

From Apartheid to Democracy: Evolution and Inefficiencies of the South African Education System through Nancy Fraser's Social Justice Framework

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Received: November 6, 2024; received in revised form: January 14, 2025;
accepted: January 15, 2025

Abstract:

Introduction: This study provides comprehensive insights of how the education system in South Africa evolved.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to provide a brief analytic insight into the legacy of the apartheid education system. Secondly, the study scrutinizes and explores the systemic failures of the democratic administration in redressing past educational inequalities.

Methods: In examining this evolution, this conceptual study draws extensively from critical analysis of scholarly work. Further, the 3-dimensional framework (redistribution, recognition, and representation) of Nancy Fraser is also applied.

Results: The results indicate that despite the deliberate intentions of the new government to redress past educational inequalities, the system still faces educational inequalities.

Discussion: Post-apartheid South Africa's education system still faces inequality and disparities.

Conclusions: There is a need for more targeted and comprehensive policy interventions to effectively address the legacy of apartheid.

Key words: redistribution, recognition, representation, social justice, education reform.

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Introduction

Every country's social and economic soundness is linked to several factors including the education system. South Africa has a history of social injustices which manifested in several areas which the Apartheid government deliberately created. These injustices are of an economic, social, cultural, and educational nature. The Apartheid government was characterized by abuse (Duncan, 2005) destruction, loss of lives, hatred, segregation, and violence. These atrocities were mainly directed towards the South African black majority. As this paper argues, education is pivotal for societal development and stability, contributing to economic, social, environmental, and personal growth. Emphasizing the criticality of education, Nelson Mandela, a prominent figure in the struggle for justice, once noted: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Steve Biko, the political advocate who was murdered by the Apartheid regime for his political stance against white oppression, in painting the designed intention of the apartheid government in oppressing Blacks noted: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

For Biko, apartheid was designed to ensure that the black majority was strategically and educationally dehumanized. The aim (which was achieved) was to ensure that white supremacy was maintained. This paper provides a comprehensive and analytical examination of the dark side of apartheid education and traces the progress of democratic education in South Africa decades since the enactment of Bantu education in 1953 (Abdi, 2003). The analysis focuses on the provision of socially just resources and the performance of the education system and explores several factors that promote social justice education. After the advent of the new democratic administration, the government sought to address past imbalances by crafting new radical policies (Christie, 1992). These educational policies were intended to ensure that resources were equitably shared amongst all racial groups, in particular the previously disadvantaged black African learners and schools.

South Africa currently devotes a significant proportion of government revenue (around 13%) to basic education (Schirmer & Visser, 2023). Despite this substantial budget allocation, South Africa is amongst the leading underperforming education system relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita among low- and middle-income countries. Schirmer and Visser (2023) further maintain that half of all the schools in the country are cognitive wastelands. Supported by Van der Berg and Hofmeyer (2018), they further observe that the failure to meaningfully transform South Africa's dysfunctional schooling system, despite significant public expenditure, represents the quiet crisis and disaster of the democratic era. Despite the enactment of progressive policies, the country remains at the bottom of international rankings in terms of

learning outcomes, particularly in subjects like Mathematics and Science (Reddy & Hanna, 2019).

This assertion is further confirmed by van der Berg and Hofmeyer (2018). The state of the education system can be summarized and characterized as the national pandemic, a cognitive sinkhole for black learners that require serious attention from the national government. The purpose of this study is to provide a brief analytic insight into the legacy of the apartheid education system. Secondly, the study scrutinizes and explores the systemic failures of the democratic administration in redressing past educational inequalities.

1 Literature review

1.1 Historical inequality and the legacy of the apartheid education system

South Africa was governed by the racially segregated National Party system of administration from 1948 to 1994. In the education sector, this deliberately racially designed administration was formalized and institutionalized by the Bantu Education Act of 1953 when Hendrick Verwoerd became the Minister of Native Affairs (Thobejane, 2013). It was intended to ensure that racial inequality and hatred were perpetuated, which favored a section of the white minority grouping. The administration deliberately perpetuated discrimination of many forms which can be summed up as institutionalized racism through legitimizing it through several oppressive laws. (Asmal, 2001; Tshishonga, 2019; Badat, 2009; Treiman, 2005; Bundy, 2020; McKeever, 2017; Marcum, 2022). This administration for a long time ensured that it developed education policies that were unjust and unfair towards other races, particularly black Africans. Black people were seen as inferior, and their education was designed with a specific purpose to prepare them for a life of labour and servitude (Ireland, 1972; Reagan, 1987; Thobejane, 2013; Marcum, 2022). Every aspect of the schooling system was racially constructed including infrastructure, such as physical buildings, classrooms, the curriculum, the education policies (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004). The curriculum for blacks was not intellectually stimulating and appealing and did not promote any critical thinking. In addition, the funding budget for the blacks was extensively minimal as compared to what their white counterparts were receiving. Further, the curriculum for blacks was irrelevant and not industry-related. Human resource provisioning in the form of teacher supply was very problematic and sub-standard. At the same time, language was also used as a weapon to perpetuate injustices in the classrooms. For example, blacks were forced to study Afrikaans and English whereas whites did their studies in Afrikaans which is their indigenous language. This was problematic because research indicates that studying in your language promotes comprehension and yields better educational outcomes (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

1.2 Qualitative analysis of post-apartheid education

Van der Berg and Hofmeyer (2018) are of the view that the government post-Apartheid was confronted with the schooling system which was characterized by fragmentation, and racial segregation, with greatly discriminatory funding for teachers, learning materials, and schools. This analysis is focused on several dimensions including policy changes and developments, infrastructural roll-out, service provision, quality of staff members (teachers and administrative staff members, teachers in schools, and the provision of staff members). South Africa is not an isolated island and forms part of the broader global community. In 2015, the United Nations adopted about 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which were global (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017; Carlsen & Bruggemann, 2022). These nations intended to work together to improve the quality of life for citizens of participating countries. One of the critical sustainable goals adopted was the achievement of quality education by 2030, SDG number 4 (with several targets) which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The targets are critical and focus on different dimensions. In addition, by 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development (Unterhalter, 2019). In evaluating the progress of the achievement of these targets, South Africa made remarkable progress since the dawn of democracy in 1994, but equally, there are still traces of serious disparities. In terms of policy development (see Table 1), there has been progress, but implementation remains a challenge. Spaul (2013) and Spaul and Taylor (n.d.) raise serious challenges with the system which cover many areas including numeracy and literacy. Their studies confirmed serious challenges and Spaul (2013) citing Taylor (2011) notes "It is alarming, however, that the distribution for grade 5 students in historically black schools was still a considerably weaker distribution than that of grade 3 students in historically white schools. One can therefore conclude that by the fifth grade, the educational backlog experienced in historically black schools is already equivalent to well over two years' worth of learning." Further, Spaul, Courtney, and Qvist (2022) in their study titled "Mathematical stunting in South Africa: An analysis of Grade 5", concluded that the wheels of mathematics education are falling off at the first step, basic numeracy. This view is strengthened by consistent underperformance by South Africa in all assessments administered by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Reddy & Hanna 2019; Department of Basic Education, 2021). Test scores compared to other countries,

particularly in STEM subjects are a disaster. The same can be said for literacy. The Annual National Assessment (ANA), which has been administered for several years, paints a picture of non-performance in different grades. Social inclusion has become the major focus of the policies of governments across many parts of the world and the separation between mainstream schooling and special education is segregation (Amstrong, Amstrong, & Spandagou, 2011). Regarding inclusive education, and access by the marginalized and students with disabilities, Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) are of the view that despite the challenges, there are ripples of hope and propose a complexity approach in dealing with inclusive education. Spaul (2015, p.34) laments that “Although racial segregation has been abolished for 20 years, schools which served predominantly white learners under apartheid remain functional (although now racially mixed), while the vast majority of those which served Black learners remain dysfunctional and unable to impart the necessary numeracy and literacy skills to learners”. This view still stands 30 years after the dawn of democracy as adequate literature attests to the fact that some schools in both rural and townships resemble sinkholes of students’ academic futures. This is a worrisome factor as former model C schools continue to be academically fully operational in many aspects. As argued elsewhere in this study, there is tangible evidence that demonstrates that the provision of socially just physical resources, such as ablution facilities, is still a pipe dream in some rural schools (see Figures 1a-4d below).



Figure 1a. Crumbling classroom.



Figure 1b. Dilapidated ablution.



Figure 1c. Dilapidated desks.



Figure 1d. Dilapidated school building.

Figure 1. Infrastructural inefficiencies post-apartheid (<https://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+schooling+infrastructure+in+south+africa>).

The images above (Figure 1a to Figure 4d) demonstrate a vivid illustration of the severe deficiencies and inequalities related to schooling infrastructure. These figures are scattered in most rural South African schools. This contrasts the picture of the former model C schools which boast state-of-the-art schools and other education-enabling resources that benefitted from historical advantages offered by the apartheid administration and are still better resourced and well maintained. On the other side, many schools serving black communities appear neglected. I argue that this demonstrates the unwillingness of education authorities to confront the socially unjust educational spaces in which black students find themselves. The situation is so deplorable that during the rainy and winter seasons, schools catering marginalized black learners are forced to close resulting in curriculum coverage sabotage.

1.3 Socially just and transformative policies to reform the education system

Concerning policy development, it can be argued that the new government attempted to legislate progressive policies that aimed at redressing the past educational inequalities. The challenge remained the ineffective implementation of these policies since their development. In 1994, South Africa became a democratic state after the historical elections of Nelson Mandela as the first inaugural president. The new government that took over was under the administration of the African National Congress (ANC), which led the struggle against the oppressive laws of the Apartheid National Party government. The government immediately initiated a process of transforming the state which included the education system. They passed a plethora of policies that attempted to redress inequalities within the sector and these included (those reflected in Table 1), which I consider some of the foundational educational policies of the new democratic government.

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Table 1

Educational policies during democratic government

<i>Policy</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Purpose and main policy considerations</i>
South African Schools Act (SASA)	1996	Its main mandate is to provide a uniform education system and ensure equitable access to education.
The National Education Policy Act (NEPA)	1996	Its purpose and key provision are focused on the establishment of policies of education and the facilitation of the transformative trajectory of the entire education system.
White Paper on Education and Training (WPET)	1995	Its mandate is to provide a comprehensive strategic framework to transform the education training system. The focus was on equity and redress, access, quality, and relevance in education.
The Policy on the Organisation, Governance, and Funding of Schools (POGFS)	2006	Its main aim was to transform the apartheid funding model to redress disparities and ensure equitable redress. This also focuses on partnerships with communities and stakeholder participation in schools.
Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education (EWPSNE)	2001	This policy advocates for inclusive education, elimination of barriers to education, and equitable opportunities for all learners despite disabilities.
Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS)	2012	Its purpose was to standardize and sharpen the assessment practices in the education system. It focused on the clear guidelines on which learning outcomes must be achieved at the end of each grade. Its purpose was to provide clarity.

These policies are the select few that were crafted by the democratic government in attempting to redress the imbalances and injustices purposely designed by the Apartheid government. These policies were in the main underpinned by justice principles and the state was intentional in ensuring that the principles of redistribution, recognition, and representation were met (Fraser, 2001).

1.4 Lensing the study through Frasers' framework

Theories of social justice are apposite to the educational phenomenon. Social justice theorists promote the idea of equitable and fair distribution of privileges, opportunities, and resources. Several scholars are pioneers of justice and one can think of John Rawls, Miranda Fricker, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser, to name a few. These scholars are leaders and advocates in the field of social justice and their contributions added novel ideas to the scholarship of social justice. This

paper's theoretical orientation is undergirded by Nancy Frasers' three dimensions of social justice (redistribution, recognition, and representation). Fraser is considered one of the leading philosophers, feminists, and theorists of social justice (Nafstad, 2006; Dahl, Stoltz, & Willig, 2004), and her analytical framework is applied and justified in this study.

1.4.1 Redistribution justice

South Africa is known as a country with two economic systems. One, for the rich (mainly white minority group) and the rest for the poor and in the main the black majority. Nancy Fraser (1996, p.3) posits that claims for social justice seem increasingly divided into two types. The first is the redistributive claims, which seek a more just distribution of resources and goods. She argues that these claims include claims of resources and goods from the rich to the poor. This overemphasizes socioeconomic transformation which promotes the justice agenda (Fraser, 2001, 2003, 2020). The economic value of the education system is measured by the quality of the resources attached to schools, for example, the type of classrooms, the quality of teachers, the professional development opportunities afforded to the teachers, the staff provisioning, such as school administrators, security personnel, ablution facilities, library facilities, laboratory facilities, sporting facilities, and technological advances in the form of computers, data, digital literacies, and AI technologies. These resources constitute a socially just education milieu (Can & Can, 2020). The absence of, or inadequate availability, or provision of such indispensable resources and facilities constitutes a breach in ensuring that learners receive public quality education which is also the bedrock of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4. This SDG addresses the question of the provision of public quality education. Fraser related this element to the economic distribution of resources to marginalized communities. By reinforcing economic disparities in terms of race, the Apartheid education system perpetuated redistributive injustice in the sense that only whites received socially just resources including well-built schools, well-trained teachers, libraries, laboratories, and sporting facilities. On the other hand, black schools and learners were provided with sub-standard and socially unjust educational resources. Whereas the Apartheid government focused on the inequitable distribution of economic and infrastructure opportunities based on race, the democratic government committed to redressing inequalities through the development of several policies (see Table1). For example, the policy on the organization, governance, and funding of schools (Mestry, 2013; Sayed & Ahmed, 2009; Adams, 2020; Motala, 2020; Salisbury, 2016). Access and quality were intended to be achieved through the South African Schools Act and the National Curriculum Statement to improve

educational access and quality. Despite these efforts, one can convincingly argue that there are glaring and significant disparities in the redistribution of resources.

1.4.2 Recognition and representative nature of justice

Recognition means acknowledgment of the existence, validity, or legality of something. The Apartheid government deliberately excluded blacks in various forms and did not acknowledge, accept, appreciate, or validate their existence. They were and still are relegated to the periphery. Racial polarization of this nature is an injustice of a political nature. Social acceptance and co-existence with other races are a political matter and Fraser (1996) perceives this as recognition justice which she identifies with political justice. Further, Fraser elaborates on a conception of justice that is grounded in an Aristotelian tradition of participatory democracy (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). A political arrangement that is just where there is parity of participation. Nancy Fraser proposes a theory of recognition that sees social inequalities as generated from complex interwoven patterns of material redistributive inequalities, and cultural misrecognition, which she describes as ‘perspectival dualism. Fraser (2000, 2003) maintains that “an order of intersubjective subordination derived from institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some members of society as less than full members of society, as less than full partners in interaction.” The representative nature of injustice according to Fraser, is when black people representing (black learners) were not part of the policy development surrounding the education system of South Africa. This was also enforced through exclusion in universal suffrage by the apartheid administration. This element addresses the question of political inclusion and representation in different spheres of government. Black people had no voting power and were excluded from the Bill of Rights and other rights. The policy titled “The Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education” of 2001 was mainly on inclusive education for all learners despite their mental and physical disabilities. This addresses the need to recognize that these learners are to be counted as equals in the education system with those without learning barriers. The period in 1994 marked a significant shift in the politics of South Africa. During this period, Blacks won the right to vote, and this promoted the recognition and representation justice agenda. Black parents had more powers through the South Africa Schools Act of 1996 through voting of the School Governing Bodies and their functions. The formation of the school governing bodies fits well with the principles of universal suffrage through the promotion of democratic participation.

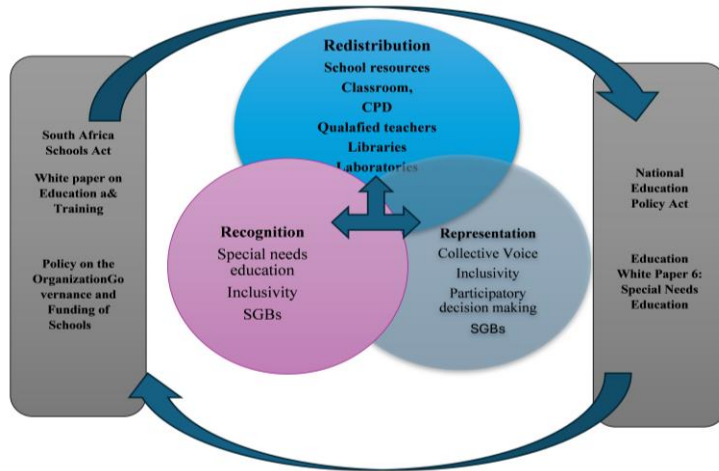


Figure 2. Three dimensions of Frasers' justice framework.

Figure 2 provides a picture of the relationship between the policy development (of democratic education) and Frasers' three dimensions of social justice. Further, the graphical representation provides a synoptic glance into the understanding of how these policies address past imbalances. It was noted that the democratic government policies were interventionist and strategic to redress the past inequalities of the apartheid administration. Through this graphical representation, I demonstrate the interconnectedness of the selected policies with Frasers' three dimensions of redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Conclusions

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the state of the South African education system since the advent of democracy, highlighting systemic failures in addressing historical educational imbalances. Deploying the social justice theoretical framework of Nancy Fraser, the analysis explores three dimensions of injustice: redistributive, representative, and recognition. The review and synthesis of authoritative, pertinent, and expansive scholarly literature was further applied. Salisbury (2016), Gallo (2020), Adewumi, Mosito, and Agosto, (2019) argue that despite the democratic project of 1994, significant challenges remain within the education system. Notably, these setbacks are evident in rural areas, where students still attend classes under trees, where there are no habitable ablution facilities, and there is a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. These issues perpetuate redistributive injustice, as previously disadvantaged schools continue to lack essential resources.

It can be concluded that while the democratic government in South Africa has made significant achievements in trying to redress past injustices through policy interventions, the education system remains characterized by disparities and inefficiencies. These stubborn and unprecedented challenges highlight the urgent need for more targeted, comprehensive policy interventions that must ensure the equitable distribution of resources, improved teacher quality, and systemic reforms. The exploration of the education system and its evolution from apartheid to democracy has revealed serious educational inequalities and social injustices. To address these anomalies, the government should revisit the education budget and intentionally spend more capital on the justice trajectory. It is also critical that a serious impact study of the democratic education policies be conducted. The budget should target infrastructure, learning materials, and technology. The Ministry of Education Justice should be established to ensure the speedy address of educational problems.

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