

Quality schooling for everyone: Financing questions and the primary school accountability conundrum

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In a [New Frame op-ed of 18 May 2021](#) Allais *et al* argue policymakers and society mistakenly pin too much hope on schooling as a way out of South Africa's deep inequalities. They attribute this in part to an over-reliance on advice from the World Bank.

Challenging widely held assumptions is healthy. There are serious faults in the predominant narrative around how education impacts on inequality, but I would like to present a somewhat different view on where these faults lie.

Though the World Bank has sponsored much of the data analysis in the last couple of decades on the links between education and economic growth, the notion that quality schooling for all children is a fundamental driver of society's development has been influential [for a few centuries](#). Within Africa, [Tanzania](#) and [Mauritius](#) provide examples of a very explicit post-independence prioritisation of quality schooling. Today, both these countries are above-average performers in [international tests](#), and Mauritius has been exceptionally good at reducing [poverty](#).

While South Africa remains an [appallingly unequal society](#), since 1994 extreme poverty [has declined](#) and the [black middle class](#) has grown. It is difficult not to see this as, in part, a result of better access to schooling, improvements in what [learners learn](#), and a larger and more demographically diverse body of [university students](#).

Yet there are structural inequalities built into the public schooling system which no caring society can accept forever. Most visible is the arrangement whereby around [25% of the system](#), and just that part, is permitted to augment funding through fees paid by parents, even if public funding is roughly [the same](#) for everyone. This is a uniquely South African phenomenon. The original intentions are understandable. The middle class had to be kept within a public system, both to limit enclaves of private schools opposed to the new democratic order, and to facilitate the growth of the black middle class.

However, this arrangement violates basic principles of equality in funding. Part of our narrative needs to be about the complex politics and vested interests behind this, and how we could gradually move to a more normal public system.

A further matter which barely features in the narrative is how unequal school accountability is. The 1996 South African Schools Act (SASA) laid the foundations for an [accountability system](#) that focussed almost entirely on parent oversight. While this has worked for better educated parents, in other words the middle class, it has [not worked well](#) in schools where parents feel disempowered relative to the school's educators.

More programmatic accountability to the state was necessary. In secondary schools, the Matric examinations served as an imperfect, but useful, basis for this. In primary schools, which enrol 65% of all learners and is where the foundations of learning are laid, there was no such system. How much children learn in the earliest grades in every school remains [largely unknown](#), meaning the limited accountability that exists currently centres around compliance with procedural rules, and not for instance whether children reach [minimum reading standards](#).

Again, the historical context must be understood. SASA was formulated while the memory of the oppressive apartheid school inspectorate was still fresh.

Attempts to fill the accountability gap in the past twenty-five years have been largely unsuccessful, but they provide vital lessons on what not to do. [Amendments](#) made to SASA in 2007 were not easy to translate into a workable system, and remain largely unimplemented. A radical 2008 proposal that would have differentiated teacher pay according to teacher performance, with learner test results being used in part to gauge the latter, was particularly poorly conceived, and [halted](#) in the eleventh hour. [Experiences](#) around the world underline that individual financial incentives of this kind are inappropriate in a context where educating a child is a team effort involving many teachers. The Annual National Assessments, started in 2011, [lacked a policy](#) underpinning its legitimacy and purpose, which ultimately spelt its [demise](#).

I agree with Allais et al that some economists (and Treasury officials) with limited knowledge of how a schooling system works have exercised undue influence, specifically with respect to school accountability. But they have often done so in a vacuum where those who knew the system had failed to come up with substantive proposals on accountability based on lessons from within and outside the country.

School accountability is complex, but we need to get it right. Unions have three concerns which are absolutely legitimate. Firstly, they are concerned that the [administrative burden](#) of measurement can get in the way of teaching. Secondly, past experiences, in [South Africa](#) and [beyond](#), have demonstrated that there is a risk that accountability systems designed without the necessary expertise and consultation will treat teachers unfairly, without due acknowledgement of the fact that teachers work across vastly different school communities, with different barriers to learning. Thirdly, unions can legitimately complain that systems to [support teachers](#) are weak. These are all issues that must be considered, and support and accountability systems need to unfold in tandem. Development cannot be premised only on support, or only on accountability.

The questions are not just technical. They have important political and ideological dimensions which should be addressed directly. A common argument is that standardised testing, for instance in the form of reliable monitoring of how well primary school learners read, is part of a [neo-liberal](#) package of reforms that includes [privatising schools](#) and undermining the tenure of teachers. While the broader concerns are understandable, there is nothing inherently neo-liberal about standardised testing, which has been implemented by [communist Cuba](#) and [socialist France](#).

It goes without saying that schooling is not the only means we have to bring about a more equitable society. Yet evidence going back more than a hundred years points to quality schooling being an especially powerful equaliser. Both rigorous technical analysis and robust political and ideological debate which challenge existing narratives are needed if we are to move ahead.