

Education, training and the ‘precariat’: An overview of the South African education and skills landscape¹

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Abstract

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has prioritized education and training with three broad social goals: redress of past injustice; developing skills for an industrializing economy; and enhancing democratic practices. Almost 20 years later, South Africa’s education system is poorly regarded by the public and often referred to as being in crisis. The inequalities of the colonial and apartheid periods have not lessened, the education system does not deliver the skills required by the economy, and there is little evidence to suggest that the system has deepened democratic values and practices. This paper tracks the various policy moves that South Africa has made, including the processes of borrowing, and proceeds to discuss the ways in which the reforms have failed to address the social goals that they were intended to address. Finally, alternative ways of addressing the crisis in education are discussed, and possible areas of alignment with BRICS countries are explored.

Introduction

In order to locate South Africa’s education system in relation to those of the BRICS partners it is first necessary to map out the shape of the system and the historical and contemporary social forces that have shaped the system. This chapter provides a broad introduction to the South African education system and the key moves in the debates about the system. It goes on to argue that at the centre of educational initiatives is a growing concern with what Guy Standing has referred to as the ‘precariat’, the increasing number of young people who are

¹ This chapter draws on an earlier presentation at the BRICS 2013 Education Forum. Ivor Baatje’s input into the conceptualization of the presentation is gratefully acknowledged.

neither in education, employment or training. The chapter ends with a discussion of how comparative studies across the BRICS countries offer potential learning opportunities for thinking about social and educational policies.

Historical overview

Like all of South Africa's modern history, the marks of colonialism and the more recent apartheid system are deeply etched into every aspect of the education system. A comprehensive history or even summary is not possible within the scope of this paper. It is only possible to highlight a few strands of the history that are particularly relevant for analyzing present day education.

Formal modern schools were introduced shortly after the arrival of the Dutch colonists in the mid 17th century, primarily to cater for the education of slaves. With the expansion of the colonial system and the arrival of missionaries, schooling and various forms of higher education expanded throughout southern Africa. However, mass schooling for a large proportion of the population was only made available by the state during the course of the 20th century alongside industrialization and the formal implementation of the apartheid system.

As the convoluted logic of the apartheid system was implemented, the school system became increasingly fragmented. Each racial and ethnic group had their own education department developing parallel systems and institutional types. Separate schooling expanded upwards into separate universities and technikons for each linguistic and racial group. While there were elements of commonality in terms of curriculum, the various systems developed their own organizational culture and resourcing and quality varied greatly, with white South Africans enjoying the lion's share.

The technical and vocational education system was further shaped by the economic developments in South Africa. Initially an agrarian economy, the discovery of minerals (diamonds and gold in particular) catapulted South Africa into a global economy and drove the industrialization of key parts of the country. Mining, particularly the deep mines on the Witwatersrand, required technical skills that weren't being produced locally. Technical education systems designed to train artisans began emerging, based largely around an apprenticeship system, while higher-level engineering and other scientific skills were trained at new universities. However, from the outset the racialised nature of the labour market shaped the institutions, with skilled labour being reserved for whites.

It was only in the 1970s, when South Africa's economy started to contract, that neo-classical economic policies started gaining ascendancy and a progressive deregulation of the race based education and training system began. Training institutions offering technical education to black South Africans were opened and some of the restrictions on categories of jobs were lifted in order to widen the skills base. Up to this point the system, which comprised technical colleges and state enterprises where apprentices were contracted, was largely successful at supplying the mid-level skills required by industry and the public sector.

However, with declining demand and increasing privatization of public entities, training at colleges became delinked from the actual apprenticeships. By the mid 1980s 26 000 applicants per annum did a trade test in engineering fields with about half succeeding at the test. A decade later this had dwindled to only 5 000 applicants with about 3 000 passing (Wedekind, 2013).

When the first democratic government was inaugurated in 1994 it was faced with an education system that was highly fragmented, of uneven quality and no longer supplying adequately skilled new entrants into the workforce. The schooling system was particularly volatile, as schools had become a central pillar of the liberation struggle, with student organisations and teacher unions playing leading roles in the internal resistance movement. This had led to the ongoing disruption of many schools around the country and the consequent impact on students, with growing drop out rates and high failure in standardized assessment. Educational renewal and reform was a critical issue that needed to be tackled by the new government.

Education Reform in democratic South Africa

The education system was one of the priorities for the new democratically elected government and South Africa has consistently spent a comparatively high 18% of government expenditure on education. Interestingly, the primary driver for educational reform in the immediate post-apartheid period was the labour movement rather than education organisations. Labour's concerns were twofold: avoiding redundancies that were a seemingly inevitable consequence of South Africa's reintegration into the global economy, and recognition of prior learning (RPL) for unqualified yet skilled workers. The former sought to upskill the workforce to improve competitiveness and productivity, while the focus on RPL was intended to ensure that those workers that had picked up skills informally were credited for these without having to jump through all the education hoops. The vehicle to achieve these two aims was a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), that would integrate all education and training.

The model that was adopted drew on the New Zealand, Australian and Scottish experiences in particular (Allais, 2007). It divided the education system into three bands (General, Further and Higher Education and Training) with eight (later ten) levels. Each and every qualification, course or section of knowledge had to be assigned a certain number of credits at a specific level, with the intention being that these credits could be transferred across the system. The framework as a whole would be managed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) while two (later three) statutory bodies would oversee quality assurance at the different levels – the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), Umalusi and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). Figure 1 below presents a basic schema of the NQF.

Higher Education	Universities	Universities of Technology	Private Providers	HEQC
	National Senior Certificate Further Education and Training Certificate (now National Certificate Vocational)			Umalusi
Further Education and Training	Grades 10-12 in Schools	FET Colleges	Workplace	
	General Education and Training Certificate Adult Basic Education and Training Certificates			
General Education and Training	Schools Grade R – 9	ABET Levels 1 – 4		

This model has had profound effects on the design of the system, and on the curriculum and pedagogy. The latter has been the source of significant research and debate in the schooling sector, with the introduction of outcomes based education being particularly problematic in the schooling system (Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Jansen, 2004).

While the primary drivers of the system had been motivated by an integrated education and training system, the implementation of reforms in the vocational training side of the system were focused on institutional size and shape, rather than curriculum. Thus it was some time before the vocational curriculum was reformed. While it is evident from the history described above that the training system had already declined prior to democracy, there was a widespread popular perception that it was the introduction of reforms in the training system after 1994 that had led to the decline. The new Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges that had been created out of amalgamations of various small technical colleges were thus burdened with the pressures of dealing with mergers, changes in governance and significant shifts in their learner population, before the introduction of new qualifications (Akoojee, 2008). When the new National Certificate Vocational (NCV) was introduced to replace outdated curricula, the FET college system was not able to deliver quality programmes at a large scale.

In the higher education system there have been significant changes in the institutional landscape, with a number of mergers taking place between institutions that historically served different race groups or different purposes (polytechnic and research institutions) and the creation of three categories of university: research, comprehensive and universities of technology. However, because of the relative autonomy of higher education institutions and the political and economic influence of some institutions' alumni, the mergers did

not affect a number of key institutions which were able to continue functioning with minimal disruption. Arguably, with one exception, all the top universities in South Africa today are the institutions which did not go through a merger process.

There have been a number of other quality assurance and curriculum related changes in the higher education landscape that have sought to insert the outcomes based model of education into the higher education band. This has been largely resisted with only limited compliance with registration of qualifications.

In the field of adult education there has been uneven progress. Adult literacy levels have not changed significantly with around 11% of adults classified as functionally illiterate². A recent campaign has shown some success, but generally the provision for adults has not been seriously addressed (Aitchison, 2012).

Having outlined some of the key pressures and policy shifts in the South African education system we now turn to an overview of how the South African system fares against a range of quality and performance indicators. This provides a basis for thinking about what comparison with other BRICS countries may be useful for future collaboration.

Education in South Africa in 2013

In 2013 we continue to have a schooling system that is bi-modal, with 70% of the system characterized by dysfunction and poor national and international achievement scores (Spaull, 2012). High levels of teacher and learner absenteeism, low levels of teacher content and pedagogic knowledge, limited parental involvement, poor levels of administrative and academic support from education authorities, and backlogs in infrastructure are features of a school system that is consistently referred to as being in crisis. However, there are a relatively stable 30% of schools that do function and produce results of reasonable quality, along with a growing private sector that caters both to the elite and a growing number of poorer communities that are either not serviced by state schools or have become disenchanted.

This bimodal system ends with a high stakes final national examination system that sees about half a million students writing examinations which will determine whether they are able to access other levels of education and enter the (albeit limited) job market. About a third of all the candidates that write the examination do not pass and of those that do, only a quarter achieve a level of pass that allows them to proceed into a university degree programme. This poor throughput is exacerbated by the fact that there is a significant dropout from the schooling system before the final grade, with the Department of Basic

² By comparison, Russia and China have literacy rates of 99.5% and 93.7% respectively, Brazil is similar to South Africa at 90% while India's literacy rate is 62.8%.

Education's own data suggesting that Grades 10 and 11 have dropout rates of almost 12% (Department of Basic Education, 2011). In addition, South Africa has a high Grade repetition rate with an average of 9% of each grade repeating, resulting in a significant set of over-aged students in the schooling system.

With significant parts of the schooling system dysfunctional, the post-school education and training (PSET) system has become increasingly central to strategies that seek to address inequality, unemployment, and poverty. Most of the discussion about post-school education and skills development relates to the relationship between this triad (inequality, unemployment, and poverty) of disabling conditions and job creation. Major planning initiatives focusing on PSET are underway. However, the key public institutions, Further Education and Training Colleges, also have poor throughput rates and are not trusted by industry to deliver skilled workers. Part of the concern relates to the fact that the colleges have been unable to recruit staff that are qualified educators that have industry experience (Wedekind & Watson, 2012), but there is also a lack of public and industry understanding of the new curriculum offerings. Many colleges or programmes at colleges have limited linkages to industry and there is little recruitment by some industries from this sector. This has resulted in students opting for colleges as a last resort, rather than as a deliberate decision to pursue a specific career option. One consequence has been high levels of alienation amongst staff.

Universities and universities of technology, which have largely retained public trust, are under pressure to absorb more students with limited resources. This has resulted in an inverted pyramid, with university enrollments far outstripping vocational programmes in colleges, and humanities, social sciences and management making up the bulk of the university enrolments. Despite attempts to promote more science and technology oriented programmes and incentivize institutions to grow these programmes, the skewed shape of enrolments has remained. The throughput rates are also very problematic, with a recent report suggesting that almost half of all students drop out of degree programmes (John, 2013). This is in part a consequence of inadequate preparation of students by the schooling system, but also lack of support at university level. In addition, while there is a financial aid system that supports the poorest students, the financial burden of the costs of higher education remain a major factor in the drop-out phenomenon.

On the research and development front, the South African system is underdeveloped and most of the expenditure is outside the university system. However, South African universities do feature amongst the top 500 universities in the world on various rankings and represent the bulk of the continents leading institutions. South African scientists and companies have a track record of innovation in various fields that attests to a small but strong innovation system. The fact that South Africa's bid to host the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope was successful indicates that there is international recognition that there is capacity to manage high-level scientific infrastructure.

Mapping a way forward within BRICS

There is a clear sense that educational reform has not achieved the intended outcomes that were imagined when South Africa moved into the democratic era after 1994. The reasons for this failure are multifaceted. South Africa designed a complex, high-end system without due regard for the capacity to deliver, and the complexity of aligning the previously uneven systems that were inherited from the apartheid past. The focus has been on establishing new systems, often borrowed from a range of international contexts (Jansen, 2004). By trying to signal a break from the past, there has been a conscious attempt to impose new models that often do not resonate with the institutional histories. This has resulted in the creation of bureaucracies (particularly in the training sphere) that generate their own logics and have opened spaces for corruption. While pockets of excellence exist throughout the system, the overarching picture is one of crisis.

While the problems of the education system (such as poor management, poor quality, poor infrastructure) undoubtedly need to be addressed, there is a mistaken belief that these problems are the root cause of wider social and economic challenges faced by South Africa. Education is viewed as the panacea for all manner of ills that are not under its control. Specifically, recent policy initiatives such as the National Development Plan continue to perpetuate a widely held belief that education can unlock South Africa's economic potential (National Planning Commission, 2011). However, despite continued growth, even during periods of global economic crisis, the national economy continues to fail the poor and marginalized and it is not education's responsibility. South Africa's various economic and development strategy documents suggest that a 9% growth target is required if unemployment figures are to be brought to within manageable range. However, growth rates of about 3% have been achieved, but significantly this has been largely jobless growth. Rising unemployment amongst graduates is not endemic to South African society only, but is an international trend. Technological and managerial efficiencies make it possible to reduce the need for labour, and South Africa has witnessed a decline in labour intensive industries since the 1990s. Whilst the graduate unemployment trend is worrying, the problem for those without higher education qualifications is far greater. By some estimates as many as 13 million South African's with less than 10 years of schooling remain on the margins of formal employment - insecure and unable to obtain meaningful access to the formal economy - and many face permanent unemployment (Human Resource Development Council, 2012). Over the last decade hundreds of youth have been "warehoused" in initiatives such as learnerships, internships and employment schemes as a means to make them more employable but whose impact in practice has been marginal (Kraak, 2013). It is clear that focusing narrowly on the formal economy and imagining that education can facilitate access to that economy makes an assumption that the economy is theoretically able to absorb all the young people looking for work. The trend globally would suggest that this is not possible within the current neo-liberal economic framework and that there will be an increasing number of adults and youth (referred to as the precariat by Standing (2010)) in both urban and rural, developed and developing contexts

who are excluded from the formal economy (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2008). Unless we explore the potential that resides in local initiatives to contest social inequalities and build a better 'commons' through socially useful work and the human agency inherent in it, education researchers are likely to remain marginal to solving the crises that affect education but are not primarily educational problems.

The relationships and support structures that are made possible within the BRICS framework create possibilities for comparative work across very different systems and institutional logics. South Africa's historical linkages are framed by the British colonial legacy and much of the system is still framed by this. In this respect there are some parallels with India, but Brazil, China and Russia offer alternative systems that have not been explored. Besides building up a common set of data across the five countries that would provide the basis for comparison, exploring the relationship between macro-policies and micro-level individual and institutional engagement with policies would be a fruitful area of research. The range of possible collaborative research spans all aspects of the education system but a current priority is the relationship between education and the world of work, and the issue of language in education. But there are possibilities to build a unique capacity that does not just replicate traditional methodologies. Given the discussion on the precariat above, and the recognition that the formal economy (even under optimal conditions) is unlikely to absorb all the new entrants into the labour market, there is a need for socially-engaged research, radical approaches to community research, responsive educational curricula and appropriate pedagogical actions that support broader community development needs. In this sense the BRICS education research agenda needs to transcend a technicist analysis of formal education, and reimagine education drawing on the very diverse philosophical and methodological traditions that are represented in each of the constituent countries.

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