

## Education and Poverty: Dispelling the Myths

S.Maile

Department of Education Managment, Faculty of Humanities, School of Education  
University of Limpopo Turfloop Campus Private Bag x1106, Sovenga 0727

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**Abstract:** This study critiques the generally accepted notion that there is a link between student achievement and poverty. It argues against the claim that poverty determines student achievement. i.e. student from poverty background are destined to under perform despite other factors that mitigate this. The central thesis of this article is that student achievement is multivariate. No single variable can determine student achievement. However, I find that quality teaching is probably the main contributor. I interrogated the notion of disadvantaged student and located it within multicultural theories of class struggle. I concluded that as a result of the entrenched prejudices, African students in particular are perceived to be endowed with tendencies of underperformance, while in reality they perform like any other student and have learning deficiencies like any student.

**Key words:** Achievement, poverty, multivariate, poverty determines

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### INTRODUCTION

The demise of apartheid in 1994 was heralded nationally and internationally as a victory for democracy and human rights. It introduced unique opportunities and responsibilities to reconstruct a fragmented and deeply discriminatory education system and establish a unified national education system underpinned by democracy, equity, redress, transparency and participation. This task proved to be challenging considering the huge inequalities and disparities inherited from apartheid education. Education in the apartheid era was mainly characterised by discrimination and unequal distribution of resources. African education suffered under apartheid education. Hence equity has become the driving force behind the education transformation. It is reflected in policies that govern the education system and it is part of the broader transformation process. Transformation brought the following process<sup>[1]</sup>.

Access to primary and secondary schooling improved significantly with near universal enrolment in primary schooling and 86% enrolment in secondary schooling by 1998. There was a considerable improvement in the qualifications of educators, with the proposition of underqualified educators reduced. Educators have been redistributed through redeployment and post provisioning strategies, to areas of greatest need. This has led to vast improvements in establishing more equitable learner: education ratios, from an average of 47:1 in 1994 to 35:1 in 2000. Other improvements include in inter-provincial equity. As a result the transformation of the education system seem to be a success from the administration point of view. However, the social mandate

of schooling remains a problem. The problem is enmeshed in a matrix of race, class and gender social relations<sup>[2]</sup>.

This article aims to dispel this myth by questioning the prevailing explanation of student (under) achievement. My central thesis is if poverty always overwhelms everything else the student endeavours to do, what explains, for instance, the consecutive 100% pass rate of Mbilwi Secondary School and Harry Oppenheimer High School in Limpopo (formerly Northern Province)? I drew my arguments from the comparison of students migrating to suburban schools and those in rural or township schools.

### PROBLEM STATEMENTS

This problem becomes conspicuous when learners from disadvantaged communities performance is put under scrutiny. These learners are met with prejudices and subtle tendencies of discrimination. Put simply, racial integration in public schools is characterised by stigma attached to African learners in affluent white schools<sup>[3]</sup>. This stigma manifested itself in the form of associating the entry of African learners with lowering of standards. This attitude resonates with earlier research<sup>[4]</sup> which showed that students rated high academically came from upper middle class. This research went on to state that in sharp contrast, students in the low sections came from blue collar or lower class families. Studies like this are cloaked by prevailing prejudices as Bernstein<sup>[5]</sup>, Jacoby<sup>[6]</sup> and Du Preez<sup>[7]</sup>, reveal. For decades the public have been fed with the same message about achievement among the poor and minority students. Despite the introduction of equity reforms there remains a significant difference in the academic achievement levels of students from African

disadvantaged backgrounds. Now, insofar as this pattern is rarely explained in terms of innate intellectual differences between different social groups, African students are considered to be formally underachieving. That is to say, unlike their white peers, they are not realising their intellectual potential. A group cannot underachieve if their intellectual and attainment levels have been genetically determined. The cause of underperformance lies elsewhere. Efforts to establish the real cause of underachievement were and are clouded by scientific racism<sup>[8]</sup>. More research pinpointed racial inequalities between black students and white students. Research on this aspect reproduced racism. Blacks have long been regarded as intellectually inferior to whites<sup>[9]</sup>.

Scientific racism in South Africa found resonance in Bantu Education Act of 1953. This Act was supposedly to give Africans an education that was appropriate to their needs. Its ulterior motive was to subjugate Africans and keep them inferior. Hence Verwoerd argued during the House of Assembly debate that:

May I remind the honourable members that if any school in South Africa today educates the native to expect that he is going to spend his adulthood living under a policy of equality, they are making a big mistake.

There is no place for him the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze<sup>[10]</sup>.

Scientific racism complemented by political drive entrenched stereotypes which are still prevalent even in this democratic era<sup>[11]</sup>. After 1994 political system was brought down, but its socialisation effects remained.

According to the Education Trust<sup>[12]</sup> there is a long held belief that because of poverty and other township conditions, these students enter school beheld as other students, not as part of the entire student body. As they progress through the grades, the deficits accumulate, leaving them further and behind other students. The conclusion is that nothing schools do make a difference. Therefore, underachievement is caused by poverty.

This article aims to dispel this myth by questioning the prevailing explanation of student (under) achievement. My central thesis is if poverty always overwhelms everything else the student endeavours to do, what explains, for instance, the consecutive 100 % pass rate of Mbilwi Secondary School and Harry Oppenheimer High School in Limpopo (formerly Northern Province)? I drew my arguments from the comparison of students migrating to suburban schools and those in rural or township schools. This thesis emanates from a

deliberate effort to question public opinion about student achievement. I asked the question: why do some students raised in poverty attend under resourced schools led by poorly paid teachers working under very difficult conditions, yet leave the system ready to pursue rigorous courses of study at higher education schools? Or antithetically, why do some students raised in wealthy homes attend schools with well-paid teachers in sparkling schools, yet leave the school system not only unable to read and write well, but lacking the ability to know just how poor their academic skills really are? Put simply, research question is: does poverty cause low student achievement?

### CONCEPTUALISATION

Student achievement is multivariate. There is no simple answer. In other words, the claim that a change in one variable causes a change in another variable is simplistic<sup>[13]</sup> and lacks scientific basis. For example many researchers claim that poverty causes poor student achievement. It is easy, after all, to find a relationship or statistical correlation between high poverty and student achievement. I argue that the conclusion that the former causes the latter is wrong, not because poverty is unimportant, but because there is never a single cause of either poor or excellent student achievement.

To illustrate the importance of the multivariate nature of educational analysis I considered the case of student demographics and achievement. It seems to be a matter of faith among teachers and in particular the legions of expert and renowned academics presuming to give advice on the subject, that demographics and achievement are inextricably linked. Poverty, race, location-are all immutable factors-a baggage with which a student comes to school on the first day.

Whenever I interrogate the status quo on student achievement I am invariably accosted by teachers and administrators (who attend my courses – Further Diploma in Education Management and Masters in Education Coursework) who angrily contend that parents, not teachers and schools are to blame for poor student achievement. They argue that expecting schools to alter in eight hours what parents do or fail to do in the other 16 hours of the day is folly.

Such hypothesis calls for testing. Unfortunately, the testing of such a claim is very bad politics, akin to trying to test gravity. It is just obvious that poverty leads to low student achievement. This assertion is deeply entrenched in our situation in South Africa. And the current transformation is premised on this notion. Hence, most studies on the transformation process investigate a

common claim: the economic status of a student is directly proportional to the academic achievement of that student. This is deeply rooted in the bi-variant academic world of cause and effect. It is easy to do such a research. Reeves<sup>[14]</sup> illustrates this by a survey which indicates that the higher the percentage of student of low income, the lower the level of academic achievement. That settles it: poverty causes low student achievement and the hypothesis has been confirmed.

I cannot agree with such a simple and fast conclusion like that. I interrogate this. What else influence student achievement? What about the dynamics that happen inside the classroom? I ask the fundamental question of education: Do teaching and instruction really matter? I will return to this question later. For now I have to deal with the other variable: poverty.

Poverty may be defined simply as having resources inadequate to meet ones needs<sup>[15]</sup>. Like all good definitions, this definitions does not solve the problem. It shifts the focus to what are needs? and what is adequate? These two questions lie substantively at the heart of disputes over different conceptions of poverty and different approaches to ameliorating it. According to this definition you are not poor if you have resources which would be sufficient resources to meet your needs, whether or not you actually spend them on things required to meet your needs. The argument arising from this is: are students who migrate to affluent schools in the suburbia poor when they use more money on commuting and cellular phones for instance. They are not suffering from absolute poverty with respect to basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter. As it is now, poverty has come to embrace a broader standard of adequacy, couched in terms of social functioning rather than physical functioning.

This understanding of poverty resonates with our South African context. For instance, students who commute to affluent white schools have the basic necessities like television, shelter, food, latest fashion clothes, cellular phones, etc. Then, why are such students categorised as disadvantaged? This term has economic connotations underlying it.

The term disadvantaged is closely linked to the governments programme of redressing imbalances of the past. In education for instance, matric results are regarded as a miracle when township or rural schools have performed better<sup>[16]</sup>. This means that good matric results in township or rural schools go against the norm, which expects them to perform poorly. It confirms the myth that poverty equals poor student achievement. Dooms<sup>[14]</sup> argues that the term historically disadvantaged is an

invention of whites intended to describe what was at first a black context, but as time went on it became a reflection of a class position. It became diagnostic of an individual who is often associated with serious academic problems. This invention has become problematic as it describes a whole set of assumptions about the mental capacities of those labelled historically disadvantaged. Therefore, this term is part of a language of a new form of racism and discrimination that takes on a particular class character.

It declares an African student a welfare case<sup>[17]</sup>. It entrenches the victim mentality. Instead of working hard on their studies students blame apartheid<sup>[18]</sup>.

### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

**Quality teaching:** I return to the fundamental question I raised earlier: do teaching and instruction really matter? For many years educators and the public have been fed with the same message about student achievement. Students from low-come families are assumed to perform poorly in academic programmes<sup>[10]</sup>. The recent matric results in Limpopo contradicts this belief and the recent research by Education Trust<sup>[10]</sup> and Ali and Jerald<sup>[19]</sup> reveals that schools on high-performing, high poverty list have about twice the rate of low-income students compared will all public schools nationally; yet score as well or better than two-thirds in their respective states. In fact Hanuscheck<sup>[20]</sup> conducted a study on the relationship between school resources and student achievement and concluded that there is no strong or consistent relationship between student performance and school resources ... Simple resource policies hold little hope for improving student outcomes.

Therefore, the high performance rate in school like Mbilwi and Harry Oppenheimer may be emanating from the most significant factor in student achievement: the teacher. Quality teaching is probably the most significant factor in student performance. Studies by Education Trust<sup>[12]</sup> concurs that high achieving students gain an average of only two points under the direction of Q<sub>1</sub> (least effective) teachers but an average of 25 points under the guidance of Q<sub>5</sub> (most effective) teachers. Middle achievers gain a mere 10 points with Q<sub>1</sub> teachers but in the mid-30 with Q<sub>5</sub> teachers. There is considerable evidence that the effects of teachers are long lived, whether they advance student achievement or squash it. The Education Trust<sup>[12]</sup> asserts that indeed, even two years after the fact, the performance of fifth-grade students is still affected by the quality of their third-grade teacher. This study dispels the myth of poor student achievement emanating from poverty. I conclude

that difference in academic outcomes may be a result of the sequence of quality teachers to which learners are assigned, not poverty alone. For this reason it is important to investigate what makes for teacher effectiveness? Teacher effectiveness is constituted by several factors such as:

**Profiles:** Research (National African Federated Chamber of Commerce (NAFCOC<sup>[21]</sup>, 201:28 and Howie<sup>[22]</sup> reveals that the profile of the teacher in teaching plays a significant role. These studies found that very few mathematics (16%) and Science (12%) teachers are older than 40 years, which suggests that many teachers leave teaching relatively early in their teaching career. It also implies that few experienced teachers stay in the profession. Very few teachers are qualified in teaching in their respective areas. These factors compound on their lack of confidence in teaching.

**Time-on-task:** Effective teachers are always on time. Howie<sup>[20]</sup> posits that many schools in South Africa are riddled by late coming among teachers. This affects the time the learner spends on a task. Late coming reduces the time spent on task. Reeves<sup>[12]</sup> argues that time-on-task is widely recognised as a problem in South Africa. This compounds to the disadvantage of the learners. Although attendance at school and in class is an important aspect of time-on-task management, improving time on task is not only about teachers and students spending more time at school and in class. It is about how teachers manage time in class so that their students spend as much time as possible meaningfully engaged in intellectual work. Howie<sup>[22]</sup> asserts that teachers from disadvantaged schools spend far more class time on administrative tasks than any other country. Most teachers probably spend more time reviewing homework. This suggests that only limited time is spending on teaching. These factors probably account for poor student achievement in township or rural schools and entrenches the racial prejudice experienced by learners migrating to suburban schools.

**Conservatism:** The notion of conservatism is intricately linked to the prevailing myth of poverty being the determinant of student achievement. Conservatism manifests itself in different guises in many sectors of the South African society. Conservatism is one of the main factors thwarting attempts to transform education. William<sup>[23]</sup> defines conservatism as an ideology according to which, firstly, the highest political loyalty of the citizen is due to tradition and the conservation of a continuing

and pre-existing social order in opposition to the idea of racial change and, secondly, the citizen is committed to a limited style of politics.

Conservatism is rooted in theories of cultural diffusion which stress the evolutionary potential of cultural groups as the reason for their acculturation. Such theories are based on the assumption that no society can successfully dominate another without the diffusion of its cultural patterns and social institutions<sup>[24]</sup>. In South Africa we experienced this through imperialism: the dominance by Western societies. The West imposed their own culture on colonial societies. Quite central to cultural theories of diffusion is the notion of the continuity of Western domination. Education was one of the keys to this process of domination. The existence of domination continued during apartheid. Christian National Education was introduced to entrench separate schools for whites and for black. Christian National Education has two aims of preservation of the Afrikaner cultural identity against the threat of British imperialism and the maintenance of white domination over the blacks<sup>[23]</sup>. The conservatives regard democracy in moral terms. To them democracy is rooted in traditional religion. Consequently, the school exists to preserve, transmit and inculcate their values<sup>[25]</sup>. The curriculum is regarded as positive knowledge geared towards the maintenance of status quo: control of other groups<sup>[26]</sup>, McKay and Romm<sup>[27]</sup>.

Education from the conservatism point of view is hierarchal and a means of directing lower-class peasants from the dominant elite class<sup>[28]</sup>. This tactic is particularly observable in schools that admit black students and at the same time do not offer any African content in their curriculum. This tactic asserts the fact that conservatism still exists in education. Vestiges of conservatism are conspicuous in the notion of lowering standards criticism of the transformation process<sup>[29]</sup>. Teaching African content is probably regarded as inferior. African students are not given credit for their African knowledge.

Another basic feature of conservatism is the promotion of loyalty towards tradition<sup>[23]</sup>. Loyalty is promoted through networks aimed at expanding their territory and keeping non-members out<sup>[30]</sup>. This tactic is conspicuous in schools where, for instance, academic matters are cloaked with cultural elements. As a result one can claim that pervasive conservative tendencies have shaped institutional order of this country since colonial times. In the course of transformation educational assistance for students in need is not usually intended to overcome the sources of poverty and assorted social ills, but only to stigmatise. For instance, instead of addressing deficiencies in learning among African students, African

students are labelled as disadvantaged. This actually contributes in subtle ways to the preservation by not administering limited concessions<sup>[31]</sup>. Why do suburban schools continue to conduct their programmes in parallel media? Why do they leave out African languages and content in their programmes?

This kind of approach (bilingual classroom) suggests that African students cannot succeed in regular classrooms<sup>[5,6]</sup>. This approach views African students as problems in the system. As a result they are given skewed attention under the guise that they cannot cope with mainstream programmes. Attention is paid to one group while scant work is given to the other. African students immersed in such programmes learn that they cannot compete with white students who are regarded as superior. African students from such programmes are under prepared for higher education<sup>[32]</sup>. They are not able to stand on their own in academic activities. Therefore, conservatism does not only delay transformation, but also hinders progress in student development.

**Solipsism:** Earlier I alluded to the fact that schools in affluent areas are experiencing demographic changes. I have cited different reasons for this. The students who moved to affluent white schools experience an error of solipsism committed by white conservatism. Whites assume that because their creed represents virtue, it will naturally be the creed of those with whom they wish to make common cause<sup>[5]</sup>. There is a claim to multi-culturalism in those schools while the reality points to the contrary. Their educational programmes remain unchanged and there is little reference to African content.

A multi-cultural programme that promotes the cultural imperatives of only one group is biased (usually in favour of the dominant group). Instead, it should embrace all groups. The parallel medium classes create islands which are not compatible with the notion of multi-culturalism<sup>[33]</sup>. Instead schools have the option of building interwoven network of cultural centres that every student feels free to learn. This is what Desmond Tutu's rainbow nation means. However, the current resistance shown in Vryburg High School, Potgietersrus Primary school, Ben Viljoen High School and many others who escaped public attention indicate that the notion of rainbow nation is unrealistic and is dissipating<sup>[34]</sup>.

The prejudice against black students conjures up memories of apartheid whereby whites were given superior education while blacks were deprived of educational resources<sup>[34]</sup>. I have established that the notion of multi-culturalism does not exist in white school but instead acculturation is the order of the day.

African cultures are pushed aside because they are regarded as inferior. Hence there is a continued and deliberate ascendancy of white cultures. As such there is no recognition of diverse social orientations. And that cannot be multiculturalism.

**Hegemonic alliance:** Closely linked to multi-cultural perspective is hegemonic alliance. South African schooling is oscillating between neo-liberal emphasis on market values on the one hand and a conservative attachment to traditional values on the other. Neo-liberals who emphasise market values prefer setting private enterprise where they teach correct knowledge, norms and values. Unfortunately this is happening at a slow pace. It appears the growth in home-schooling, for instance. However, they don't have the authority to accredit their knowledge. This in ways keeps them under control. At societal level this new hegemonic alliance has a wide umbrella. The alliance combines four major groups<sup>[36]</sup>:

- dominant economic and political elites intent on modernising the economy and the institutions connected to it;
- white working class and middle class groups who mistrust the state and are concerned with security, the family and traditional knowledge and values and who form an increasingly active segment of what might be called authoritarian populists,
- economic and cultural conservatives who want a return to high standards and ;
- a fraction of new middle class who may not totally agree with these other groups, but whose own professional interests and advancement depend on expanded use of accountability, efficiency and management procedures that are their own cultural capital.

This development may indicate the fact that conservatism espoused in market values and traditional values are on the ascendancy. This kind of development is antithetical to equity reforms. The furore over failing standards and the fear of violence in schools and the concern over the destruction of comfort zones created by apartheid-which are now vanishing-are used by hegemonic groups to shift debates around transformation to standardisation, productivity and marketisation. Apple<sup>[36]</sup> contends that behind conservative restoration is a clear sense of loss of control over a number of things: economy, personal security, the knowledge and values that should be passed on to their children.

From this postulations it is important for us not to radically criticise the education system. The

conservatives are concerned about lack of quality in student from townships or rural backgrounds. Rather, I think it is important to critically ask profound questions about the values of these groups-groups with considerably more power and money-who in the past have made the political and economic decisions that segregated African communities economically and racially<sup>[25,27,34]</sup>.

The essence of this study is to probe pathological detachment as an inter-goal part of the fundamental problem of whether poverty causes student underperformance. I think the problem is crystallised by studying the pathological detachment of the affluent and of their allies in academic circles. The alliance is never innocent. It is probably a means of hanging on the privileges of the past. On the whole, the alliance is effectively creating the conditions that give it hegemonic powers over transformation policies, values and education.

**Hegemonic cultures:** Hegemony is a concept associated with power. Its analysis reveals some ways in which differential power is circulated and used in education and the larger society. According to Apple<sup>[36]</sup> the concept hegemony refers to a process in which dominant groups in society come together to form a block and sustain leadership over subordinate groups in terms monetary power and intellectual endowment. The reader should take note of the fact that the hegemonic culture does not command the education sector entirely-it struggles to hang to power with emerging cultures-and should be thought of in class terms. The emerging cultures are termed disadvantaged (which referred to earlier). In this section disadvantaged implies that Africans problems are largely the result of bad luck. It entails that there are no agents of domination. If we are to realise the notion of equality and rainbow nation espoused by Archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>[37]</sup>, I prefer the term previously oppressed rather than previously disadvantaged. This choice signifies that oppressive structure exist<sup>[36]</sup> even in this democratic era. It is exactly this difference which I wish to unravel in this study. I argue that hegemonic cultures have perverse effects on the curriculum to legitimise inequality. It lulls the authorities that whatever differences in schools, they all have something in common. They are all equal.

I used the term lull to signify the utter power of the very real differences that exist between suburban schools and township/rural schools. This argument is probably located within the correspondence theory advocated by Bowles and Gintis in McKay and Romm<sup>[25]</sup>. The essence of correspondence theory lies in the view that social

relations of the school and classroom roughly mirror the social relations of the workplace. According Giroux<sup>[38]</sup> this theory results in the reproduction of the social and class divisions needed for the reproduction and legitimation of capital and its institutions. Students are being prepared for their roles in the society through the close correspondence between the school and the workplace. The central argument of this theory is that inequalities in capitalist societies are provided largely by the educational system. The myth of poverty influencing student performance legitimates inequality by fostering the belief that academic success depends primarily on the possessions of capital and ultimately luxurious school buildings and splendid gardens. And entrenches the stereotypes about African students who are considered lazy and succeed only when normal standards are waived or through corrupt means<sup>[7]</sup>. Because of the stigma they enter multiracial schools as nobodies, who tend to conduct relationships in a less competitive manner. They probably conform to stereotypes and ultimately take their place as followers in the lower echelons of the status hierarchy. They learn to live quiet<sup>[4]</sup> and become hewers of wood and haulers of water. Their academic deficiency is not unique. However, one may concede that their academic deficiency is limited by cultural and historical development. Their culture is not practiced in schools and their historical deprivation is emphasised. But if these were not so African students will be capable to compete with their counterparts. They fail because they encounter class and patriarchal restrictions on their educational mobility.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that student performance or achievement is multivariate. There is no single determinant to student achievement. The claim that poverty is the cause of poor achievement among African student is challenged. I advanced teaching as the main contributor to student achievement. I referred to different scientific research evidence to substantiate my claim.

In the analytical framework I attempted to trace the roots of the claim that poverty causes student underachievement. I used different theories to dispel these myths. Evidence from these theories points to the fact that different groups protect what ever privileges they enjoy. In the classroom, African students encounter both class and patriarchal restrictions. However, they succeed like similar middle class groups. Foley<sup>[4]</sup> asserts that African students have higher aspirations and ambitions like their counterparts.

From the arguments raised, I conclude that education is deeply implicated in cultural politics. School programmes are never neutral. They are a part of selective tradition<sup>[36]</sup>, someones selection, some groups vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of cultural, political and economic conflicts, tensions and compromises that organise and disorganise a people. And ultimately African students are perceived to be underperformers.

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