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Intervening after school is too late

Policies such as affirmative action are worthy but preschool is where inequality should be headed off

COMMENT
Nicholas Spaull

The national planning commission's recent report shows that there is renewed interest in the role of preschool education for national development. One of the commission's main suggestions is to "increase the quality of education so that all children have at least two years of preschool education".

While we should have some reservations on the quality of those two years of preschool, the principle of intervening as early as possible is spot on. But I would like here to juxtapose the provision of quality preschool education with our existing policies of affirmative action in the labour market, and show that when and how one intervenes are of critical importance with respect to righting the wrongs of apartheid and creating a more just society.

The principle behind affirmative action is simple: some form of redress is necessary to place previously disadvantaged people on an equal footing with those who were advantaged under apartheid.

Given the strong inertia of social processes, where your parents live, what schools they went to, their social networks and so on all largely influence where you live, what school you go to and what social networks you have. In short, your socioeconomic status is principally determined by your parents' socioeconomic status.

Education is meant to level the playing fields and mitigate inequalities, but in South Africa it propagates them.

Although racial segregation has been abolished for 18 years, the former white schools remain functional but most former black schools remain dysfunctional, irrespective of how you choose to measure functionality. To put it bluntly, largely as a result of apartheid-era policies black students in South Africa continue to receive an inferior quality of education when compared with their white counterparts, and this disadvantages them in the labour market and entrenches their poverty.

Unfortunately, most educational policies the post-apartheid government has implemented have been ineffective at reducing these inequalities, which are driving the intergenerational transmission of wealth and poverty, and therefore the persistent

patterns of income inequality.

Looking specifically at the numbers and the theory, wage inequality explains between 78% and 85% of total inequality in South Africa. Differences in the quality, duration and type of education, which all correlate with race, largely determine wage inequality. Therefore, increasing wages for the majority of black labour market entrants is necessary to lower income inequality, and this is not possible without first improving the quality of education that is received.

This is where the fundamental flaw with our existing policies of black economic empowerment becomes evident: they intervene too late. By the time job seekers enter the labour market, the patterns of who has which skills and qualifications have already been cemented for many years. As Professor Servaas van der Berg and others have noted: "Policies that address inequality by intervening in the labour market will have limited success as long as considerable pre-labour market inequalities exist in the form of significant differences in school quality persist."

This is not to suggest that labour-market policies should be abandoned entirely, only that they should not be the primary mechanism for transformation. Although I agree with the principle of affirmative action — that previously disadvantaged people should receive preferential treatment — it should be implemented with vigour at the early stages of the income-determining process — preschool and school — and not once that process is almost complete.

Preferential treatment should mean that township students, for example, have access to high-quality preschools, as well as the best teachers and principals. This cannot be achieved by decree, such as forcing teachers to teach in certain areas, but it could be accomplished by providing the right incentives to the best teachers and principals.

Prevention is better than cure

Preschool is perhaps the most poignant example of this brand of early intervention. Rather than trying to fix mistakes later on in life, we should nip these problems in the bud in the formative years of a child's life.

As Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has noted: "Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in early years are much more costly than early investments wisely made, and do not restore lost capacities even when large costs are incurred. The later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes."

Our research shows that the patterns of educational inequality in South Africa are already firmly in place by the age of eight. Implementing one year of quality preschool education will help to ensure that all children in South Africa start primary school with a more equal footing than would otherwise be the case.

Intervening at this early stage of development is surely the most logical and cost-effective policy for equalising educational opportunity.



Step ahead: Providing quality preschool facilities to previously disadvantaged groups can help to close the inequality gap. Photo: Delwyn Verasamy

The quality of the primary schools that these children then enter is a different matter, one that must also be addressed lest the gains of quality preschool education are lost within a dysfunctional primary education system. But the same principle applies: we must devote our energies to fixing the generative mechanisms of inequality, and not only in dealing with the effects of those mechanisms.

There are, however, numerous hurdles to overcome with this approach, mostly relating to the differential quality of preschool education. Many preschool facilities in South Africa are more accurately described as childminding services, with one *gogo* (grandmother) caring for 15 children in her backyard as best as she can. These makeshift arrangements do not provide the cognitive, social and emotional benefits documented in the literature.

Preschool teachers need practical basic training in order to provide sensitive care and an intellectually stimulating environment for the

children in their care.

As an aside, where exactly does the national planning commission think all these thousands of new preschool teachers will come from? The department of basic education should not become the employer of last resort; the refuge of the otherwise unemployable.

There needs to be more effective regulation and monitoring of child-care providers with a clear, standardised curriculum outlining what preschools should be doing.

This is not limited to the academic side of preschool, but should explain the importance of developmentally appropriate play, social interaction and so on.

To repeat: when we intervene and how we intervene are critically important determinants of success and effect. Affirmative action should first be about offering a fair start in life by providing an equal quality of education to all children, irrespective of race, location or socioeconomic status and, secondly, about

levelling unequal playing fields in the labour market. We seem to have got these two the wrong way around. Given this situation, is it really that surprising that the patterns of inequality have not changed since the transition?

What I am proposing is far easier said than done and it will take strong political will, real accountability and strategic leadership before there can be meaningful progress. Plans and ideals are necessary for change, but what we need more than new and improved plans are the competent individuals and departments who can successfully implement those plans, something we are sorely lacking in South Africa.

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