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NEVA MAKGETLA: Innovations in work needed to beat unequal education

The country cannot
simply copy the
systems and
standards
historically enjoyed
by the privileged

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We've all put off repairs on a building. You get used to the defect — the light in the closet that doesn't work, the dripping tap, the cracks in the foundation. After a while, fixing it is just too disruptive.

Similarly, we have become accustomed to deeply dysfunctional and inequitable education. Can we even imagine a system that meets the needs of our democracy and economy? That would require far more educators, or at least teachers' assistants in low-income schools; a mass upgrade of school buildings in townships and informal settlements; easy access to computers and textbooks; a huge expansion in preschool education and after-school care; and revised

curricula to meet modern economic and social needs. Such a sea change is only imaginable with a big redistribution of resources from rich to poor schools, which would indeed be disruptive. But the cost of putting it off is steadily rising.

SA's education system remains deeply rooted in apartheid inequalities. To this day the number of pupils per teacher is twice as high in historically black schools as in historically white ones. The economy and democracy depend on a handful of world-class institutions to generate skills. These are no longer legally segregated by race, but access still depends on ability to pay.

For all but the most exceptional individuals from working class and poor households, these doors of learning are firmly closed. Instead, most pupils end up in understaffed,

underfunded and overcrowded schools that have no capacity to provide skills for the modern economy, above all design, computer and language competencies; with decrepit and overcrowded buildings; with inadequate administrative and maintenance personnel.

SA still has a shortage of skilled people compared to the rest of the global south. In 2019 9% of the workforce had a university degree. That was the same as China, but in other upper-middle-income countries the figure was 15%. As under apartheid, the system ensured unusually large returns to education. For instance, unemployment was nearly nonexistent for people with degrees. In contrast, only one in four of those who left before matric — over half of those aged 18 to 34 — could find any kind of employment.

Education inequalities result far more from

family income and location than individual merit or effort. In 2019 the top decile of households spent R20,000 on school fees — equal to four months' pay for those in the poorest 60%. That is a recipe for reproducing inequality down the generations.

Unequal education is also a severe drag on the economy, raising the cost of skills and undermining productivity. It is hard to see how SA can diversify into more advanced and competitive manufacturing and service industries as long as education for most workers lags behind.

But real change will be deeply disruptive. In 1994 transformation pretty much stopped after an end was brought to legal discrimination based on race. There was no systematic restructuring of funding, staffing or curricula to meet the needs and

realities of the new SA.

The hard fact is that more equitable schooling must confront two realities. First, SA cannot afford simply to copy the global north or the systems and standards historically enjoyed by the privileged. Second, it is ultimately unsustainable to maintain luxury institutions for a minority while the majority starve.

Rather, as in other successful countries in the global south, SA needs to develop innovative systems geared to meeting local priorities more efficiently. That might mean, for instance, reorganising work to reduce the need for highly qualified people so it is possible to increase staffing levels, both in the classroom and in support positions; expanding community preschools to lessen the burden on primary education; and finding ways to share fee

income and facilities
from high-end schools.

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Neva, your solutions
boggle the mind.

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R30000 per child on
their basic education
each year. Sharing
fee income from
high end schools
that fortunately still
produce a handful of
maths competent
people who
heroically keep the
country functioning,
is not a good idea.
Rather abolish the
Department of Basic
Education. It has
received an F grade
for 26 years and the
private sector
schooling could
solve the