

Youth Voices In Development
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South Africa is a country with incredible disparity. The Apartheid regime left behind a nation devastated by divisive and oppressive economic policies. Although Apartheid has not been mandated since 1994, it's lasting effects are still very present. Segregation is so pervasive within the education system it is harrowing. Number 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to 'reduce inequality within and among countries' by 2030. This cannot be achieved in South Africa without a complete overhaul to the education system, which in my opinion, only serves to perpetuate racial segregation. We cannot begin to reduce the inequality within this country without addressing number 4 of the SDGs, which is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

With the fall of Apartheid in 1994, South Africa published one of the most progressive constitutions of its time. It was applauded internationally and became an emblem for inclusive social policies. Although these rights may be constitutionally protected, whether or not they are enforced is a matter of exactly whom those rights belong to. Simply put—it looks really good on paper but isn't necessarily being put into practice.

The quality of education one receives in South Africa is directly proportional to how much one can afford. Slangspruit Primary, the school where I am currently working, is a no fee public school and acts more like a child-care service than an educational institution. This is not to suggest that the principal and teachers are not committed, but rather that the school is so devoid of resources that anything other than the vital essentials feels fundamentally out of reach. The school's infrastructure is in dire need of repair. Many of the classroom windows are broken and also awaiting repair. During the winter months the draft being let in as a result puts significant strain on learner's ability to concentrate. Many of the desks and chairs are also broken. Classrooms are overcrowded and average 45 learners per teacher. The school has approximately 23 copies of every text, thus learners are forced to sit two to a book. These 23 books are required to remain at school as they are shared among three classes. The roughly 135 learners in each grade share 23 books. There is no soccer field at Slangspruit Primary. No gymnasium. Thus the physical education segment of the life skills curriculum is virtually nonexistent. Three tractor tires supported by wooden posts constitutes the jungle gym, which is shared by the 1050 learners who are currently enrolled at Slang. The grade Rs (Kindergarten) have their own basic jungle gym that is sectioned off and unavailable to the rest of the student body. The washroom facilities available to the learners are so appalling they are undoubtedly a human rights issue. The toilet seats are broken, if there is even one at all. Toilet paper is not provided to them, resulting in excrement being smeared across the bathroom walls. Without tissue how else is one expected to wipe? I have heard the argument that if the school were to effectively stock the bathrooms with toilet paper, learners would smuggle it home. The part I find most challenging is being confronted by my position of privilege

every time I use the staff washroom. Cases of toilet paper are stacked to the ceiling. There is such an inordinate amount it is unlikely the school could go through it in a year.

Traditional Zulu culture appears to be incredibly hierarchical. Men are fed first and children last. In my first month in South Africa I was invited to Lobola, a negotiation between two families who are soon to be united by marriage. Lobola usually results in the exchange of money, cows and various other goods such as blankets and food. I was surprised to see that children were required to wait until all the adults had finished eating and were sufficiently satisfied, at which point they were fed what was left.

The education system is also very hierarchical. In the classroom, learners will fetch me a chair and wipe it off with a cloth before I am ever able to sit down. In my experience all educational institutions are hierarchical but here it really speaks to the complexity of the social stratification within South Africa society. For example, teachers at Slang are not permitted to use the photocopy machine regardless of how long they have worked there. Aunty Flo, an older woman who maintains the administrative building, is required to attend to all of the teachers photocopying. Ironically us interns, who have worked at the school for less than three months, are permitted to use it. I fail to grasp the logic there.

The learners of Slangspruit face an uphill battle to access even the most substandard primary education. So there are little things within the school setting that I am unable to understand. It seems as though the school will jump at any excuse to cut classes short. This can be anything from weekly staff meetings held during class time to rehearsing songs and dances that will be presented at various upcoming functions. Learners are often left sitting in class without a teacher. Many teachers also seem unwilling to stay at school any longer than they need to and leave as the last bell is ringing. Some deem it to be the result of laziness on the teachers' part, yet I can't help but wonder if it might be more complicated than that. They could be feeling powerless, discouraged or simply defeated by a system that has so effectively marginalized township schools that they have been virtually abandoned. Another one I struggle to grasp is when I teach, anything that could potentially be achieved in the first 15 minutes becomes gridlocked by questions that I personally feel are inconsequential to their learning.

‘What book do we write in? Do we write in the front of the book or back of the book? Do we put a title? Do we underline the title? Do we put the date? Do we write in blue pen or in pencil?’

I can't help but ask myself how any of this actually matters? However, we are completely unable to make any progress until I answer all of these questions.

‘Write it in your exercise book. At the back of the book. Put a title. Don't underline the title. Write the date. Use whatever writing tool you currently have in your hand.

‘So blue pen? Pencil?’

‘Pencil.’

The entire charade hurts me because I cannot help but reflect on how these kids are already failing to cover so much of the annual curriculum and none of this is actually of consequence. Or is it?

The other week while one of the other interns was facilitating homework club, a learner accidentally confused the answers to two questions by writing them in the other’s place. No problem. Randa takes her pen draws a blue arrow showing that number two means three and number three means two. Easy fix. The learner looked utterly horrified and told her he would get into trouble for that.

“Just tell your teacher I did it.”

The next day she sees the learner at school, his hands obnoxiously red and swollen.

“What happened? Because of the arrow? Did you tell him it was me?”

He bowed his head sheepishly. Clearly that was a no. Apparently the grade 4s pestering questions might actually be of consequence.

Although corporal punishment is prohibited in South Africa, within the township schools it is still very much in practice. At Slangspruit more or less every teachers’ classrooms are equipped with the quintessential reed that is used on unruly learners. The principal often roams the school grounds, lead pipe in hand, which I find incredibly distressing. I have never felt inclined to ask what it is used for– I know. I am not in any way looking to vilify the Principal, as this is a cultural practice. Most of these kids get hit at home. They also get hit at school. In speaking with the learners at Slang many of them honestly believe it is the only way to address dissidence. I am not saying that I in any way agree with the practice but nevertheless, it is important to keep it in context.

A project we have been working on at Slang is an effort to steer the school away from the use of corporal punishment. On Monday we attended Longmarket Girls Public Primary School, a fee paying public school that appears to cater to the mid to upper-middle class. As Longmarket does not use corporal punishment, we went to discuss alternative methods of discipline with the Principal. The stark contrast between Slang and Longmarket was shocking. It is truly amazing what money can buy. It really highlighted the extreme disparity within the public primary education system. During our meeting with the Principal she mentioned how it took little more than a learner receiving a funny look from a teacher to have the Department of Education (DOE) knocking at her door.

Until that point the DOE had been more like a mythical deity. It is recognized as the authority within the public education system but is so incredibly elusive it has yet to be seen. However, what was made clear to me are the varying degrees of worth afforded to South African children by the DOE. Just like the constitution, the policies that were created to protect those most vulnerable are failing the people who need them the most. The lack of enforcement on the part of the DOE is utterly inexcusable. However, I honestly believe it is because communities like Slang have been so effectively disenfranchised the DOE knows they are unlikely to face any sort of opposition. It is also merely a strategy for evading responsibility. If the DOE were to actually come to Slang they would be forced to become accountable to a tremendous amount of other needs.

When the learners at Slang graduate they will be funneled into another under resourced institution where high school graduation rates are dismal. If they do make it to graduation, which is an accomplishment in itself, they will still be disproportionately disadvantaged to anyone who was able to buy their education and their elevated social status. Another fundamental problem with the inconsistency in public primary education is that it restrains teacher's social mobility within the education sector. Having two different structures catering to different socio-economic brackets within the public education system does nothing more than immobilize people within their prescribed social sphere. If the methods of teaching are so inherently different, educators would need to unlearn everything they know about teaching if they are ever to cross over to the other side. Thus having such disparity within the public education only serves to perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization.

By this point I hope it is evident just how much the South African education system is plagued by systemic injustice. In order to achieve tangible results in closing the divide in economic disparity within the country I believe there truly needs to be more cross-cultural cooperation. Few white people seem to ever step foot in the townships. Maybe it is the result of fear? Or guilt? Or fear of guilt? However, without blending that divide there will be no progress. It is unconscionable to have such incredible disparity within the public education system. Maybe if Jacob Zuma had invested the nearly US\$17 million he spent on building his new house, or the money spent supporting his 4 wives or 22 children for in the public education system we might actually see some progress. Black Employment Equity Act (what Canadians know as Affirmative Action) can only do so much to narrow the divide if South Africa remains segregated.

A friend of mine has an interesting analogy. He believes South Africa to be a packed bus driving through town when a woman and her two babies suddenly steps out onto the road. The bus driver has a choice. He can attempt to brake or swerve in order to avoid them and significantly risk injuring everyone, or he can choose to plow through them in order to protect the mass. He believes that until South Africa elects someone who is ruthless enough that they would be willing to sacrifice the mom and her children for the overall greater good, we will not see change. I'm not exactly sure how I feel about that, but if

that is what it takes to redraft the public education system, it is so broken and discouraging I hope they surface soon.