

# Rupturing or reinforcing inequality? The role of education in SA today

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# Centre for Researching Education and Labour



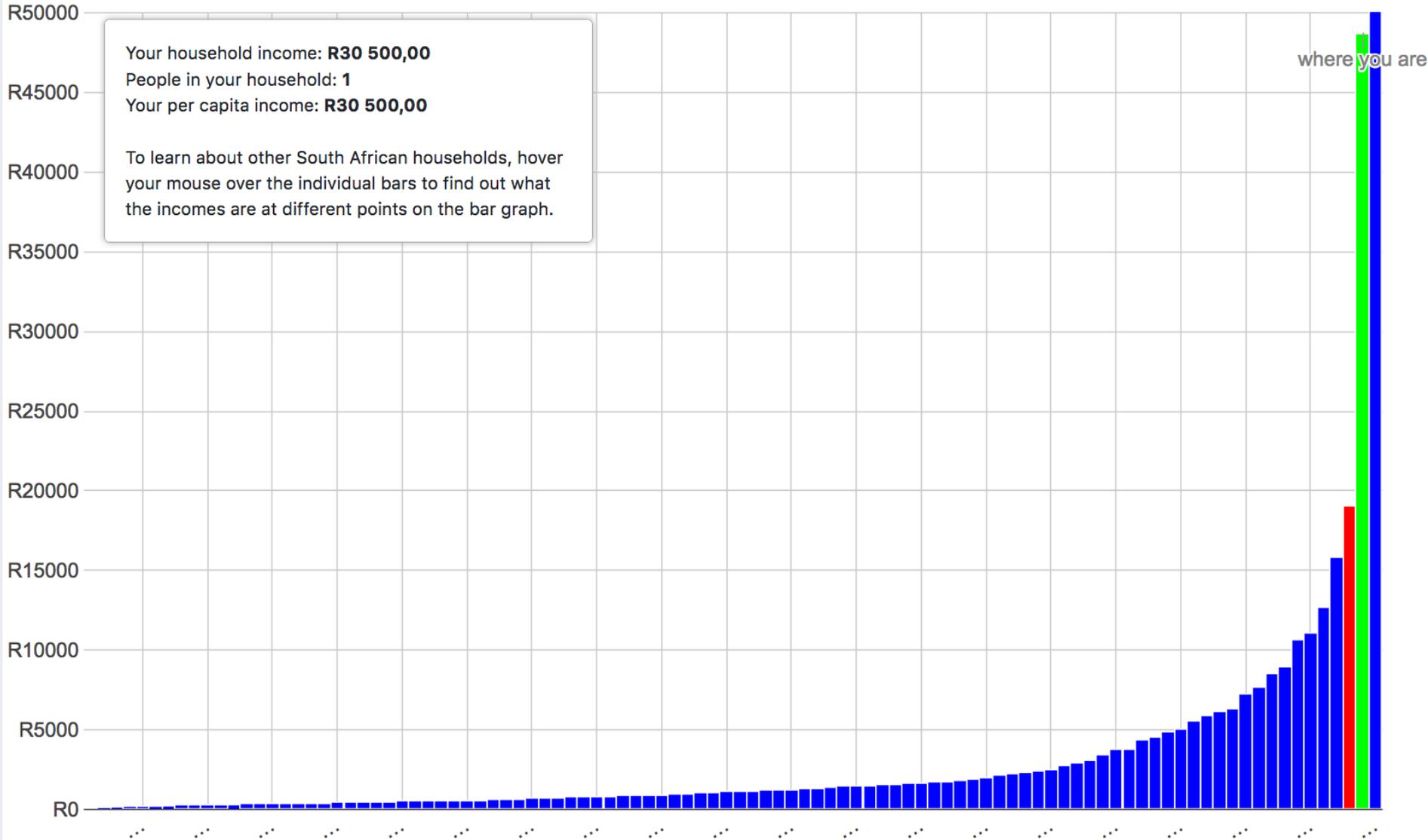
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# Per capita income in South African households



# Rupturing or reinforcing inequality?

## The role of education in SA today

- Influential body of contemporary educational research in SA based on findings and policy recommendations from local economists, the World Bank and Dept of Basic Education researchers/associates. They assert that:
  1. Improved educational outcomes= main mechanism for assisting the poor in the labour market
  2. In-school factors can alleviate poverty at a community or national level without addressing socio-economic conditions themselves

# We believe that this...

- Mis-diagnoses the fundamental causes of both **income inequality** and **inequality of educational outcomes**
- Ignores socio-economic conditions that structure the lives of learners, families and communities
- Ignores the limits to improving equality of learning without addressing structural factors
- Ignores that even if knowledge and skills radically improved, no evidence that this would increase the demand for labour
- May well have perverse effects: catalyses an educational 'arms race' for a few good jobs, preventing broader mid-level skill regime

# Background: Local and International approaches to education and inequality

- The belief that education is essential for rupturing inequality is widely held by parents and policy makers around the world.
- However, the Sociology of Education has long shown that SES shapes educational achievement and rises in working class educ levels elevate middle-class educ levels, maintaining inequality
- Range of approaches have been used to theorize how education either ruptures (Becker, 1993; OECD, 2010; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004), reinforces (Bowles, 1972; Kallaway, 1984; Ladd, 2012; Wolpe, 1972), or fails to rupture inequality (Halsey, 1975; Roth, 2019; van der Berg, Cloete, Wills, Gustafsson, & Kotze, 2016).
- Different positions on the nature of education, and how it can rupture or reinforce inequality

# Human Capital Theory (HCT)

- Chicago School in the 1960s.
- Enhanced levels of education raise people's and countries' productivity, stimulating economic growth and eradicating poverty (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961).
- Most educated and skilled people and nations most affluent; monetary capital only explains a small amount of income growth in most countries (Becker, 1976).
- Schooling increases people's incomes and productivity, supplies them with knowledge, skills and problem solving abilities (Schultz, 1961).
- Labour market returns to education caused by the productivity enhancing effects of education
- 'Human capital' an investment or a 'produced means of production' that yields a return; measure the 'rates of return' to educational investment (for example, Psacharopoulos, 1994; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004).

# South African research on relationship between education and inequality during apartheid

- 1970s and 1980s: educational research focused on the critique of the political, social, and economic oppression of apartheid

- Schooling under apartheid reproduced the labour force

*Eg. Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid (Wolpe, 1972); Bantu Education: Apartheid ideology or labour reproduction (Christie & Collins, 1982); and an edited collection Apartheid in Education (Kallaway, 1984).*

- Two main positions:

1. Liberal: Bantu Education = racial exclusion and domination versus
2. Marxist: core of injustice= economic interests which perpetuate racial exclusion

These 2 positions remained dominant until liberation in 1994

# Post apartheid approaches to education and inequality

- 1990s: educational research focus changed drastically- focus on schooling and school quality.

*Eg The first and last interpreters* (Taylor, Muller, Cloete, & Narsing, 1989); *Getting Learning Right* (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999); *Changing Curriculum* (Jansen & Christie, 2000)

- Called for classroom-based research to improve learning and teaching in schools; previous research more substantially Sociological

# Post apartheid approaches to education and inequality

- Key turning point in “School quality” research 2007:
  - Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, stated that inadequate resources no excuse for poor quality  
*“Around 2007, a certain sense of despair had crept in as the realisation dawned that tackling the legacy of apartheid education inequalities required far more than simply dismantling the apartheid school funding model, and as it became clear how little South African children were learning, even relative to children in economically less developed African countries. But there were policymakers who set about refocussing the system so that it paid more attention to the effectiveness of classroom practices.”* (Gustafsson, Forthcoming, p. 17)
- School inefficiency key; focus on policies governing teachers; national assessments; leadership accountability, resilience, exceptional teachers and schools (Gustaffson, forthcoming; Fleisch, 2008; Jansen & Spaul, Forthcoming; van der Berg et al., 2011)
- Regulating curriculum coverage, tightening school management, and prescribing instructional practice = main vehicles for educational change (Fleisch, 2016; Gustafsson, Forthcoming; van der Berg et al., 2011).
- Improving school quality part of broader neoliberal economic policies and big data analysis: economists became increasingly dominant in educational research in SA in 21<sup>st</sup> century

# Economists enter the fray: Low quality schooling as a “poverty trap”

- Poverty not seen as binding constraint in preventing equality of educational outcomes.
- Improving education seen as the best way to reduce racialised labour market inequalities
- Inequality a result of wage inequality, and wage inequality linked to inequality of educational outcomes (van der Berg et al., 2011, p. 121):

“... the labour market – rather than access to wealth or to political and fiscal power – currently sets the limits to redistribution. Wage inequality, deeply rooted in South Africa’s history, plays a central role, and patterns of human capital development are fundamental to the future growth path and thereby to poverty and inequality ... substantially reducing inequality is now unlikely without a massive increase in the human capital of those presently poor.”

- Inequality reproduced by low-quality schooling (Gustafsson, Forthcoming; van der Berg et al., 2011; van der Berg, Spaull, et al., 2016).
- Supported by the World Bank’s (2018) report
- Racialised differences in income: employers’ realistically assess productivity; Schools formerly reserved for black and white South Africans do not produce equal cognitive gains, leading to differences in the productive capacity of each student, which they argue explains a large proportion of the unexplained wage gap

# Need to improve **in-school** factors to reduce inequality

- Restricts debate to school and its personnel, rather than broader structural issues:

“Social mobility in such a world of double dualism between the school system and the labour market can occur in four possible ways. Children from a poor homes can gain entry to the upper end of the labour market (i) through attending more affluent schools, (ii) through some schools serving the poor performing well, (iii) through entering the lower end of the labour market and then somehow being upwardly mobile within the labour market, or (iv) through some children in weaker performing schools nevertheless performing well enough to complete matric and then gaining access to universities or colleges.” (Moses et al., 2017, p. 18)

- Social mobility possible either through an individual’s hard work at school, ‘school improvement’, or working one’s way up the labour market ladder: ie individual or the school not economic conditions
- The proposed solution to economic problems= school improvement, despite much evidence that economic conditions are the reason for poor education, rather than vice versa.
- All aspects of low SES that contribute to low-quality schooling are occluded from the recommendations for improvement.

# Our counter-argument

- anomalous relationship between the *data presented* in some of the key research publications in this area, and the *explanations* of the binding constraints of school quality, as well as its effect on inequality of educational outcomes.
- no theory of job creation in the dominant discourse
- a highly unequal labour market in which the rewards to degrees are vastly better than rewards to technical and vocational certificates and diplomas, creates a negative feedback loop in how education interacts with labour markets.

# Conclusions

- Poverty as the root cause of weak educational outcomes Chronic poverty in learners' homes correlates with many input and output educational measures
- Labour market inequality will not be substantially changed substantially changed by improved equality of educational achievement