The formal end of apartheid was greeted with optimism and expectations. A new Government of National Unity with Nelson Mandela at its head signaled a new just and democratic social order, including social justice in and through education. Twenty years later, formally desegregated yet class-based educational institutions, continuing disparities and inequities, and poor academic achievement are key features of the contemporary educational order. This article considers how far South Africa has come since 1994 in realizing laudable constitutional and policy goals, especially equity, quality, and social justice in education. It argues, however, that, as a consequence of policy, the doors of learning remain firmly shut to the majority of South Africans. Some key strategies to advance social justice are identified. A failure to act now and with urgency to reform South Africa’s educational approach betrays constitutional ideals and leaves intact the systemic crisis of education that especially affects South Africa’s historically disadvantaged and marginalized peoples.

Keywords: social justice; education; post-apartheid South Africa; affirmative action

Post-1994, a nonracial, democratic South Africa came into being on a rising tide of expectations, legitimacy, and political will. Education was called on to address and respond to the needs of all citizens, and to the social and economic development imperatives of the new state. There was great anticipation that the education system would be fundamentally transformed by dismantling the old apartheid

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order and creating a new system based on the Freedom Charter edict: “The doors of learning and culture shall be open to all.” People’s Education for People’s Power\(^1\) captured the zeitgeist of the immediate post-apartheid educational order. South Africa’s new democratic government committed itself in 1994 to transforming education as well as the inherited apartheid social and economic structures and institutionalizing a new social order. Over the past 20 years no domain of education has escaped scrutiny, and there have been a wide array of “transformation”-oriented initiatives.\(^2\)

This article critically considers why, almost 20 years later, there is still a “long walk” to realize the anticipated freedom of education. Why does the “right to learn” ring hollow for many, while for others quality public education is an everyday reality? How and in what ways and to what extent can deep-seated historic and structural inequalities be overcome? There are no simple answers to these questions, but a critical analysis and understanding of the trajectory of post-apartheid South African educational policy are important in the quest for a new educational order predicated on social justice.

In examining such issues, we adopt a social justice perspective that encompasses a number of theses. Colonialism and apartheid were predicated on a racially based system of inequality in which the black majority was denied equal educational opportunities and outcomes. As a consequence, post-1994 education policy is predicated on the principle of equality of opportunity in relation to provision, access, and outcomes. First, equality of treatment and opportunity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for eliminating systemic historical and structural educational inequalities that black South Africans experience as a result of the segregated (and underdeveloped and unequal) institutions that were reserved for them under apartheid. The systemic nature of inequities cannot be redressed by formal equality while it ignores inherited and structurally produced inequalities. Thus, formal equality has to be distinguished from equity: whereas the former refers to the “principle of sameness” and to uniformity and standardization, the latter is concerned with fair and just treatment. Equity is thus essential for achieving substantive equality.

Second, redress requires a state that has the political commitment to institute measures that favor, through positive discrimination, those who were and are disadvantaged.\(^3\) Redress measures are especially critical for ensuring social advancement for individuals from socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Third, good quality public education is critical for social justice in and through education. It is a necessary condition for the formation of the intellectual and other capabilities of individuals, their cultivation as lifelong learners,\(^4\) their functioning as economically and socially productive people, and their participation as critical and democratic citizens.

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Fourth, although policies and practices predicated on all four dimensions of social justice noted above would represent a significant advance in educational conditions prior to 1994, they still embody a restricted notion of social justice. A more substantive idea of social justice would recognize that South Africa's economic and social structures, with their attendant class inequalities, significantly constrain equality, equity, redress, good quality education, and social justice for all.

In this article we argue that education in South Africa generally fails to enhance the freedom of all. The idea that “with freedom comes responsibilities” to respect and promote constitutional imperatives to social justice in and through education has not received the full and concerted attention of the government. What is required, in addition to measures of positive discrimination that operate largely in terms of historical rectification and at the level of individuals, is structural change and the institutional transformation of education and society. Positive discrimination is, on its own and in the absence of far-reaching institutional transformation, likely to leave the status quo unchanged (Mamdani 1993, cited in Sikhosana 1993).

In the next section of this article, we outline the intentions and goals of educational change after 1994 in the context of the apartheid inheritance. Then we assess the changes that have occurred during the past two decades under the new democratic government, noting continuities and discontinuities, successes and failures, and shortcomings. Next, we review official efforts to address shortcomings and accelerate progress, and identify some priority issues in need of urgent attention. We conclude that there is a long road ahead to realizing social justice and constitutional imperatives and goals in education.

The Context of Educational Change in South Africa

Post-apartheid South African education had to deal with two impulses. On one hand, there was the new government’s commitment to deal with racial discrimination as the most obvious and visible form of inequality in education. This approach gave rise to a conception of social justice as racial redress, captured in a policy of affirmative action, or positive discrimination. On the other hand, this strategy had to be pursued in a manner that maintained the social order and educational system; that is to say, change was not to rupture radically prevailing educational norms, structures, and policies and practices. In essence, there was a limited conception of social justice, predicated on a pluralist democratic approach where any strong form of social justice, such as redistribution, could only be undertaken with the political consent of the privileged.

Developments in post-1994 education did not occur in a vacuum; change or the lack of change in education was conditioned by the specific nature of the inherited educational order, in particular the apartheid legacy of unequal spending, unequal access, unequal opportunity and outcomes, distorted notions of quality, and so forth. In 1982, the apartheid government spent R146 (on average)
educating a black child, but invested R1,211 on a white child (De Waal 2013). The School Register of Needs, commissioned by the Ministry of Education to determine the needs of schools, indicated in 1996 that there were significant infrastructural and other backlogs: 65,380 classrooms were needed, about a 25 percent increase from the total number of classrooms that then existed; 60 percent of schools did not have access to electricity and telephones; 35 percent were without potable water; and 12 percent did not have access to toilets—pit latrines constituted 47 percent of all school toilets.5 The new government would need to muster enormous resources to overcome the educational legacy of apartheid.

The ability of the new government to address the apartheid legacy was conditioned by the changes that occurred between 1990 and 1994. On one hand, the ruling National Party began the process of transferring control of schools previously reserved for whites to school governing bodies, effectively privatizing them (Carrim and Sayed 1992). On the other hand, the post-1994 state was, as an outcome of the pre-1994 negotiations, a Government of National Unity (GNU) in which the majority party (African National Congress [ANC]), in a coalition led by President Nelson Mandela, emphasized reconciliation. The GNU was reluctant to act decisively to transform the educational system. This result was partly a consequence of the negotiated settlement itself, which created a federalist state and established powerful provincial interest groups that shared concurrent responsibilities for schooling. Implementing redress as a national strategy was thus constrained by relatively autonomous provinces coupled with strong governing bodies in previously white-only schools—what Weiler (1990) refers to as the displacement of conflict and an attempt to secure local-level legitimation. Provincialization also created local-level elite capture as the new provincial parliament and governments, by and large dominated by the ANC, were (and remain) reluctant to cede control to the central state. They fear loss of power, authority, patronage, and accumulation of wealth through control of provincial structures (McGinn and Street 1986). The new national government also had limited policy resources to draw on to articulate a clear and focused strategy for effecting social justice. The policies to which it had recourse, in particular the National Education Policy Investigation documents (1992) and the ANC's 1994/1995 Education and Training Framework and Implementation Plan, were long on values and principles but short on strategy, including finding the right people and finances to effect the transformation of the education system.

South Africa's post-1994 educational goals were explicitly framed in relation to the existing and inherited order, and the 1996 South African Constitution, which set out the character of the society that was envisaged, proclaimed the values of “human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms,” and “non-racialism and non-sexism” (Republic of South Africa 1996a, Section 1). The Bill of Rights unambiguously proclaimed that individuals and “the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth” (Sections 9.3 and 9.4). The Constitution declared the right of all “(a) to a basic education including adult
basic education; and (b) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” (Republic of South Africa 1996a, Section 29a, 29b). The notion of a progressive realization beyond basic education has been the subject of much contestation.

These constitutional commitments were captured in a 1995 White Paper on Education and Training,6 which directed the state to “redress educational inequalities among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages” and affirm the principle of “equity” so that all citizens have “the same quality of learning opportunities” (Department of Education [DoE] 1995, 16–17). A year later, the National Education Policy Act of 1996 stated its goal as “the democratic transformation of the national system of education into one which serves the needs and interests of all of the people of South Africa and upholds their fundamental rights” (Republic of South Africa 1996b).

The Constitution and the National Education Policy Act not surprisingly echoed the views of the Mandela-led ANC and its politics of equality of treatment whether in relation to race, gender, or ethnicity. The Freedom Charter statements that “South Africa belongs to all”, and that “All national groups shall have equal rights” are manifestations of this commitment to a politics of equal treatment. With the advent of democracy, “equal treatment” was translated into a constitution that guaranteed equality in all spheres of society.

Following the hallmark National Education Policy Act, there was a flurry of policy activity, manifest in the production of green and white papers, acts, and regulations, all seeking to transform the nation’s educational system. Between 1994 and 2013, there were about seven white papers, three green papers, twenty-six bills (of which seventeen were amending bills), thirty-five acts, eleven regulations, fifty-two government notices, and twenty-six calls for comments that encompassed basic to higher education (Sayed and Kanjee 2013).7 During this period, the Ministry of Education was governed by four different ministers.

In 2009, two separate departments were created for basic and higher education, each headed by a minister. In basic education, a new system of school governance was established with the passing of the South African Schools Act in 1997, a more equity-focused form of school financing was promulgated with the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (DoE 1998), curriculum reform was enacted in the form of Outcomes Based Education (1997), and a new regime of continuous assessment was introduced in 1998, followed by Whole School Evaluations in 2001 and Annual National Assessment in 2008.8

In higher education, Education White Paper 3 of 1997 proposed a far-reaching transformation of higher education (DoE 1997), and the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2001) suggested some of the decisive choices of government with respect to higher educational change, including institutional mergers.

All these policies argued that substantive equality was not possible without an active political commitment to favor those who had been disadvantaged. A politics of equal recognition could not be blind to the effects of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Nor could it ignore that the advent of democracy was not in itself a sufficient condition for the elimination of historic and structural
inequalities in all domains of social life. It was precisely this reality that gave sali-
ence to the idea of redress and made it a fundamental and necessary dimension
of educational and social transformation. The notion of redress that drives edu-
cational policy today is well encapsulated in Education White Paper 3, which
proclaimed an intention “to provide a full spectrum of advanced educational
opportunities for an expanding range of the population irrespective of race, gen-
der, age, creed or class or other forms of discrimination” (DoE 1997, 1.27). The
white paper further states:

The principle of equity requires fair opportunities both to enter higher education pro-
grames and to succeed in them. It implies, on the one hand, a critical identification of
existing inequalities which are the product of policies, structures and practices based on
racial, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage, and on the
other a programme of transformation with a view to redress. Such transformation
involves not only abolishing all existing forms of unjust differentiation, but also measures
of empowerment, including financial support to bring about equal opportunity for indi-
viduals. (1997, 1.18)

Educational policy changes since 1994 have been framed within the govern-
ment’s wider and contested macroeconomic developmental strategies. Changes
in educational policy were initially aligned to the 1994 Reconstruction and
Development Programme, which spoke of “meeting basic needs of people”;
“developing human resources”; and “democratising the state and society”
(Ministry in the Office of the President 1994). Subsequently, from 1996, the
Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) program, described in some
quarters as “a neoliberal macroeconomic policy . . . [developed to dismantle]
the RDP,” began to frame state priorities and also condition educational change
(Buhlungu 2003, 195). Later, GEAR was replaced by the Accelerated and Shared
Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA). On the back of a decade of sustained
economic growth and stable macroeconomic conditions, AsgiSA projected cut-
ting the unemployment and poverty rates by half by 2014 through various initia-
tives, including significant investments in public infrastructure, focused attention
on “skills and education,” and building a “developmental state.” Of importance
was the acknowledgment that one of the key “binding constraints” on economic
and social development was “the shortage of skills—including professional skills
such as [the skills among] engineers and scientists; managers such as financial,
personnel, and project managers; and skilled technical employees such as artisans
and IT technicians.”9 More recently, the National Planning Commission (NPC)
diagnosed problems and challenges in South African society generally and in
education more specifically. As with AsgiSA, the NPC’s National Development
Plan 2030 is an attempt to create a macro framework for social change in South
Africa. The NPC argues that it seeks to “realise the promise of our future, as it is
so aptly captured in the preamble to our Constitution,” and to ensure that “by
2030, South Africans should have access to education and training of the highest
quality, leading to significantly improved learning outcomes” (NPC 2011, 29,
296). It makes a number of recommendations to achieve this vision and sets
ambitious targets for early childhood education, basic education, higher education, and skills development, recognizing that improved education is critical “in building an inclusive society, providing equal opportunities and helping all South Africans to realise their full potential, in particular those previously disadvantaged by apartheid policies, namely black people, women and people with disabilities” (NPC 2011, 296).

Educational policy development after 1994 was framed by the constitutional imperative of cooperative governance—an understanding that the collective good can best be advanced by diverse stakeholders united around a common vision. Yet it is evident that the principle has not been fully realized. First, the state has over time become more directive and dirigiste, as it has become frustrated with the slow pace of change and as the citizenry has grown impatient with the lack of positive change in living standards. The state has sought to intervene in institutional governance in higher education and to impose on schools a culture of testing and performance. These impositions have created tensions between particular education ministers and institutions, between national and provincial ministers, and between stakeholders and the state. Second, in basic education there has been growing frustration with teacher unions perceived as blocking change; such unions are subject to considerable media and public derision and are accused of indefensible self-interests. Third, initial high participation by civil society organizations in policy development was subordinated to technocratic, state-centric, modalities of policymaking.

The Results of Educational-Change Efforts

Given the extensive policy activity noted above, what has changed in education since 1994? At one level, given the previous salience of race in all aspects of social, economic, and political life, much has changed. Race is no longer a primary determinant and marker of inequity in post-1994 educational policies and strategies. However, race necessarily features in the various educational equity strategies discussed below, given the constitutional commitment to affirmative action.

**Differentiated access**

The most visible evidence of change has been the formal desegregation of schools and higher educational institutions, manifest in increased participation in education. In the case of higher education, by 2010, black students composed 80 percent (714,597) of the total student body of 892,943; African students made up 66.7 percent (595,963) of students, and white students 19.9 percent (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2012, 1). There has also been commendable progress in terms of gender equity. By 2010, women constituted 57.4 percent (512,570) of the total student body (CHE 2012, 1). This compares favorably with the apartheid era: in 1993, whereas black South Africans (Indians, Coloureds,
and Africans) constituted 89 percent of the population, black students constituted only 52 percent of the student body of 473,000. African students, although composing 77 percent of the population, made up only 40 percent of enrollments. On the other hand, white students, although only 11 percent of the population, constituted 48 percent of enrollments. Forty-three percent of students were women (Badat 2012, 124). Great progress, then, has been achieved in terms of racial redress in so far as access to universities is concerned. Still, African and Coloured South Africans continue to be underrepresented in higher education relative to their population size (CHE 2012, 2).

However, racial redress is but a small part of the picture. The desegregation of institutions has inadequately addressed the differentiated access to different institutions. Students from the capitalist and middle classes are concentrated at historically white institutions, while those from the working class and rural poor are concentrated at historically black institutions. Despite initiatives to reshape the apartheid institutional landscape through mergers of higher educational institutions and the opening up of public schools, the historical geographical patterns of advantage and disadvantage continue to condition the capacities of historically black institutions to pursue excellence and provide high-quality learning experiences and equal opportunity and outcomes. In short, if equity of opportunity and outcomes were previously strongly affected by race, they are now also conditioned by social class and geography.

The differentiated access to schooling and higher education in post-1994 South Africa parallels the evolution of the English education system, which one scholar described as the two nations educational structure (Simon 1974). In the South African case, the “two nation” educational structure is reflected in a two-tier system of education, resulting in a poorly resourced educational sector serving the poor and mainly black population, while the wealthy have access to private and semiprivate public schools that serve mainly whites and the new black elite, and attend “research” universities. These new geographies of inequality in the schooling sector are the direct results of national policy; in the search to retain the middle class within the public school system, the state created, by design or default, a differentiated and bifurcated educational system that permits the charging of school fees and the control of schools by school governing bodies. Government policy, such as the South African Schools Act, has allowed the middle class to secure control of the historical ex-white school sector, empowering a “new deracialised middle class” to obtain semiprivate education (Sayed and Ahmed 2009).

The bifurcation of schooling is mirrored in higher education if we examine the progress of black and female students. A larger proportion of African students are concentrated in distance education—40.5 percent as compared to 33.3 percent for whites (CHE 2012, 7). African and female students continue to be considerably underrepresented at the postgraduate level and in science, engineering, and technology programs. There has been little improvement in the university participation rates of African and Coloured South Africans. By 2010, the participation rate of Africans increased from 9 percent in 1993 to 14 percent, and that of Coloureds from 13 percent to 15 percent. In contrast, the participation rate of
Indian students increased from 40 percent in 1993 to 46 percent in 2010. The white student participation rate stood at 57 percent in 2010, down from 70 percent in 1993. The overall participation rate (those 18–24) in 2010 was 18 percent (CHE 2012, 3). These statistics, taken together with the patterns of enrollment by fields of concentration, qualifications levels, and modes of study, highlight that the low participation rates of blacks and women in South African higher education has continued.

Perhaps the most visible indicator of differentiated access is shown in pre-primary and early childhood education services. Early childhood education in South Africa before the single year of pre-primary (grade R) education is mainly provided by private for-profit institutions and community-based and nongovernmental organizations through a subsidy for registered centers. However, as the NPC notes, such services are “unevenly distributed and do not yet reach the most vulnerable poor children, especially in rural areas. Fees also inhibit the poorest families from using what services are available. Early childhood development programmes need to expand, with government support, to reach all vulnerable children, including children with disabilities” (NPC 2012, 299). Although there is increasing coverage of pre-primary grade R education (estimates suggest about 81 percent coverage), good quality provision is uneven, and there is a lack of qualified teachers working in grade R classes. Such unequal and differentiated access has inequitable long-term effects. Access to good quality early childhood education is arguably the most important equity measure that can be taken to strengthen South Africa’s educational attainments.

Unequal quality

The weak participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education stems from the ongoing and systemic quality deficiencies associated with South African schooling, especially for students of working-class and rural poor social origins. The data on learning show that although schools may be open and accessible, enrollment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not necessarily imply learning.

Poor quality of learning in South African schools is evidenced by the second Annual National Assessment (ANA) results of learners’ mathematics and literacy skills. The results indicated that grade 9 learners across the country achieved an average score of 12.7 percent in mathematics. It also suggests that learners’ mathematics ability declines steadily as they progress in school, with grade 1 learners achieving an average score of 68 percent in the mathematics tests and grade 6 learners 27 percent. Significant differences in performance were also noted among the quintile one, two, and three schools, which consist of a high percentage of learners from poor backgrounds; and quintile five schools, which are attended by a high percentage of learners from wealthier families. Across grades 1 to 6, learners in quintile five schools can expect to obtain scores that are approximately 10 to 15 percent higher than their counterparts in the other quintiles.
International tests show disappointing performances among South African learners compared to other countries. In the 2011 Performance in International Literacy Study (PIRLS), 43 percent of South African learners tested in Afrikaans and English were unable to reach the “low international” benchmark, with only 4 percent reaching the “high international” benchmark (Howie et al. 2012). In the 2003 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), only 29 percent of South African eighth-grade students were able to answer correctly a basic subtraction question. This situation did not improve in the 2011 TIMSS, as South African learners were placed second from the bottom out of a total of forty-four countries for both mathematics and science, despite having tested grade 9 learners while all other countries tested grade 8 learners.13

International tests also reveal a marked disparity in learning attainment between rich and poor. South African grade 6 learners participated in the third Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) survey, which involved fifteen countries from southern and eastern Africa. The average reading test score for the wealthiest 20 percent of learners was 605, compared to 436 for the poorest 20 percent of learners.14 Similar disparities were noted for the mathematics test, with averages of 583 and 454, respectively.15 Moreover, the poorest 20 percent of learners performed far worse than their peers in other African countries. A ranking of the performance of the poorest 25 percent of students places South African learners fourteenth for reading and twelfth for mathematics, both out of fifteen African countries. Similarly, rural South African children fare poorly relative to their peers, ranking thirteenth in reading and twelfth in mathematics out of the fifteen.

Arguably, the most obvious manifestation of poor schooling quality and the bifurcated nature of the South African educational system are the final school leaving examinations results. In 2007, 10 percent of about seven thousand secondary schools—independent schools and public schools previously reserved for white students—produced 60 percent of all university entrance passes. Another 10 percent of mainly historically black schools produced a further 20 percent of all university entrance passes. Thus, in 2007, 80 percent of university entrance passes were generated by only 20 percent of secondary schools, while the remaining 80 percent of secondary schools produced a paltry 20 percent of university entrance passes.16

The crisis of schooling is not one of learners alone. It is also one of teachers and teaching, as shown by test results from the SACMEQ III, where teachers were tested in language and mathematics. Although South African teachers performed relatively well on questions requiring the simple retrieval of information explicitly stated in the text (scoring an average of 75.1 percent), scores dropped dramatically as soon as the higher cognitive functions of inference (55.2 percent), interpretation (36.6 percent), and evaluation (39.7 percent) were invoked.17 Scores on the mathematics test show a similar decline for more complex topics, from a mean of 67.2 percent for basic arithmetic to 49.7 percent for the key topic areas of fractions, and ratio and proportion. A 2008 study that examined teachers on the same test items as that taken by grade 6 learners revealed low levels of performance among teachers. For mathematics, Foundation Phase teachers (up to grade 3)
obtained an average score of 53 percent, while their colleagues in the Intermediate Phase (grades 4 to 6) obtained an average of 36 percent. The highest scores were obtained for arithmetic by teachers with postgraduate degrees (Taylor 2011).

Problems of quality in higher education are reflected in the success rates for black and white students. The white student success rate in 2010 was 82 percent at the undergraduate level and 80 percent at the postgraduate level; that of African students was 71 percent and 66 percent, respectively (CHE 2012, 11-12). In so far as graduation rates are concerned, that of Africans was 16 percent in 2010 and 22 percent for whites, with an average of 17 percent, which is low (CHE 2012, 9). In terms of graduation and drop-out rates for a three-year degree at contact institutions, of those students beginning study in 2005, 16 percent of African students had graduated in the minimum three years and 41 percent had graduated after six years, with 59 percent having dropped out. In the case of white students, the comparative figures were 44 percent graduating in the minimum three years and 65 percent graduating after six years, with 35 percent having dropped out (CHE 2012, 51). The figures for three-year diplomas at contact institutions were worse: after six years, 63 percent of African students had dropped out, as had 45 percent of white students (CHE 2012, 50).

Equal spending but no equality

Financing education was a key concern on the post-1994 agenda to transform education. The most obvious target was the elimination of the racially skewed allocation of resources in schooling and higher education. All institutions and all students in schools and higher educational institutions were allocated resources post-1994 using a common and uniform funding formula in which race was officially no longer a criterion of allocation.

In basic education, equity was built into the funding allocation in two ways. The first was the provincial equitable share formula, which took into account the size of the rural population in each province and the size of the population for social security grants, weighted by a poverty index. The goal was to ensure that every province, whatever its financial standing, would be able to spend an equitable amount on each learner. Since provinces make their own decisions about how to spend their share across social services (education, health, and social welfare), the actual per capita educational expenditure differs from province to province. The second equity measure in financing was related to the National Norms and Standards for School Funding. This strategy ranked schools using a quintile system whereby each school was classified into one of five quintiles based on the socioeconomic status of the surrounding schools. This determination was now a national rather than a provincial function. Using this approach, provinces are expected to direct 60 percent of the available resources to the poorest 40 percent of learners (schools in quintiles one and two). A third measure was what could be classified as targeted and means-tested financing for specific equity interventions (here the principle of affirmative action was most apparent). Such classification included setting up specialist schools in poorer communities. In higher education the obvious manifestations of equity interventions are a
formula-based redress factor for universities based on their enrollments of African and Coloured students, the earmarked funding of academic development programs, and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which operates on a means-tested basis and has made considerable funding available for indigent (black and white) students.19

These efforts to advance equity through financing are laudable, but they fall far short of what is needed. In basic education, equity through financing is beset by two main problems. First, while the new funding formula for basic education does, to some extent, leverage resources for equity, the federalist nature of the polity does not guarantee that school spending is equal, as the actual expenditure on schooling is determined by each province. Equity in education financing is best given through centralized interventions (rather than decentralized efforts). Second, the strategy of using the quintile ranking system to redistribute resources to schools has various weaknesses. For one, the quintile system (and its presumed intake) is not a robust measure of poverty (Chutgar and Kanjee 2009). More fundamentally, the differential allocation of resources through the quintile system only affects operating costs and is not the fundamental driver of inequity; teacher costs and deployment of well-qualified teachers disproportionately benefit schools in the wealthier quintile ranks. While the redeployment and rationalization of teachers initiated in 1995 was perhaps poorly implemented and ultimately defeated in a landmark court case, the intention was laudable as it sought to secure equity through the more equitable deployment of teachers and their expertise.

The greatest problem of equity through financing is that means-tested targeted interventions in South African education are not adequately funded. Thus, for example, the shortage of funds for financial aid and academic development, and limited funding for institutional redress, have compromised attempts both to increase access and to expand equality of opportunity and outcomes for disadvantaged social classes and groups. In the face of the existing needs, the state’s equity interventions require a greater commitment of resources if they are to be more meaningful and to achieve their objectives. More fundamentally, targeted means-tested equity interventions insufficiently address deep-seated and historic inequalities that require active redistribution strategies. The equity measures through financing operate on a limited conception of social justice—they ignore the fact that the far-reaching institutional transformation of historically black institutions requires ensuring that they are able to provide equality of opportunity and outcomes. The equity measures discussed above also do not take into account the private contributions of the rich and middle class. Rich and middle-class parents expend substantial financial resources on their children’s education, which the poor are unable to do. For example, as a result of income from school fees, the ex-Model C schools20 perform well notwithstanding the equalized formulae funding. Motala (2006, 2009) argues that when fees are added to the state per capita expenditure per learner, enormous disparities along race and class lines emerge. Her work shows that there are huge differences in per capita learner expenditure that are masked if there is a reliance only on state per capita expenditure data.
Changing institutional practices and culture

Although adequate funding is important, so too are appropriate institutional cultures of learning and teaching in schools and universities. The white paper on higher education expressed a commitment to increasing the relative proportion of public funding used to support academically able but disadvantaged students and to provide funds for academic development programs, although a call was also made to institutions to “mobilise greater private resources as well as to reallocate their operating grants internally” (DoE 1997, 2.26; 2.24; 2.27). This was an indirect call for changes in learning and teaching to favor historically disadvantaged groups. In this respect, academic development programs were created to address the underpreparedness of students and to facilitate the development of their content knowledge, academic skills, and the literacy and numeracy required for academic success. Over the years institutional approaches to these development programs have changed: they have moved away from being an add-on or supplemental offering to become more institutionally embedded. This shift has moved institutions toward enhancing student learning “across the curriculum” and toward locating initiatives “within a wider understanding of what it means to address student needs framed within the context of a concern for overall quality” (Boughey 2005, 36). In this context, it is institutions and not individuals that have to adapt to a changing and more diverse student population.

Institutional cultures, especially at historically white universities, in differing ways and to varying degrees compromise equality of opportunity and outcomes. The specific histories of these institutions—lingering racist and sexist conduct, privileges associated with social class, English as the language of instruction and administration, the overwhelming predominance of white and male academics and white administrators, the concomitant underrepresentation of black and female academics and role models, and limited respect for and appreciation of diversity and difference—combine to produce institutional cultures that black, female, working-class, and rural poor students experience as discomforting, alienating, exclusionary, and disempowering. Such an experience has negative consequences for student outcomes. Even if equality of opportunity and outcomes are not unduly compromised, the overall educational and social experience may be diminished. The existence of class-based, racialized, and gendered institutional cultures also obstructs the forging of social cohesion (Badat 2012, 145).

In sum, the analysis of educational outcomes post-1994 suggests that the cleavages of race, while still noticeable, have become more muted; and inequities of class, gender, and geography have become more apparent. There is a powerful link between the social exclusion of disadvantaged social classes and groups, and equity of access, opportunity and outcomes, and achievement in schools and universities. Without appropriate and extensive interventions on the part of the government significantly to improve the economic and social circumstances of millions of working-class and rural poor (and primarily black) South Africans, the impact of high drop-out rates, poor retention, restricted educational opportunities, and diminished outcomes will be principally borne by those social classes.
The simple reality is that the colonial and apartheid legacies have meant that there is a strong coincidence between class and race, with black South Africans hailing from predominantly working-class and rural poor social backgrounds and white South Africans having their social origins largely in the capitalist and middle classes. (There are, however, also white South Africans of working-class and rural poor origin.) The explicit racial ordering of apartheid has taken on a more class character since 1994 as black elites have joined white elites in historically privileged educational institutions.

The changes noted above suggest that South African education has been characterized by great fluidity and relative stasis; by both ruptures and discontinuities with the past and by continuities in institutions and conditions; by conservation of institutions as well as by the dissolution, restructuring, and reconstruction of institutions; by “small and gradual changes [and] large-scale changes” (Jansen 2004, 293); by modest improvements, more substantial reforms, and deeper transformations; and by successes as well as by failures and shortcomings in policy, planning, strategy, and implementation. There has been no “total, rapid and sweeping displacement” of structures, institutions, policies, and practices (Wolpe 1992, 16). It is also arguable whether there could be, given the post-1994 policy choices of the ANC, constraints on the negotiated political settlement in South Africa, and various other conjunctural conditions and pressures.

New Pathways

In light of the analysis here, how might key problems that constrain equity and quality in education be tackled, and what might be possible pathways for further advancing social justice in education? The most significant “new” thoughts about this come from three recent documents: the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025 (2010); the Department of Higher Education and Training’s (DHET’s) Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2012); and a chapter in the NPC’s National Development Plan 2030 (2012). Collectively, these documents engage with key challenges and propose solutions to them. They generally concur that despite the advances and gains made since 1994, gender, class, racial, and other inequalities persist with regard to access to educational opportunities and outcomes. Their sober assessment of the post-1994 period points to the long road still to be traveled for “the doors of learning” to truly “be opened to all.” These documents also recognize the need to hold firmly together the goals of access and quality, and for those to become parallel vectors if there is to be social justice in and through education.

South African educational policy documents tend to be expansive in vision and extremely short on detail. Specifically, establishing priorities and making decisive choices between dearly held goals and attendant social and political dilemmas are critical. For example, the pursuit of social equity and redress, and quality in higher education simultaneously, in the context of inadequate public financing
poses a difficult challenge. An exclusive concentration on social equity can lead to its unadulterated privileging at the expense of economic development and quality. Doing so could compromise the goal of producing high-quality graduates with the requisite knowledge, competencies, and skills, and hence result in a slower pace of economic development. Conversely, an exclusive focus on economic development and quality and “standards” (especially when considered to be timeless and invariant and attached to a single, ahistorical, and universal model of higher education) could result in equality being delayed with no, or limited, erosion of the racial and gender character of the national occupational structure. The danger of concentrating purely on social equity or economic development is that such a formulation abstracts from and hinders the development of policies appropriate to contemporary conditions and social and economic imperatives (Badat 2009, 462). Thus, details are needed on how the proposed solutions to the educational challenges as proposed in the various recent documents can mediate among key paradoxes and potentially competing goals. Policy-makers have to be more specific not only about the goals and targets (as is happening) but also need to map the journey and indicate concretely the means to get there.

Arguably the biggest challenge in advancing social justice in South Africa is making adequate state funding available for equity; otherwise social justice and development in and through education will be undermined by financial constraints. It is increasingly clear that public funding of basic and higher education is inadequate in the face of the legacy of past inequities and new demands. At least two areas warrant attention. First, there is a need to increase the block funding allocations to schools and universities; in the case of schools, doing so requires a substantial increase in provincial budgets with a ring-fencing of the educational component. Second, equity interventions work best when they are adequately financed, well targeted, and robustly monitored and evaluated. In higher education there is a need to increase the NSFAS budget so that all eligible students are funded fully and there is real equality of access and opportunity; and to increase earmarked funding for high-quality academic development initiatives that enhance equality of opportunity and outcomes, for curriculum innovation and transformation, and to enhance the teaching capabilities of institutions to meet the needs of the national economy and society. Basic education requires specific interventions targeted at struggling or dysfunctional schools, including increasing teacher salaries to attract the best educators, and to provide support for curriculum renewal and additional academic support for students. Without well-funded and effectively targeted equity measures, equality of opportunity for students (largely black) from working-class and impoverished rural social backgrounds will continue to be severely compromised.

Beyond the diagnoses and the proposals of the recent DBE, DHET, and NPC documents, there are several other issues in need of urgent attention. First, the DBE should issue clear and transparent minimum infrastructural norms and standards for all schools. Enacting minimum standards is consistent with Section 5A of the South African Schools Act, which empowers the minister of basic education to promulgate minimum norms and standards for school infrastructure.
The minimum standards should encompass both infrastructure (e.g., classrooms, facilities, water, and sanitation) and an appropriate institutional environment (e.g., policies on safety and a teacher code of conduct). At the very least, the historical infrastructural backlogs that include mud hut schools should be redressed as a matter of utmost priority. The draft standards that the DBE has issued, while welcome, remain inadequate. Clear standards would enable citizens to hold the provincial educational departments accountable. Building on the minimum standards, additional support should be provided to schools serving the poor, including nutrition and health programs.

Second, the NPC calls for early investment and interventions in children’s schooling. It commends a range of school-specific interventions as well as health and social welfare programs for children starting from birth. Such multisectoral interventions are critical if the state is to begin to tackle the multidimensional causes of poverty and inequality. Advancing social justice in education requires more programs of this kind, including tying social grants provided by the Department of Social Development more clearly to education.

Third, “qualified, motivated, and committed teachers” are “the single most important determinant of effective learning” (Sayed 2008, 7). To this end, there is an urgent policy need to ensure that schools that educate learners from the most deprived backgrounds have the best teachers—not to do so is to trap the poor into vicious intergenerational cycles of poverty. A range of interventions are required, including paying teachers more in such schools so as to attract well-qualified and experienced instructors. Twinning arrangements between rich and poor schools would also be helpful so that good teachers can be deployed across schools rather than being confined to the wealthy schools.

Fourth, the process of educational decentralization to provinces since 1994 has occurred in a context of great social disparity; as such, policy has exacerbated rather than reduced educational inequity across provinces; the provincial capacity to deliver high-quality education is uneven across the country and is constrained by the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. For example, the Eastern Cape Province, which brings together two of the former Bantustans, shows poor progress across multiple measures of poverty, including education, in precisely those geographical locations that were part of the former Bantustans (Noble, Dibben, and Wright 2010). Provincialization as an outcome of the post-1994 settlement requires rethinking if social justice in education is to be achieved.

Fifth, the policy of charging school fees—an outcome of the school decentralization policy—is probably the most difficult political issue to resolve and yet remains a key source of inequity in education. It is tempting (and indeed popular) to suggest that this policy be abandoned, but doing so could well destabilize a stable and functioning section (the ex-model C schools) of the public school system. An alternative is to ensure more equity-focused measures that share and redirect resources in the private and ex-model C schools to schools that are most in need. One strategy could share well-qualified and experienced teachers across schools. To do so, targeted and attractive incentives need to be provided.

Sixth, a key distinguishing feature between the 10 percent of the historically black schools that produce 20 percent of all senior certificate endorsements and
the other 80 percent of public secondary schools that produce only 20 percent is effective leadership and management. Creating visionary, purposeful, and effective educational leadership and management in national and provincial departments of education, district offices, and, especially, schools is crucial.

The idea of a “back to basics” curriculum is problematic. Although curricula reduced to the essentials so as to be (almost) teacher-proof and drilling learners in fundamentals may result in modest and temporary gains, those gains are unlikely to bring about any fundamental transformation in teaching and learning. Reducing the curricula ignores the fact that relative to the poor, the economic, social, and cultural resources of the middle class provide it with considerable advantages with respect to access to and opportunity in education. Rather than inherently biased and narrowly utilitarian approaches to education, the poor need varied and challenging curricula and forms of pedagogy that suit their particular contexts and circumstances.

In higher education a number of areas require attention. First, while there has been significant progress in the representation of both black, especially African, and female students in higher education, this progress masks inequities in their distribution across institutions, qualification levels, and academic programs. The representation of black and female students at specific institutions and qualification levels and, in particular, in academic programs, requires constant attention. Carefully designed interventions are needed to ensure improvements in representation. Second, in light of unacceptably poor pass and graduation rates and high drop-out rates, the enhancement of the academic capabilities of universities and rigorously conceptualized and designed academic development programs to support academics and students are urgent to ensure equity of opportunity and outcome, especially for students of working-class and rural poor social origins. There is knowledge, expertise, and experience at some universities in this regard. This knowledge needs to be harnessed, expanded, and put to work for the benefit of all universities.

Third, with respect to postgraduate education, a major constraint is that both the funding for postgraduate study (especially full-time study), and the size of the awards provided through the National Research Foundation, are severely inadequate. If South Africa is to enhance economic and social development as well as ensure greater opportunities for and participation by black students from indigent backgrounds in postgraduate study, significantly more investment is needed in postgraduate, especially doctoral level, study. At many South African universities the availability and quality of the research infrastructure, facilities, and equipment impedes the enrollment and production of doctoral graduates. This effect is so even at twelve of the twenty-three universities that produce 95 percent of the country’s doctoral graduates and also the bulk of peer-reviewed scientific publications (CHE 2008).

The challenge of enhancing institutional capacities is, however, not confined to nor should be reduced to infrastructure, facilities, and equipment. It also relates to a capacity to expand and mount new doctoral programs, the management of doctoral education, the management of research, and the mobilization of funding for doctoral studies and students. There is great scope for interuniversity
collaboration, though the nature, terms, and conditions of such collaboration will require careful consideration.

Fourth, as a consequence of apartheid, knowledge production in South Africa has been predominantly the preserve of white men. The democratization of knowledge requires special measures to induct previously excluded social groups, such as blacks and women, into the production and dissemination of knowledge. The NPC notes that “Higher Education South Africa has developed a detailed proposal for a National Programme to develop the next generation of academics for South African higher education” and that it “deserves to be implemented” (NPC 2011, 319). This is a good example of an imaginative and well-developed program constrained by the lack of state funding. Improving the proportion of academics with doctoral qualifications will require a dedicated program, with adequate funding and support for staff though formally supervised development programs, mentoring, and co-supervising students alongside experienced supervisors.

The systematic and progressive transformation of institutional cultures, in congruence with constitutional ideals and values, also remains an important and urgent task, especially at historically white universities. The challenges are to uproot historical cultural traditions and practices that impede the development of more open, vibrant, democratic, and inclusive intellectual and institutional cultures; to respect, affirm, and embrace the rich diversity of the people that today constitute and must increasingly constitute historically white universities; purposefully to create and institutionalize cultures that embrace difference and diversity; and to see these challenges as strengths and powerful wellsprings for personal, intellectual, and institutional development.

Although this article has focused on schooling and universities, there are at least 2.8 million people between the ages of 18 and 24 that are neither employed nor at educational or vocational training institutions—the so-called NEETs (Cloete 2009). The vast majority (1 million) have less than a grade 10 qualification, some 990,000 have a grade 10 to 11 qualification, and almost 600,000 have a grade 12 qualification without exemption. Thus, there is a critical need to reconceptualize and clarify the scope, structure, and landscape of the postschool system and institutions, and to give attention to the spectrum of postschool institutions that are required for economic and social development, as well as to expand opportunities for high quality postschool education and training.

Conclusion

On the final page of a Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela (1994) writes, “The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning” (p. 617). While the Constitution, laws, and policies direct the state to realize wide-ranging goals in and
through education, our analysis indicates that the post-1994 government’s devotion in practice to a strong version of social justice underpinning policy in education is moot, due perhaps to the divergent and even contradictory understandings of equity and redress. On one hand, equity and redress are considered as historical rectifications, as in the uniformity and standardization of basic schooling and the equalization of per-learner expenditures. This entails no redistribution of substantial goods and resources from those who were previously advantaged. On the other hand, equity and redress are considered as distributional justices, as a way of providing resources to those who were most disadvantaged under apartheid. Conceived in this way, equity implies redistribution in the sense of taking away from others, specifically from the privileged white minority.

Ultimately, South Africa’s educational failings are neither entirely technocratic nor managerial: they are political, associated with a government increasingly mired in short-term electoral politics that fails to distinguish between party and state. The government appears to lack the will to act courageously and decisively to address problems at the levels of policy, personnel, and performance when it is clear that the apartheid legacy in schooling remains entrenched. As Gill Marcus, Governor of the Reserve Bank, an ANC stalwart, puts it, “South Africa faces significant challenges” that “require a coordinated and coherent range of policy responses”; “the government [needs] to be decisive, act coherently,” demonstrate “a coordinated plan of action to address them” and “exhibit strong and focused leadership from the top.” Doing so “will go a long way to restoring confidence, credibility, and trust.” The heady days and promise of “People’s Education for People’s Power” are long past. Many prominent anti-apartheid activists have mutated into technocratic bureaucrats, and critics of the broken or forgotten promises have been marginalized or have fallen silent. Teacher unions and the government are simultaneously in alliance and at an impasse, and the anomie at various provincial education departments is a serious hindrance to change. Popular mass and civil society formations have disappeared and sometimes been replaced by professional NGO bureaucracies, and there has been a steady decline of popular participation in educational issues. Direct parental participation in education has come to be framed by a discourse of governors and governance. In this context, there is a need to reinvigorate mass community participation and to forge binding compacts among diverse local and national actors to ensure effective education.

Effective policies to advance redress must secure consent and ensure legitimacy. Implementing a social justice vision in education entails establishing new institutions, reconfiguring old ones, and changing institutional cultures and practices. South Africans have to be educated and trained; equipment and learning materials have to be provided; and funding has to be voted, allocated, and accounted for. And all these advances have to be effectively stitched together by people with the necessary knowledge, expertise, skills and values consistent with those espoused in the national Constitution. Ultimately, achieving social justice in education requires Mandela-like commitment, dedication, and a heightened sense of responsibility. The “long walk” to equity in and through education has not yet ended.
Notes

1. The concept “People’s Education for People’s Power” was adopted by the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), an anti-apartheid education organization, at its conference in 1986. It was an attempt to establish the interconnections between peoples’ power and peoples’ education and an attempt to shift the education struggle away from the idea of “Liberation Now, Education Later.” The NECC saw contesting the running of education institutions through democratically elected structures, such as parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) and student representative councils (SRCs), as an important element in the overall struggle for liberation.

2. We use the term “transformation” since it is how government describes the nature of change that is sought (see DoE 1997, 1998). But see the comments here regarding “transformation.”

3. The term “positive discrimination” is equivalent to “affirmative action” in the United States. These terms are used interchangeably throughout the article.

4. In South Africa, students are called “learners.” Again, these terms (students and learners) are used interchangeably here.


6. This formed the basis for the National Education Policy Act of 1996.


8. These policies were amended in 2006, which clarified the provisions for school funding by means of quintiles, and the charging and payment of school fees (DoE 2006). A large number of schools were declared as no-fee schools; under the amended policy, these schools were entitled to an increased allocation by the state to offset revenues previously generated through school fees, and fee-charging schools (previously all schools) could apply to their provincial education departments to be declared a no-fee school. This was a grudging acknowledgment that equity and redress in education have been less assured than originally conceived.


10. Total enrollments in higher education as a proportion of the 20 to 24 age group.

11. ANA is the Annual National Assessment, a census-based assessment of school pupils undertaken by the Department of Basic Education and conducted among 7.2 million pupils at 24,000 schools.

12. Each school in South Africa has a poverty score, which assigns it to a quintile rank that determines the amount of funding it receives. Every school in South Africa is assigned to one of five quintiles with quintile five (Q5) representing the wealthiest (least-poor) schools and quintile one (Q1) the poorest.

13. Botswana and Honduras also test grade 9 learners but are excluded from this comparison.

14. The mean across the international sample was set at 500 and the standard deviation at 100.


16. Statistics presented at a Development Bank of Southern Africa think-tank on education chaired by Mamphela Ramphele. Badat was a member of the think-tank.

17. Ibid.

18. “Contact” institutions provide face-to-face education, in contrast with open distance learning institutions.

19. Academic development programs are interventions aimed at enhancing the academic literacy, numeracy, and content knowledge of students who are eligible for admission to universities but are deemed to be underprepared in certain areas.

20. Ex-Model C schools are previously whites-only schools. In 1992, all schools that were reserved mainly for the white population were granted autonomy by the then-ruling Nationalist Party. In effect independent school governing bodies thereby secured control over these schools in what is known as the Model C Proposals. The new post-1994 democratic government was thus confronted with a system whereby self-managing school governing bodies in effect controlled the most resourced and privileged schools. This article argues that this unequal legacy still persists in post-apartheid South Africa.

21. Black academics constituted only 44.1 percent of the total permanent academic staff of 16,684 in 2010; they composed less than 20 percent of the academic staff at some historically white universities. Female academics compose 44.1 percent of academics in 2010 (CHE 2012, 41). Women tend to be concentrated at the lower levels of the academic hierarchy.
22. Seven of the twelve universities produce 74 percent of all doctoral graduates.
24. Ibid.

References


