

Piercing the myth of South Africa's

"PUBLIC" EDUCATION SYSTEM

By Sara Black



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OBSERVANT SOUTH AFRICANS have probably noticed what seems to be a rising trend in low-fee private schooling offerings in the public conversation. These include newcomers such as the UCT online high school (backed by the US-based *Valenture Institute*) and more established household names such as Curro schools. Responses to an increased variety of private offerings are highly polarised and trend along class lines. Wealthier families welcome more choice; poorer families remain excluded.

However, what is less discussed is the nature of public and private relations in South African education in general, their historical origins, and how such relations feed different ideas about what is to be done to improve education opportunities for all children.

Some early history

Often overlooked is the fact that South Africa has never had a fully inclusive public education system. The first Western-style schools founded in the Cape Colony by missionaries were explicitly for the "civilising" mission of teaching slaves and indigenous peoples literacy and religion. Much later, schools for white settlers in the British-controlled Cape Colony in the 19th century were often funded by the colonial administration. It had a more modernist "everyone should be educated" ideal, albeit with distinctly gendered approaches. There was also less political will to actually implement for those deemed "less worthy"

of the onerous investment. Meanwhile, schooling for children in the Afrikaner controlled territories (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) was limited to elites in the cities, with access to schooling limited in rural areas.

Many of the rural mission schools were (eventually) supplemented by the British colonial government through a stipend system to churches. This form of state-subsidisation was hatched by George Grey to co-opt church-organised education in the Eastern Cape as part of the Frontier Wars in the mid 1800s. Church-based education for elites was often supplemented by exorbitant fees. This formed the foundation for what are now some of the most elite and expensive private schools in the country (e.g. Hilton College founded in 1872; Michaelhouse, formerly St. Michael's Diocesan College, in 1896; St. Cyprian's in 1871 etc.).

The apartheid era

Fast forward through unionisation to the Nationalist government, and there is still no coherent public education system for all children who live in South Africa. The racist project of apartheid had four separate "public" education systems within the common areas, and a further 15 different education departments for the homelands and "independent" territories. Graaff and Jacklin's 1994 report on schooling in the Bantustans is one of the few documents that examines what was happening in these territories regarding the provision

of education; it documents how education here was again, to use Jacklin's term, "state-aided" and not truly public. Parents had to provide infrastructure and money for any materials the school needed. All the government paid for were teacher salaries.

From the 1960s to early 1990s, explicitly private schools still tended to be church-run, and *privately funded* through fees of varying amounts. Low-fee private schools run by the Catholic church in the 1980s also formed part of anti-apartheid efforts towards racial integration (e.g. the La Salle, Holy Cross, and Sacred Heart schools). "Public" education in the common areas was free, but heavily differentiated in financial support based on race.

Post-apartheid

As formal apartheid entered its death throes, the [Clase models](#) (*Models A, B, C and D schools*) once again fragmented the education landscape beyond recombination. Formerly whites-only public schools were privatised by stealth: admissions decisions were devolved to the local school governing body and parents could cross-subsidise public funds with fees, as enshrined in the 1996 South African Schools Act. (In reality, these former whites-only schools were told by the outgoing Nationalists that while four models for funding and racial integration were on the table, the "C" option was the only one they could really choose. Hence all formerly white schools are now referred to as "former Model C" schools.)

While explicit racial discrimination was outlawed by the new 1996 Constitution, parents and school administrators could use proxy factors such as zoning and fee-paying ability to exclude students of colour, who were always assumed to be poor. Those schools that did not exclude Black children experienced a phenomenon called “white flight”. White parents withdrew their children from a school that was racially transformed, taking their money with them.

Today, wealthy schools are inaccurately referred to as “former model C”. This is mistaken because some former model C/white schools are now poor, as their parents cannot pay fees. A more accurate descriptor is “fee-collecting” schools, because these schools get the lion’s share of their budget not from the state, but from the now racially-heterogenous parents who pay fees. All other schools that cannot command this private supplementation are faced with dire material shortages.

Austerity policies continue to under-fund the fractured “public” education system, creating a two-tier structure: one tier heavily propped up by private supplementation, and the other crumbling from under-funding. The worst-off schools are those in the former Bantustan areas whose infrastructure was built by the poorest of parents, and who still have not had their infrastructure replaced with decent buildings since 1994.

No united public education system in SA

The purpose of this lengthy historical lesson is simple: to illustrate that schools in South Africa have never been united into a truly *public*, coherent, functioning system. Rather, as Jacklin states, we’ve a history of state-aided education, one in which the government might give a portion of what is required for schooling, with parents, the church or local traditional authorities making up the difference (if it is made up at all).

Noticing this is important, for two reasons: firstly, it casts a different light on the alleged phenomenon of “middle classes leaving the public education system”, as they were never truly in it; and secondly, it dispels the myth that we need to “fix” the public education system: one cannot “fix” something that never existed.

Given this, the increasingly vocal interest of the wealthy in low-fee *explicitly* private schooling suggests that all pretence at superficial publicness is finally being dropped. Like the rainbowism of the post 1994 moment, performative attempts at play-acting cohesion or unity are giving way to a far harsher, but perhaps more

honest, reflection of the true state of the body politic. The Covid moment brought forth the clientelist relation wealthy parents have with marketised, neoliberal education institutions, as parents withdrew fees in response to school closures (no service, no pay). This withdrawal of private subsidisation brought many fee-collecting “public” schools to a similar fiscal crunch faced by private schools: go online for “continuation of service”, or cut the salaries of privately-hired staff.

Another aspect to consider is that those who are “middle class” in South Africa are facing increasing economic precarity, and see relatively expensive “public” fee-charging schools as increasingly unaffordable and difficult to access (some of these “public” schools charge R50,000 a year per child). That low fee private schooling is an appealing alternative might indicate not only a more blatant withdrawal from any compact with



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the state (the push-factor). It may also indicate a fear-driven decision to reduce household outgoings (pull factor). The UCT online high school, amongst other private schools, is also looking to introduce an International Baccalaureate alternative to the National Senior Certificate. This may also reflect market research suggesting wealthy parents envision their children’s futures elsewhere.

These symptoms are all intensifications of the broader narrative at play – that of austerity, a retreat from the -tate and “opting out” of the collective by the wealthy. Covid has shown, as will pending climate catastrophes, that such opting out is an erroneous, albeit still popular, myth.

A truly public system

However, truly public education for all South Africans is not beyond the imaginable. Just this year, the *Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* released [research on Global South nation-states](#) who have succeeded, to varying degrees, in championing public education in policy and practice. In doing so, they have reduced exclusion, inequality and alienation from public schools. Indeed, as that report concluded, the “shortcomings in public education often arise not from lack of capacity, but lack of political will”.

What is required is action to regulate the private sector against profit-seeking practices in education; *all fees* in public schools must be abolished and replaced with progressive funding policies. In the South African case, this must also include the political will to reckon with the reality of our fragmented system, to recognise

that nostalgic narratives of “fixing” are premised on a fictitious imagined past, and a present that misrepresents soft-privatised schools as “the functioning public”.

The task before us is one of *building*. We do not need to fix our schools; we need to build them in a manner never seen in South Africa before – a truly public, fee-free, quality education system, the likes of which we’d want for all our children.

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