unequal with respect to the socio-economic status of children and their race group.

Though these performance differentials are evident throughout the school system, an important feature is that these inequalities in performance manifest early, so that by grade 4 it is already relatively clear which children have fallen so far behind that they would probably not be able to reach and pass matric with good enough marks to go on to university. Given the large returns on obtaining a university degree, this early failure of the education system has massive implications for labour market outcomes, and thus for social mobility. Low quality education is for many children a poverty trap.

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About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

Reasons for the persistence of the deep inequalities and poverty

Throughout the world, socio-economic status is correlated with cognitive outcomes in education, implying that it is difficult to overcome a poor background through educational interventions. However, the slope of the social gradient (the relationship between socio-economic status and test scores, for instance) is steeper in South Africa than in any other country for which data are available. Moreover, poor children in South Africa perform worse than equally poor children in countries such as Swaziland and Botswana, which points to systemic problems in the ability of South African schools to improve educational outcomes for poor children. What is clear is that until we raise the quality of education service delivery to the poor, intervening as early as possible, South Africa will not circumvent wider income inequalities.

Our work on “Identifying Binding Constraints in Education” has pointed to four problems that act as binding constraints in education, in the sense that failure to overcome these problems will probably mean that other interventions (such as the provision of more resources) would most probably only be successful to a limited degree. These constraints to improvement must be tackled first as they preclude progress in other areas and, as is not possible for governments to tackle all things well, prioritisation is necessary.

The four binding constraints to improved educational outcomes that must be addressed are:

1. Weak institutional functionality reflected in provincial department weaknesses in fulfilling critical administrative functions.
2. Undue union influence on administrations’ ability to act in children’s best interests.
3. Wasted learning time.
4. Weak teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, including skills to teach reading.

After synthesising years’ worth of collaborative research from contributors across economics, education and policy-making arenas, a unanimous conclusion was reached that quality improvements in basic education, particularly learning to read in the foundation phase, are a national priority. For all subjects, the curriculum assumes that children have learned how to read by the end of grade 3. But most children in South Africa do not acquire the most basic reading skills, thus never fully accessing the curriculum despite being promoted to higher grades. We perceive the massive failure of children to read for meaning (even in their home language) by the time they enter the intermediate phase of education in grade 4 (where most of them also have to cope with a new language of learning and teaching) as acting as a fifth binding constraint. The failure to learn to read means that children in the intermediate and subsequent phases cannot properly read in order to learn. This is a binding constraint to all further learning.

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What should be done about this?

We believe that a focus on the most fundamental learning outcome in primary school would have beneficial outcomes throughout the system. More specifically, we proposed that the Department of Basic Education adopt a unifying goal: Every child in South Africa must learn to read for meaning by the end of grade 3. More succinctly put: Every child should read.

The consequence of using this as a unifying goal would be that all other constraints that stand in the way of achieving these goals would need to be addressed, and that there would have to be a system in place to measure the extent to which this goal is reached.

Potential impact of poverty and inequality

The effect of successful interventions to improve reading in the foundation phase would be enhanced learning throughout the subsequent years, and it would reduce one of the major inequities at the starting gate. That is no guarantee that poverty and inequality in other spheres will be reduced, but the obverse is clear: Without improved education, it is very difficult to remove social inequalities and ensure that more people can be productive contributors to economic growth and development. That is the only way in which the country can lastingly deal with these problems. Without improving education, this would be impossible.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative:

