

Challenges South African youth face in education and their quest to eradicate issues of the past

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Introduction

The youth of South Africa today face many challenges in their daily lives. The age bracket that defines youth in South Africa is between 15 and 35 years of age, and this age group makes up a large proportion of the South African population (Foley 2018). Youth in South Africa face challenges such as crime, unemployment, poverty, and most importantly unequal opportunities in education (Foley 2018). These challenges should not be present in the daily lives of South African youth, especially since it has been over two decades since South Africa's first democratic elections. One of the most pressing issues in South Africa is the poor state of the education system. In 80% of South African schools, learners receive a sub-par education compared to other countries around the globe (Foley, 2018). Due to the poor education system, 55% of Grade 1 learners drop out of school and do not write their final matric examinations (Foley 2018).

Literature review

One of the most pressing issues in South Africa that affect many South African households is poverty. Countless children are born at-risk due to South Africa's sad history of poverty and the influences it has on the country (Foley 2018). Poverty is a vicious cycle that predominantly affects black and brown South Africans due to the apartheid regime that controlled the country over two decades ago (Foley 2018). Poverty does not work on its own-it brings along many other issues such as poor health and other socio-economic factors.

Many children that come from an underprivileged background tend to suffer from poor health compared to children from more well-off areas. Children from poorer backgrounds tend to have weakened immune systems, which leads to infections, illnesses, and other diseases (Chisholm 2004). Weak immune systems can stem from poor diets and little to no nutrition, which occurs due to the lack of income in impoverished communities (Chisholm 2004). Learners that have major health problems such as HIV/AIDS are often absent from school or have little money for school fees as most of the money goes towards health care (Chisholm 2004). Violence, as well as racism and sexism, affects learners and their schooling experience (Chisholm 2004). Rape, sexual violence, and abuse from teachers, family members, peers or strangers is, unfortunately, part of the daily challenges that some learners face during their schooling (Chisholm 2004).

Many learners in South African schools are faced with many socio-economic challenges, such as poverty. As of 2011, the youth population in South Africa was more than 10 million and the youth made up 19% of the total population in South Africa (De Lannoy et al. 2018). Sixty-two per cent of those youth were living below the poverty line with an average monthly income of only R799 or less (De Lannoy et al. 2018). Lower-income rates are strongly associated with race; in 2011, 69% of black youth and 46% of brown youth were living below the poverty line (De Lannoy, et al. 2018). Many learners and youth living below the poverty line have poor home life situations, come from households that are classified as informal dwellings, and do not have electricity, proper plumbing or running water (De Lannoy et al. 2018). Poverty can be described as multidimensional as poverty can be associated with and has an influence on an individual's experience of social exclusion, violence, trauma, and heightened levels of stress (De Lannoy et al. 2018). When an individual—especially from the youth of South Africa—experiences multidimensional poverty it may increase the risk of substance abuse, and/or mental illness (De Lannoy et al. 2018).

Learners that come from poorer backgrounds may not have the opportunity to attend university; some are afforded bursaries and take them as a last option, out of desperation or as a response to the needs of their communities (Thakrar et al. 2009). Many of these teachers did not intend on following a career in teaching, which may lead to some of these teachers being unmotivated, having few aspirations and low morale and work ethic (Thakrar et al. 2009). The minimum levels for teaching qualifications are significantly lower than those of other countries, which allows for the quality of teachers and education to be significantly lower than other, more developed countries (Thakrar et al. 2009).

Teaching in many poor and third-world countries is a difficult task as there is a lack of basic resources, poor curriculum and poor curriculum development and research (Thakrar et al. 2009). The education system and teachers in South Africa face daily challenges such as corruption, underfunding and political and racial instability (Thakrar et al. 2009). These challenges lead to poor working conditions and unmotivated teachers, which in turn challenges learners unfairly (Thakrar et al. 2009).

Infrastructure influences a learner's schooling experience (Amsterdam 2010). Infrastructure in schools can be defined in terms of two aspects, namely structural, and cosmetic (Amsterdam 2010). Structural infrastructure refers to the building, windows, colour, heating, flooring, and overall size of the school grounds (Amsterdam 2010). Cosmetic infrastructure refers to interior and exterior painting, furniture, landscaping, vandalism such as graffiti, textbooks and stationery (Amsterdam 2010). According to the South African National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS), school infrastructure is made up of elements such as water, electricity, furniture, sanitation facilities, computers, communication technologies, and the number of learners per teacher (Amsterdam 2010). In recent studies, some learners have stated that they find their classrooms filthy and littered, while they found their school bathrooms to be smelly, filthy, or non-functional (Amsterdam 2010). Learners have also raised concern about the upkeep and general maintenance of their schools, such as faulty classroom doors, and have also expressed their wishes for safe, inviting and hazard-free school-/playgrounds (Amsterdam 2010). All the above-mentioned issues influence the learners' learning experiences. A lack of proper seating could also lead to backache, low concentration levels and writing difficulties, which overall affects learning opportunities (Amsterdam 2010).

Tertiary education can be one of the answers to South Africa's many problems. There are many issues concerning tertiary education in South Africa and the two main challenges are entrance requirements and fees. The poor quality of education in South African secondary schools is evident in the matric pass rates and the university entrance rates-only 80% of these schools produce learners who pass matric and gain university entrance (Badat 2010). Of that 80%, 60% of the schools are independent and public schools that were once reserved for white students only; the remaining 20% of the schools are historically black and brown schools (Badat 2010). Since the start of democracy over two decades ago, rising numbers of first-generation black and brown students from middle-class as well as rural and poor households are entering higher education institutions (Reddy 2004). Universities have an important role to play in social transformation (Reddy 2004).

Possible solutions

Some of the possible solutions for the issues discussed in this article include better role models for youth and more organisations helping youth at risk (Foley 2018). To address the issue of poorly qualified teachers, attention needs to be given to the relationship between the language of learning and teaching, as well as utilising learners' home language in the classroom; multi-faceted interventions to support educators and the curriculum, specifically literacy and numeracy (Chisholm 2004). To address human rights issues and poverty, teachers need to start addressing these issues in the classroom (Chisholm 2004). Increased access to higher education for all youth, especially previously disadvantaged learners, is extremely dependent on the improvements that need to be made to the quality of the South African schooling system (Badat 2010).

Conclusion

Many youths in South Africa face several challenges- these include poor quality of education, poor health, low-quality housing, lack of basic services, low income and poverty (De Lannoy et al. 2018). Education is an essential tool for breaking the devastating chain of poverty faced by many in South Africa; education will also liberate the youth of South Africa (Foley 2018). The current population of South African youth is vitally important in ensuring that they prevent future youth from facing the same challenges (Foley 2018).

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