

Breaking the cycle of poverty by addressing education inequality

By [Nadia Lubowski](#)

20 Mar 2024

Much has been written in recent years about South Africa's broken public education system and dismal educational outcomes which perpetuate the cycle of unemployment, poverty, and inequality.



Source: [Unsplash](#)

Children who attend schools in more affluent communities – including both private and former Model C schools – typically receive a far superior education to those living in lower socio-economic areas where the majority of schools are characterised by overcrowded classrooms, poorly maintained infrastructure, high rates of teacher absenteeism and educators without the required pedagogical knowledge.

Learners from more affluent areas typically start Grade 1 having had access to high-quality early childhood development and have attended nursery school, books, and puzzles to stimulate them mentally, and regular nutritious meals. Their parents are able to provide homework support and later on, use their networks to help their children find employment.

The majority of children living in townships, on the other hand, start Grade 1 on the back foot, having had no access to any form of early childhood development, let alone books and puzzles. Food scarcity is not uncommon. When they start school, many parents are not able to provide assistance with homework either because they work long hours or because they themselves receive only a limited education. Nor will they have advantageous social networks to help their children find good jobs as they reach adulthood, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality.

South Africa has the highest income inequality globally with a Gini coefficient of around 0.67 and high rates of unemployment. According to Stats SA's quarterly labour force survey for the fourth quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate increased to 32.1%, up from 31.9% in the third quarter. The youth, classified as those aged between 15 and 34, are the most vulnerable in this respect with youth unemployment sitting at 44.3% in the fourth quarter of 2023. These unemployment figures are even higher when taking into account those who have essentially given up looking for work.

Part of the problem is a lack of employment opportunities in an economy that is not growing. The other, and arguably the bigger part of the problem, is a public education system that is no longer fit for purpose and that fails the most vulnerable of our citizens, our nation's children, from the outset.

Addressing South Africa's multiple crises of unemployment, poverty, high levels of crime and growing inequality starts with ensuring every child is able to access early childhood care and education. Education that nurtures, protects, guides, and stimulates and that allows them to form positive neural networks in order to live up to their full potential.

It also means ensuring that children receive the necessary emotional and psychosocial support and that parents and caregivers in low-income communities are supported to provide this. Early childhood education that does not take a holistic view of the child will always be limited in its ability to fulfil its mandate.

At the same time, teachers and caregivers need to be provided with ongoing training and development so that they are well-equipped to support young minds and, given the high levels of crime and violence in many South African townships, that they are able to identify trauma in the children in their care and provide them with the necessary empathetic support. It's critical that teachers and learners are able to access the appropriate network of holistic care modalities alongside their learning.

Sadly, this is a tall order given the state's fiscal constraints which have resulted in persistent cuts to basic education budgets. While the 2024/25 national budget for basic education saw a small increase to R324.5bn, once inflation has been factored in, the increase does little to alleviate the funding crisis the basic education sector finds itself in.

The draft Basic Education Law Amendment (BELA) Bill proposes making Grade R compulsory. While the idea is a good one in theory, in reality, most public schools have neither the budget nor the physical space to accommodate an extra compulsory grade given the cuts to the basic education budget in recent years.

The 2024 national budget cuts school infrastructure spending as well as the budget for school infrastructure maintenance over the next three years. The Wits Public Economy Project says real government spending per learner has fallen in recent years from less than R24,000 in 2020 to R21,635 by 2025.

This is confirmed by Equal Education and the Equal Education Law Centre. In a joint statement issued in response to the 2024 National Budget announcement, the two organisations said, "Even though education continues to be one of the biggest national spending items, basic education has been gradually falling off government's priorities for a while now."

It says the budget is insufficient "to provide quality education delivery, let alone address the many crises in the sector because of high inflation and higher learner enrolment" and that "the foundation of the school system is shaky, affecting the rest of a learner's schooling career."

The statement adds that, "Reduced spending per learner means one of two things: either the quality of education (which is worryingly low already) will suffer, or the number of learners provided with schooling will need to go down. Neither of these

options should be allowed.”

The two organisations have called on the government to reverse all cuts to the education budget, ensure that, at the very least, education budgets grow in line with inflation and learner enrolment, that the value of the early childhood development subsidy is increased, and that nutrition support for children at all ECD programmes is phased in.

For South Africa as a country to succeed we need to break this negative cycle – sooner rather than later – and that needs to start with ensuring that every child, irrespective of the socioeconomic status of their families – has access to quality basic childhood education.

If we hope to change the economic trajectory of our country and ensure a more equitable future for every citizen, we cannot afford to look the other way any longer. By allowing the education crisis to continue festering we violate the human rights of our children. It’s time for proactive action.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Director of the Anton Lubowski Educational Trust

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>