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CASE STUDY

School Fees in South Africa: Increasing quality or decreasing equality?

Introduction

As the 2015 Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals deadline approaches, the issue of school fees and its connection to enrollment has increased in importance. Given that unenrolled children tend to be poor and less able to pay costs associated with education, school fees have come to be one of the major obstacles to the achievement of universal primary education. As such, the school fees issue has caused intense debate within the development community. Some development experts, including Luis Crouch and Penny Vinjevold and Paud Murphy, et al., have concluded that expanding access will not reduce inequality and poverty if the quality of education is low. On the other hand, opponents of school fees believe that they act as a barrier to education for poor children. School fees, argue experts such as Raja Bentaouet Kattan, Nicholas Burnett, and Jill Blackmore, further marginalize already vulnerable segments of the population and reinforce existing inequalities: wealthier communities are able to raise more funds, meaning the likelihood of a student attaining a certain stage of education becomes highly correlated with his/her family income level.

South Africa provides a unique case with regards to the issue of school fees. Not only is the country a new democracy that created policies virtually from scratch, but it is also a middle-income country less dependent on foreign aid. Today, the vast majority of learners in post-apartheid South Africa attend public schools, all of which are encouraged to supplement government funding with private funds, namely through fees charged to learners' parents.

While school fees are hotly debated in South Africa, there is little information about the effects of this policy on schools. This study examines the school principals' implementation of South Africa's school fees policy and analyzes its effectiveness in tackling the issues of equity and redress in the post-apartheid environment.

School Fees in South Africa

In 1994, during the transition from apartheid to democracy, policy-makers recognized that education system reform was critical to tackling the issues of redress and redistribution. Education was also symbolically significant given the apartheid education system's role in creating and reinforcing inequities in opportunity. The African National Congress (ANC) continues to face the challenge of transforming South Africa's education system into one that does not discriminate and prioritizes funding for previously disadvantaged schools. To realize this transformation, the government enshrined in the Constitution the right of all South African citizens to basic education.

Many scholars agree that this passage of South Africa's Constitution codifies education's role in the quest for societal equality and redress and obliges the government to provide education for all citizens, regardless of the nation's financial or political climate (Fiske & Ladd, 2002; Spreen & Vally, 2006; Veriava 2005). Other rights guaranteed by the Constitution, such as healthcare, food, water, and housing, are all qualified by a progressive realization clause, meaning the government is protected from prosecution if unable to finance full, immediate realization of citizens' rights in these areas.



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However, the policies governing this right to basic education were developed among competing national interests and rival international theories: the neo-liberal focus on cost-recovery versus the more recent focus of EFA on education rights and universal access through fee abolition. Subsequently, while schools in South Africa are encouraged to charge user fees, policymakers have tried to mitigate their negative effects by addressing the need for equity and redress within the system.

Policies and Processes

Two pieces of legislation refer to school fee policy and shape its implementation at the school level: the South African Schools Act (SASA) and the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF).

SASA provides the foundation for the most essential elements of the education system. Filled with references to the goals of equity and redress, it establishes key points about rights to education, school governance, and school funding:

- Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 7 and 15.
- Government funding of schools must be on an equitable basis so the state treats all children fairly.
- All schools should be self-governing and establish School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in which a majority of members are parents.
- All SGBs are obliged to supplement their government resources to improve education quality.
- Schools are divided into two classifications: Section 20 and Section 21, in reference to their respective areas of the SASA. A Section 20 school has its financial affairs managed directly by the provincial Department of Education (DOE) until its SGB applies and is approved for financial management responsibilities. If a school is awarded Section 21 status, DOE funds are deposited directly into the school's bank account and it manages its own finances. These responsibilities include maintaining and improving school grounds, purchasing textbooks and learning materials, and paying for school services.
- Schools and SGBs cannot discriminate unfairly against learners who wish to be admitted. In particular, schools are not allowed to turn away learners on the grounds that they are unable to pay school fees.

The NNSSF outlines how the government funds public schools and distinguishes the financial responsibilities of the state from those of the parents or SGBs. Specifically, the NNSSF:

- Legislates progressive funding of schools, meaning schools are divided into national quintiles and funded based on the relative wealth of the surrounding community;
- Establishes no-fee schools where communities in the bottom two income quintiles receive a higher resource allocation from the provincial government and are prohibited from charging fees;
- Dictates the process for setting fees in which a school's principal, department heads, SGB, and parents collaboratively design and present a budget to the provincial Department of Education;
- Provides a school fee exemption for households that cannot afford fees and requires schools to inform parents of their right to apply for full or partial exemption, based on household income; and

- Mandates that collection of school fees is the responsibility of the SGB and school administrators. If a parent did not apply for an exemption, or applied but did not qualify, he or she is legally obligated to pay their child's school fees. If such a parent fails to pay their fees, SGBs are allowed to take the parent to court to collect the amount owed assuming the SGB can prove that the exemption information was made available to parents.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to fill a research gap by looking at how school fee policy is interpreted and implemented by principals in South Africa. Acknowledging that rural and urban schools face different challenges in their quest to offer high quality education, this study focused on the peri-urban township of KwaNdengezi.

As a peri-urban township close to the city of Durban, KwaNdengezi is affected by the typically urban issues of overcrowding and crime, while remaining fairly undeveloped and isolated from the resources and infrastructure of the city. This combination created an ideal location to study as school principals are tackling problems from both sides of the rural/urban divide. Two schools were also chosen from the nearby small urban area of Pinetown after principals in KwaNdengezi frequently compared themselves to schools in that area.

In total, 11 principals were interviewed: 9 from relatively poor schools in KwaNdengezi (as defined by observable characteristics such as physical state of the school and the schools' annual budgets) and 2 from the wealthier area of Pinetown. In 2007, the KwaNdengezi schools were classified as Quintile 4 (receiving R369 per learner per year from the government), while the Pinetown schools were in Quintile 5 (receiving R123 per learner per year from the government). However, while KwaNdengezi primary schools charged students annual fees of R80 or R100 per year and secondary schools charged R240, the two Pinetown secondary schools charged R8,000 or R11,000 per learner in fees each year. If all parents paid their fees, the disparity in level of fees would create a annual difference of either R7,391 or R10,391 per learner in secondary schools. All 11 principals' experiences were compared with regards to the implementation of the school fee policy.

In addition to the interviews with principals, the study also included an interview with a community leader working closely with schools, a desk study/literature review, and a short questionnaire gathering quantitative data such as numbers of students, classrooms, and teachers.

Main Findings

To discern whether the school fees policy in South Africa was well-designed and clearly communicated, this case study observed its implementation across sites to see if it was uniformly applied. Principals' experiences with school fee policy were consistent across the poorer schools in KwaNdengezi, but contrasted significantly with the experiences of Pinetown principals. This suggests that South Africa's school fee policy is either interpreted differently or not designed well enough to fit into the distinct realities of schools in different income brackets.

To complicate matters further, the school fee policy contains a number of adverse elements that mostly affect poor schools. Currently, principals do not have an incentive to inform parents of the exemption policy or to encourage them to apply; even the poorest schools

received no additional government funding if they had high levels of exemption. Also, parents do not have an incentive to pay school fees in poorer areas (schools rarely take non-paying parents to court) and parents who apply for exemptions have incentive to obscure financial information to appear poorer. Finally, provincial governments do not have an incentive to investigate whether schools are reaching their budgets as this might require the province to increase education funding, further straining limited financial resources

Overall, the study found that the stark differences between the KwaNdengezi and Pinetown schools indicate huge disparities in the educational opportunities accessible to learners of different income brackets in South Africa, thus possibly perpetuating historical inequalities. The following findings highlighted the differences between poorer and wealthier schools.

The design of the school fee implementation procedures complicates principals' work, and the current rules negatively affect poor schools' financial processes and final budgets. Schools must go through a budgeting process and submit a final budget to the provincial DOE demonstrating proper accounting for funds and, presumably, to ensure all schools have a sufficient amount of funding. However, for principals in poor schools, the budgeting process becomes a futile exercise rather than a useful method of financial management for the following reasons:

- Principals in KwaNdengezi cannot determine at the beginning of the year how much income their school will receive. First, they feel they cannot request from parents the necessary funds due to poverty in the community. Then, even with this small amount requested from parents, these principals cannot accurately budget since it is unknown how many parents will actually pay in any given year. The budget submitted to the DOE will almost never be accurate: while parents approve the level of school fees, rarely does a majority pay.
- The budgeting and fee collection process itself is costly to poor schools due to the immense amount of time and resources it requires. These schools are also less likely than wealthy schools to have the tools such as computers and copiers that facilitate fee collection, creating even more inefficiency and costs for poorer schools.
- Principals in poorer schools were often required to personally oversee, or implement, all stages of the fee policy while wealthier schools were found to have a finance department responsible for budgeting and fee collection. This detracts from principals' other responsibilities such as staff management and support, discipline, planning, and fundraising.
- Principals in poorer schools have little recourse against parents who could but choose not to pay. While the policy allows SGBs to sue parents to collect unpaid school fees, legal and collection expenses are far higher than the original fee debt of parents, and SGBs are not given additional resources to pursue this option.

The quality of education seems to be related to a community's wealth. The findings of Edward Fiske and Helen Ladd (2004) and the theories of other scholars including Bentaouet Kattan, Blackmore, Burnett, and Roithmayr, contend that fees create a situation in which the quality of education and the level of education to which children progress are highly correlated with family income level. The qualitative findings from this study seem to support their theory:

- The fees collected do appear to improve the quality of education at a given school, which supports the assertions of advocates of cost-sharing such as Bray, Crouch, Murphy, and

Vinjevold. Principals in KwaNdengezi said that being able to collect fees does help them to provide a better quality education. However, they needed school fees to compensate for inadequate funds from the government rather than improving school quality beyond basic provisions. The funds raised in the Quintile 3 schools were small and illustrates that the school fee policy itself was not beneficial in raising the funds to address the equity issue between students from different family income levels.

- The additional funds raised from fees did not appear to equalize the opportunities for learners of poor and wealthy schools. While no quantitative data was gathered, the visibly stark differences in learning environments suggest that the quality of education offered in Pinetown was higher than that of KwaNdengezi. According the Department of Education, all nine of the KwaNdengezi schools were considered to be in Quintile 4 on the 2008–2009 resource targeting list. While considered relatively wealthy, all of the schools had crumbling infrastructure, old desks, and worn supplies. The two Pinetown schools were considered Quintile 5 schools, were in good physical condition, and possessed a number of other physical assets such as tractors, buses, and computers. Even if the teachers and teaching methods were of the same quality, the environment and learning tools available in Pinetown schools would positively affect the quality of education.
- Principals in KwaNdengezi all said they would prefer to be no-fee schools and be allocated their full budget directly from the government. Besides being easier to administer, no-fee schools are likely to receive more funds than those that rely on the combination of government resources and school fees. While principals see fees as being beneficial to quality if the majority of parents pay them, becoming a no-fee school would secure a higher level of total funds.

The continued division between Section 20 and Section 21 disadvantages poor schools and makes principals’ management responsibilities more difficult.

Section 20 and 21 classifications were created due to the concern that principals serving Black or Colored students were undertrained in financial and school management due to apartheid-era policies. After SASA, the government automatically awarded the vast majority of ex-Model C schools, which had self-governing structures established during the apartheid system, with Section 21 functions. Almost all schools serving poorer Black, Indian, and Colored students were required to apply and prove their ability to manage school finances. Section 20 status has a number of effects on principals’ management responsibilities:

- The government allocates funds to Section 20 schools that are managed by the provincial DOE and only a small portion of the funds are given to the school directly in cash throughout the year. Thus, a good portion of principals’ time is used to solve immediate cash needs instead of managing the staff and the school. This is exacerbated when the school is in need of repair, as principals do not have cash-on-hand to maintain or fix physical infrastructure and must wait for the DOE to handle their request, which in some cases takes years.
- All of the KwaNdengezi principals reported that, due to their Section 20 status, they had to pay double or triple the price for items through the DOE than what they would pay at private stores. This puts poor schools in Quintiles 3–5 at even more of a disadvantage since they neither receive the highest level of funding from the DOE, nor pay the same as wealthier schools for resources.
- The Section 20 classification also forces a school to spend its entire allocation each year.



This rule disadvantages poorer schools as they are unable to save for larger purchases or school infrastructure improvements.

- Section 20 schools were more affected by the lack of support and communication from the DOE. Despite receiving similarly inadequate support from the DOE as their wealthier counterparts in Pinetown, the Section 20 KwaNdengezi schools depend on the DOE's approval for everything from supply purchasing to maintenance and therefore require more support than Section 21 schools. KwaNdengezi principals are therefore hampered in their ability to efficiently and effectively manage their schools in a way that their Section 21 school counterparts are not.

Disconnects between Reality and Policy

The preceding findings demonstrate the result of a breakdown between reality and school fee policy. This disconnect and the school fee policy's adverse effects suggest that the most important question is not whether schools are correctly implementing the policy, but rather, can the current policy help South Africa reach its goals of quality education for all? Some of the disconnects made clear by the findings include the following:

The use of quintiles to determine school funding does not account for the true distribution of income. The current national resource targeting system ranks the country's schools using the income of the surrounding community and then divides the schools into five quintiles of approximately even numbers of learners. While SASA was designed to promote a more equitable distribution of resources by giving more to poorer quintiles, the allocation plan appears to disadvantage many poor students. South Africa's extreme income inequality (Gini coefficient of 0.77 in 2001—one of the most unequal in the world) means a small portion of the population holds most of the wealth. Thus, a quintile system created by dividing the total number of learners by five may not be the ideal way to allocate resources.

Policymakers overestimated both parents and SGBs' power and access to information and the ability or desire of parents to pay fees and oversee their children's education.

This study finds that the school fee policy does not substantially augment government funds in poor communities. KwaNdengezi schools reported such low rates of payment that parent contribution to the overall budget was minimal. The government's school funding allocation policy assumes that parents pay school fees and that schools have access to these additional resources. However, the policy fails to provide resources or practical mechanisms to hold non-compliant parents accountable.

All principals indicated that fees did not increase parental involvement. There was almost no parental involvement in any of the schools studied, regardless of the level of fees. If anything, the fee policy detracted from involvement in other areas as parents interested in participating in school activities did not due to fear of being reproached for not having paid fees.

Overall, the experiences of principals in this study seemed to support Wildeman's (2008) findings that the assumption about the ability of provincial DOEs to properly support poor and Section 20 schools was misinformed. The exemption clause specifically states that schools should be assisted by their provincial DOE when facing problems implementing the school fee policy. However, both Pinetown and KwaNdengezi schools reported a complete lack of communication with the DOE.

The provincial departments seem to be unaware of schools' issues with the school fee policy and do not have the required personnel to review the accuracy of the financial information collected from the schools. Considering these gaps, the DOE almost certainly does not know how the school fee policy is implemented at the school level. Without a clear idea of how it is implemented, it would be difficult for the DOE to assess whether or not the policy is achieving the intended objectives, or what might be its unintended consequences.

Implications for Equity

Achieving equity within the education system is critical for South Africa to decrease poverty and socio-economic inequality. This is a complex issue affected by other socio-political factors and is without an easy answer. However, this is perhaps the most important goal of a democratic South Africa, and as such, the process of continually assessing progress and modifying efforts is essential. In their works, Fiske and Ladd (2002, 2004) present an excellent framework of the concept of equity within which to analyze the success of educational transformation. They specify three distinct definitions of equitable education that could be applied in a system analysis: equal treatment, educational adequacy, and equal educational opportunity.

Equal Treatment (Distributional Equality)

The explicit objective of much of South African education policy has been to reach distributional equality through the reallocation of public resources (human, physical, and resource inputs) to poorer schools. By this definition, the democratic government has achieved limited success in creating a more equal system by distributing state funds to previously disadvantaged schools. However, the focus on giving additional funds to those in the poorest two quintiles has left fewer funds for schools in Quintiles 3 and 4, which in fact serve a majority of poor learners (Wildeman, 2008). Additionally, while the distribution of state funds may be skewed toward poorer schools, overall funding (government funds plus school fees) for wealthier schools dwarfs that of the poorer schools.

Educational Adequacy

Many schools are still not being funded at an adequate level. The DOE estimated the cost to teach a child for one year to be between R600 and R1,000 per student in 2003, but expected provinces would only provide, on average, R500 per learner. The 2007 NNSF defined adequate funding as being R554 per learner in a primary school, which is the recommended Quintile 3 allocation. While most schools in Quintiles 1 and 2 are now funded at this level or above, Quintile 4 or 5 schools located in poorer areas (like those in KwaNdengezi) are not likely reaching even R500 per learner. This is due to the relatively small government allocation coupled with low rates of fee payment by parents. These schools receive less funding than other schools, and this amount is lower than the established DOE level of adequate funding to provide a quality education.

Equal Educational Opportunity and Redress

South Africa has high enrollment rates compared to other developing countries and has reached gender parity. This suggests the school fee policy may not be acting as a barrier to education access in South Africa. However, is the quality of education accessible by poor learners equal and equitable? A point made frequently in the literature is that equal may not, in fact, be equitable since simply allocating equal resources may not make up for historical oppression or the current disadvantages of poverty. Everard Weber (2002) explains



that “equality is defined in relation to inequality...while equity is seen as addressing unjust outcomes...an equitable system would strive to overcome the disadvantages so all students would have equal opportunity.”

The results of this study show that the current system is perpetuating historical inequalities established under colonial and apartheid rule, supporting the findings of the DOE and other researchers including Fiske and Ladd and Roithmayr. Affluent communities continue to have better schools, thus the already wealthy have better chances at learning, acquiring skills, and, later on, being economically successful. While the DOE remains focused on, and has taken steps toward, the equalization of educational opportunity, this and other studies have found that neither expanding access nor focusing funds on the poorest learners has resulted in an equitable education system. Further measures are needed to achieve this goal of equal access to educational opportunity.

Recommendations

An education system that prepares the majority of students to compete equally among one another upon graduation is necessary to decrease poverty and inequality and increase economic growth. If South Africa is to make gains in these areas, changes need to be made in the way the education system is financed.

The main objective of this study was to describe schools and principals’ experiences with the implementation of the school fee policy. However, in the analysis of the findings, a few major systemic issues emerged that need to be addressed by the DOE and South African government if their stated goals of equity, redress, and quality are to be achieved.

The processes designated in the policy, particularly those of the exemption and collection procedures, need to be reviewed and revised to better fit with schools’ experiences.

If a policy is not relevant to schools, it will not be implemented as designed and will not have the desired effects. Since the majority of schools in South Africa serve poor students, it is likely that most schools face some, if not all, of the same issues as the KwaNdengezi schools. Further research should be conducted into how consistently these problems with implementation are found in poor schools in different areas.

The Section 20 and 21 classifications need to be revisited.

In the 14 years since the inception of democracy in South Africa, many resources have been put into teacher and principal training, yet the responsibilities and privileges granted to Section 21 principals have not yet been realized by their Section 20 counterparts. Due to Section 20 schools’ disadvantage in the financial and budget process, it seems appropriate to revisit the policy and determine how the classifications might be modified or eliminated. Effort should be put into rectifying this situation, perhaps via a more streamlined process to help qualified schools become Section 21. Additional resources could also be allocated to building the capacity of the principals and SGBs in schools the DOE believes are not ready to undertake Section 21 responsibilities.

In addition to decreasing the disadvantages facing poor schools, modifying or removing Section 20 and 21 classifications may also relieve the burden of the provincial DOE departments to administer Section 20 schools, which require more supervision than Section 21 schools.

The national budget and resource targeting system need to be reevaluated.

The DOE has a compelling case to lobby the National Treasury for additional funds and should do so. Education received 17.6 percent of the national budget in 2007 according to the World Bank. However, considering its importance to achieving other national development goals and its place in the Constitution, education's share should be increased as high as necessary to achieve the stated goals. While South Africa's expenditure on education is high compared to other African countries, there are other middle-income countries spending similar, or greater, percentages of government funds on education. For example, in 2006, the World Bank found that Chile spent 16 percent and Costa Rica spent 20.6 percent of the national budget on education.

The funding policy needs to account for the South Africa's unequal income distribution.

In a country with extreme income inequality as in South Africa, income distribution will not follow the perfect 20 percent cut-offs used by the DOE to determine school funding quintiles. School funding quintiles should instead follow the same pattern as income distribution to ensure schools serving equally poor communities receive an equal amount of funds per learner.

Policies need to be better-aligned with social and education grants.

Currently, regardless of the quintile, additional funds are not allocated to schools for children who are required to be automatically exempted from paying fees. While the number of partial and full exemptions presumably depends on the level of fees set by the school compared with the average level of income of parents in the community, automatic exemptions are determined by factors beyond the control of principals. If a significant proportion of a school's households are receiving a Child Support Grant on behalf of learners, the school's ability to raise additional funds through fees is greatly compromised.

Furthermore, many households' primary income source is a pension for elderly people. To receive this grant one must be poor, yet it does not count for automatic school fee exemption since it is not received on behalf of a learner. Despite being ineligible for automatic exemption, the need to pay school fees does not impact the amount of the pension. Automatically exempting pension recipients who are primary caregivers of children might solve the issue from the household side but would further disadvantage schools counting on those fees. Additional consideration is needed to determine how schools will be compensated for automatically-exempted learners.

Conclusion

The reform of the South African education system was initiated during major national political transitions and international disagreement about education financing. The stated goals of the post-apartheid education policies include equity, redress, and quality. On some fronts, large strides have been made toward achieving these objectives, while on others, progress has stagnated. In large part, this study has corroborated the conclusions of previous studies examining the issue from different angles, specifically that the current policies are perpetuating historic inequalities.

The implication of this study's findings is that the provincial and national governments must review and amend the current legislation to ensure equal access to quality education for all of its children. An equitable education system is essential to South Africa's future as it is both the fulfillment of a fundamental human right and instrumental in the creation of future economic growth and sustainable poverty alleviation.

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