

# **Towards the Elimination of Disparities in Educational Provision: A Look at Zimbabwe and South Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper, while acknowledging the communal factors, diversity of religious and cultural lifestyles, language differences, socioeconomic differences, and the serious polarisation that divides the different races of Zimbabwe and South Africa, attempts to address the problem of securing equal educational opportunities for all.

As it is a known fact that pupils cannot reach their full development when denied equal educational opportunities, and, since all pupils in these two societies basically have the freedom to be educated, attempts to eradicate inequalities in educational provision based on racial, socioeconomic and religious grounds which were created during the apartheid era are made.

Suggestions are also made on how to identify these disparities. The need for further investigation on what best methods could be applied in order to eradicate them is also recommended.

## **Introduction**

It is a well-known fact that both Zimbabwe and South Africa have had a long history of racial segregation since the 19th century when white settlers arrived in these countries. Racism suffused in all fields in both Zimbabwe and South Africa. The key areas of racial discrimination were in workplaces, religious congregations, educational institutions, housing and in economic fields.

Many whites in the 1920s and 1930s believed that blacks were intellectually inferior to them and that they were only suitable to carry out manual, repetitive labour tasks (Foster, 1991). As apartheid or racial segregation deepened among races, polarisation between the opposed groups also increased.

It is therefore hardly surprising to note that educational provision among the different racial groups in these countries has been grossly unequal due to the policies based on segregation that were established during the pre-independence years.

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Despite the newly-won independence and the advent of majority rule in both countries, there is still a good deal of work to be carried out in the educational field to make educational provision equal, not only among different racial groups, but also among different levels of social stratification. This paper seeks to assist in the healing of the still existing divisions and disparities in educational provision in both countries.

## **Zimbabwe**

When Zimbabwe achieved Independence in 1980, it inherited an educational system based on inequality of opportunity for the four main racial groups – Coloureds, Indians, Europeans and Africans. In urban areas very few Africans (ie, blacks) had white collar jobs before independence. No Africans were allowed to enrol in whites-only schools. A handful of private schools would enrol one or two token blacks each year if they showed outstanding academic performance, had influential and wealthy parents or if they belonged to the same religious denomination (eg, Catholic Church) as the institutions.

European schools, which were often referred to as Group A schools, were situated in areas designated for whites only. Although Europeans represented less than 1% of the country's total population the annual budget for European education in Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia) was at least 10 times more than that spent on Africans who represented 99% of the school population (Dorsey, et al, 1991). Up until Independence, enrolment in Group A schools which had higher standards of education and better facilities than those in African schools continued to be based on one's skin colour or socioeconomic status. Despite a change of policy by the majority government which gained political power in 1980, Group A schools continued to be dominated by white children whose parents to this day continue to possess economic power.

As the white population began to decrease around 1985 mainly due to emigration, more opportunities were created for black pupils to enrol in Group A schools, but these had to come from mainly middle-income Africans who had taken residence in low-density (formerly European) suburbs. The strict zoning system did not (and still does not) allow African pupils living in high density areas (formerly African Townships) to enrol into schools that are situated in low density suburbs. This means, therefore, that it is mainly those African pupils whose parents have a high economic status and live in formerly European suburbs that the system allows to mix with white pupils in school. There is no known case of any white child attending a Group B school in the high density areas.

At Independence in 1980 the Zimbabwe government adopted a policy which aimed at widening access to schooling for all children. School fees were phased out

and non-white children began to attend former white fee-paying schools in urban areas. More primary and secondary schools were built in rural areas. Adult literacy groups were formed and those adults who could not attend schools during the day because they were employed, began to attend night schools (Mutumbuka, 1989).

More women in Zimbabwe began to attend schools after Independence but to this day sex differences in enrolment numbers still prevail. This can be partly accounted to a number of factors such as cultural and economic. Most parents, due to poverty, gave priority to their sons' education and encouraged young women to get married after completion of primary school. This trend had not been phased out completely. According to Dorsey, et al (1991) even those girls who go further to higher schools, end up opting for training courses in nursing and teaching after 'O' Level due to lower aspirations.

According to the World Bank (1990), when resources are short, Zimbabwean parents prefer to educate their sons at secondary level rather than their daughters. In 1990, only one in every two girls were enrolled in secondary schools compared to three out of every four boys of the same age. In the same year the government re-introduced the payment of school fees which has resulted in more girls dropping out of school. By 1994 only 42 percent of secondary school enrolment comprised girls despite efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies (such as CIDA) to promote the education of girls. In 1995 the University of Zimbabwe also introduced an affirmative action policy which resulted in girls with less entry qualifications than boys being enrolled for degree courses after 'A' Levels, but despite these efforts less than 40% were enrolled.

Attempts to eradicate inequalities in educational provision based on racial, socioeconomic or gender lines are continuing. However a number of inequalities are still pronounced. For instance pupils in rural areas still do not have access to good quality education. Most of the children have to walk long distances of fifteen to twenty kilometres each morning in order to attend the nearest school. Walking long distances has an impact on rural pupils' performance (Dorsey, 1991). Urban children in high-density suburbs are also finding it difficult to be enrolled in well-equipped schools which are situated in low density areas because of the zoning system and their socioeconomic status.

While the Rhodesian system was designed to prepare African children for their pre-determined status in life – that of employee, labourer or servant who would serve his/her white masters, the advent of Independence forced Zimbabwe to embark on the process of addressing the inequalities and to regard education as a fundamental human right. Many Africans are now in executive positions as a result. However despite these changes, what Kuper (cited in May, 1978), postulated as far back as 1974 seems to hold:

*"It seems clear that hierarchical race relations may persist as cultural uniformity increases and indeed there may be greater racial discrimination in reaction to a perceived threat as members of the subordinate group acquire the culture of the dominant group".*

Indeed, European culture seems to dominate in Zimbabwean schools. Many whites who felt threatened by the presence of black children in the former European-only schools removed their children from those schools or sent them to racially segregated schools in South Africa. The Zimbabwean economy is to this day still dominated by the minority whites. Family income to some extent has therefore replaced race as the principal screening factor in certain schools. This means that the most economically disadvantaged rural pupils continue to face a critical shortage of teachers, no teaching materials, shortage of books, poor housing, little government subsidies and general isolation.

For as long as the education system in Zimbabwe is dominated by economic factors, it will continue to suffer disparities in the distribution of facilities despite the great efforts made so far in attempting to eliminate these inequalities.

## South Africa

A large number of the so called Third World countries owe their multicultural make-up largely to the impact of colonial power. Like many other countries in Africa and Asia which were colonies of the British, the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Spanish, South Africa also falls into this category.

Colonialism brought about a diversity of cultures in South Africa. The Boers later known as Afrikaansers who originated from the Netherlands, and the British, became the two dominant groups after 1910. The indigenous groups such as the Zulus despite their large numbers came under colonial rule after losing many battles as they tried to fight against colonial power. Thus, they were forced to adopt the languages, culture and educational policies of the colonial masters. In schools, English and Afrikaans became the official languages which were used as the medium for instruction. The different ethnic groups which included Asians, Coloureds, Africans and Europeans although subjected to the apartheid system which forced each group to live separately (apart) from the other, still found that they had to learn the culture and languages of the Europeans who were the dominant group, while the Africans received the lowest and worst forms of economic provisions from the apartheid governments. Thus the education facilities for this group were also affected. There was a shortage of textbooks; most of the teachers were unqualified; the curriculum followed emphasised the values of the

dominant group only; schools were over-crowded; very few secondary schools were built, thus forcing many pupils to leave school after primary education. The environment was not conducive to learning and many African children did not even bother to go to school as it was not compulsory. As can be seen, the South African education system under apartheid rule limited access to quality education for blacks, thereby preventing the majority from competing with the entrenched minority groups for key positions in the occupational structure of the country.

As more money per pupil was spent on the education for whites, this group continued to be privileged and self-contained. The unequal funding of education and training across the racial and ethnic lines caused disparities not only in the physical facilities and the quality of professional services provided, but also in the psychological make-up of the people affected.

While education for whites was compulsory, the blacks who were not compelled to go to school remained illiterate for generations. Those who attended school were faced with textbooks and an education system which were manipulated for ideological purposes and which were used as instruments of propaganda and indoctrination.

South Africa, however, achieved black majority rule in 1994 after almost a century of apartheid rule which alienated the majority population from attending schools that were designated for whites only.

Nkomo (1992) summed up the role of the South African Education System during the apartheid regime as "*...a mechanism to sort select and legitimise white privilege while it prepared black workers for the subordinate economic and political roles*".

To this day, despite the achievement of majority rule, most Africans are still deterred from attending those schools and institutions which are supposed to be the easy forward move towards the multicultural society within which they eventually have to make a living. It is the whites who still wield most of the economic power, yet these form only 5% of the country's population.

Education in South Africa today is still organised in ways which limit access to quality education for blacks, thereby preventing the majority population from competing with whites for key positions in the occupational structure. The same trend experienced in Zimbabwe regarding inequality of school enrolment opportunities seem to prevail.

In its first year, the ANC-led government made positive strides towards the establishment of a single education system by insisting that the segregated national and regional education departments should all come under one wing.

However, to this day, over-crowding, under-funding, lack of textbooks, lack of equipment, inadequate buildings and a shortage of teachers due to under-staffing remain the hallmark of African township schools. Yet many white schools

continue as before, resistant to the change that are being brought by the country's first democratic government. Just like Zimbabwe, the zoning system also applies.

One focus of struggle in the South African Education System is the Model C school – an idea that was cooked up in 1990 by the National Party's apartheid government in collaboration with the all-white Teachers Federal Council as they saw political power slipping away.

Mxolisi Nkosi (1995) sums up the situation as follows:

*"The apartheid government transferred the best-equipped schools to private, white parents' bodies. With them went the property rights to buildings and equipment paid for by the state, along with highly qualified staff and a degree of autonomy that has thwarted most attempts to open them up to all. These schools set their own admission procedures, curricula and fees, making them accessible almost solely to the children of affluent whites.*

*Many have admission tests, and given the privileges most white kids have been exposed to. It's hardly surprising that most black kids fail. What you are seeing is the perpetuation of another form of apartheid, along class lines. We can't allow these schools to remain as ivory towers. They must be transformed".*

Admission into Model C schools is limited to small catchment areas which exclude African townships. The few black children who are admitted into these schools come from relatively wealthy families or from parents who have political influence. The National Party, which is still an organ of the present government, in 1995 boosted, through its provincial government, all Model C schools by enrolling all white pupils in the Western Cape while failing to find places for over 6,000 black children (Van der Heever, 1995). Although state-aided, Model C schools remain to a large extent institutions for the privileged few as they continue to be controlled and dominated by white teachers and school heads.

The new democratic government of South Africa is doing all it can within its power to guarantee equality of educational provision among all its citizens as well as non-discrimination and a right to basic education for all. In addition an attempt is being made to give everyone equal access to all educational institutions, cultural freedom and diversity, but these attempts are being thwarted by those who are resistant to change.

A draft policy document outlines new visions for education and training in the reconstruction and development of the new South African society (Ministry of Education, 1994).

Under the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)

attempts are being made to eradicate the legacy of apartheid. A democratic future from which race and gender discrimination will be completely eliminated is being sought. The underlying goal of the RDP is that all South Africans should have access to life-long learning which should be available in schools and other educational institutions as well as in homes and workplaces. The RDP also recommends that the number of schools and classrooms should now be increased so that there are sufficient places for all children. All schools should also be adequately equipped and staffed. Barriers which may prevent some children from attending school, such as lack of transport, disabilities, hunger, looking after siblings, poverty, long walking distances and racial discrimination should also be addressed.

The RDP supports the establishment of a National Qualification Framework (NQF) which is intended to be a mechanism for achieving a fundamental restructuring of the education and training system. It will encourage new and flexible curricula, the upgrading of learning standards and the monitoring and regulating of the quality of qualifications.

The Ministry of Education is also in the process of investigating the feasibility of establishing a National Open Learning Agency with a mission of promoting the open learning principles which will increase the educational opportunities of those who have long left school but feel that they need to improve their qualifications.

There is an increased effort to redress the historic inadequacy of schooling especially for black communities. Basic education and literacy classes are being set up with programmes targeted at the adult population which did not have access to adequate schooling in the past.

A National Commission on Special Needs has also been proposed to address the cases of disabled persons in order to give them access and protection from unfair discrimination in education.

There is also a proposal for a commission on Gender Equality to address the issue of unfair discrimination and ill-treatment of girls and women in educational enrolment.

The South African education budget has always been inherently inequitable due to the historic legacy of inequality based on race, and to some extent, religion. In 1995 the Ministry of Education proposed to change the allocation of finances in all state-aided schools in order to have a more equitable and transparent distribution.

Mncwabe (1990) summed up the future of education in South Africa as follows:

*"Education does not exist in a vacuum, but in a social, economic and political context. Education reflects political and economic realities, and fundamental change in education is dependent on changes in society, politics and economic life."*

*Education in its present form does not offer equal opportunities to all South Africans, and cannot do so as long as it is racially segregated: equal and separate will simply not work. As damaging and destructive as apartheid education has been for black South Africans, it has also failed privileged white South Africans in the long-term.*

*Only a common education system can serve the needs and aspirations of all South Africans. This does not mean the co-option or absorption of everyone into the existing white-type educational model, but rather the creation of a new cross-cultural mainstream South Africa education system. Whereas education has been a divisive force in the past, it should serve the purpose of national unity. Education based on a commitment to a common purpose could be a powerful agent for societal change.*

*Commitment to a common purpose should not mean the imposition of a dull bureaucratic uniformity. Education can only live and breathe if there is room for diversity (not inferiority), flexibility, different aspirations, local initiatives, but not differentiation on grounds of race, colour or definitions of 'culture' which are mere euphemisms for them."*

## Conclusion

Both the Zimbabwean and South African governments are making strides at modifying the historical disparities in educational provision by aiming towards more equitable societies. However economic factors, as has been pointed out, continue to determine the rate at which the elimination of disparities develops. Other factors such as race and religion and to some extent, class, also play a key role. Zimbabwe, which has had more than 15 years of independence is still struggling to address these problems. The zoning system continues to be a major consideration regarding which child enters what school, while some schools will only accept children who belong to the same religious denomination, among other things.

South Africa, no doubt will continue to face similar problems. Problems such as changes of curricular within the existing segregated system, lack of inter-school activities and integration of pupils from all classes, races and religious beliefs will continue to prevail for as long as there is a segregated society. Economic and political factors also have a role to play and these will make it difficult for those who would like to make radical changes to educational policies. Proposals are underway to make English the only official language but this is being resisted by other groups who feel that their cultures will be eroded in the process. Reconstruction of the education system and the elimination of disparities in both Zimbabwe and



South Africa will continue to be an uphill struggle.

If basic education for all is to be regarded as a priority in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, there is therefore an urgent need to identify, investigate and eliminate all the existing disparities that seem to make education a privilege for only a few.

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