Racial and Gender-Based Inequality in School Completion in South Africa: An Expression of Socioeconomic Disparity

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Abstract

Socioeconomic disparities reveal unfair imbalances in the distribution of economic, political, and social resources. They stifle social mobility and hinder economic growth and development. This article discusses the expressions of socioeconomic inequalities and their implications. Given the importance of education in addressing socioeconomic disparities, it documents differences in secondary school completion by race and gender in South Africa. The consequences of these educational disparities are highlighted, and interventions are recommended. It uses nationally representative data from General Household Surveys from 2015 to 2019. Cross-tabulation and a chi-square test were used to indicate the inequalities in school completion based on race and sex. School completion, expressed as the proportion of those aged 21 to 23 years who have at least completed upper-secondary education, ranged from 48% in 2015 to 54% in 2019. Black and Coloured racial groups were significantly behind Asian and White racial groups over the years. This highlights a lingering phenomenon that has existed since the apartheid regime and emphasises the socioeconomic disadvantages of the Black and Coloured race. Though females were ahead of males in school completion, the gap was not as pronounced as observed among the racial groups. Concerted efforts to address this issue should be taken to prevent the recurring intergenerational transfer of socioeconomic disadvantage among Black and Coloured people in South Africa.

Keywords: educational attainment; inequality; school completion; socioeconomic disparity; South Africa

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Introduction

Socioeconomic disparity or inequality refers to the uneven and unjust distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within or across societies (Neckerman and Torche 2007; Thomas, Archer, and Engelen 2024). Despite efforts to reduce inequalities within and across countries, inequality remains a challenging issue in both the developed and developing regions of the world. Inequality serves as an impediment to economic stability and obstructs economic growth and advancement. Furthermore, it endangers social harmony and exacerbates poverty (Bourguignon 2018; Chowdhury and Sundaram 2018; United Nations 2023). Reducing inequality mitigates conflict, enhances health, and promotes societal well-being. South Africa exhibits high levels of inequality, which is a consequence of historical racial segregation (Makgetla 2018). Socioeconomic disparities can manifest in four major forms: economic inequality, educational inequality, health-related inequality, and unequal access to political power (Adler and Rehkopf 2008; World Economic Forum 2017). Distinct variations express economic disparities reflected in the dispersal of employment, income, wealth, occupation, and other financially associated resources. In such cases, there will be a wide gap between the poor and the rich as wealth will be concentrated in the hands of a few while a big portion of the population struggles to meet their basic needs (Bapuji and Chrispal 2020). Educational disparities occur in societies where educational opportunities and outcomes vary significantly. Hence there will be stark differences in literacy rates, enrolment rates, years of schooling, or school completion/graduation rates among members of the same society even if the members have the same educational aspirations (Rumberger 2010). Health-related disparities are characterised by a systematic variation in health outcomes that correlates with socioeconomic status (Gkiouleka et al. 2023). It is exhibited when ill-health conditions such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, depression, suicide, and mortality are more prevalent in lower socioeconomic population groups or if there is an unjust difference in the access to healthcare services based on socioeconomic status (Castro-Dominguez, Smolderen, and Mena-Hurtado 2023; Nelson 2002). Political disparity is a situation in which the political advantage is captured by a particular racial group, ethnic group, or elite social class. It is a structured discrepancy that limits governance processes and public policy decisions to the control of the advantaged population groups as the disadvantaged groups are excluded from holding government authority (Dubrow 2008). Political power becomes skewed in favour of the upper socioeconomic class or certain racial/ethnic groups while the poor are without representation in the political space and public policies to address their challenges will not be advocated.

Socioeconomic disparities trigger several undesirable outcomes. Individual success will not truly reflect one's talent, aspiration, effort, or hard work. Social institutions will operate in ways that will maintain inequality (Mijs 2021). In societies characterised by an imbalance in wealth and status, evaluating one's circumstances with others tends to lead to feelings of anxiety and diminished levels of assurance and self-worth. This is exacerbated by a lack of empathy towards the well-being of other members of the public

(Paskov and Dewilde 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). It can intensify the feeling of relative deprivation among the economically disadvantaged and encourage inclination towards committing violent crimes. This promotes higher violence and crime rates and more imprisonment in unequal communities (Breetzke 2018; Coccia 2017; Neckerman and Torche 2007). Physical and mental health conditions such as depression, physical inactivity, and obesity will be amplified among members of the disadvantaged group (Assari 2019; Bono and Matranga 2019; Chen 2012; Phaswana-Mafuya and Peltzer 2018). Social trust and cohesion will decline, often exhibited by geographical separation in place of living, schooling, or recreation between high-income households and low-income households (Comandon and Veneri 2021; Fischer et al. 2004). Systematic limitations in progression to higher educational levels among members who are economically less privileged will be perpetuated from one generation to the next, thereby halting social mobility (OECD 2015; Shapiro 2004).

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, school completion refers to the proportion of individuals who successfully attain the final grade of an educational level at an age range that is three to five years beyond the designated graduation age (UNESCO 2020). It denotes the ratio of young learners who are three to five years older than the official entry age for the ultimate grade of a particular educational level who have successfully advanced to that final grade. For instance, if the official entry age for the last grade of upper-secondary education (Grade 12) is 18 years, the school completion rate will be the proportion of those who are between 21 to 23 years who have finished upper-secondary education. Standard school completion rate or graduation refers to the percentage of students who successfully graduate from school within the expected timeframe, reflecting the effectiveness of educational standards and systems (Reiling and Strøm 2015). The completion rate takes into cognisance learners who may start schooling late, repeat grades, or drop out and re-enter school. School completion levels give policymakers, education managers, and researchers insights into educational attainment and help to identify areas where intervention might be needed at the broader level. It is a crucial metric for monitoring education, and it is captured in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4.1.2) as a global priority. Globally school completion has improved, but there are awful gaps between the poor and the rich. In fact, poor, rural-dwelling women hardly complete school in countries like Mali, Tanzania, Burundi, Togo, Cameroun, Guinea, and Congo (UNESCO 2020). In Nigeria, the primary school completion rate can be as low as 11% for the poorest rural-dwelling female but 97% for the richest urban-dwelling male (Zubairi and Rose 2019). Therefore, wealth is an important factor in determining whether people will complete school, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Education should be a priority for social mobility but when people are unjustly denied basic resources their ability to attain the required education to access economic-empowering opportunities is compromised.

Education is widely acknowledged as a significant factor contributing to inequalities in various socioeconomic indicators such as employment, household income, accumulated wealth, and health (Diprete and Buchmann 2006; Klokgieters et al. 2021; Nam 2020;

Pensiero and Schoon 2019; Salinas 2018, Simangunsong, Stewart, and Debortoli 2023). Therefore, educational disparities depict to a large extent other forms of inequalities that may exist in a given population. School completion especially at the upper-secondary level is a global priority and creates leverage for people to pursue higher education, access job opportunities, and escape poverty (Erickcek 2019; Lutz, Cuaresma, and Sanderson 2008; UNESCO 2020). This work documents racial and gender-based differences in the level of upper-secondary school completion in South Africa, which is an expression of socioeconomic disparity. It also engages literature in briefly discussing socioeconomic disparities and provides insightful ways to address educational inequalities in South Africa.

A Brief Overview of South Africa

South Africa is located in the extreme south of the African continent, sharing its northern border with Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Eswatini. It covers a geographical land mass of 1,219,090 km^2 (Isaacs and Friedrich 2006). South Africa has a historical background characterised by colonialism, apartheid (racial segregation), and the fight for liberation, but it currently functions within a democratic framework (Ayubi 2023). The nation comprises four major racial groups: Black/Africans, Coloureds, Indians/Asians, and Whites. The Black/African racial group accounts for the largest racial group in South Africa. They are the progenies of the indigenous Bantu people, with nine distinct cultural groups speaking the local languages such as Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swati, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu. Coloured people are the mixed descendants of the earliest European/Asian settlers and indigenous or other African ethnic groups and they speak Afrikaans (of Dutch origin) and English. Indian/Asian people are predominantly English speakers. Their ancestors immigrated from Southern Asia (mainly India) as slaves or in search of greener pastures during the British rule over South Africa in the early 1900s. White people are of European ancestry and comprise two groups: Afrikaners—those who are predominantly Afrikaans speaking with French, Dutch, and German origins, and those from Irish or British backgrounds who are English-speaking (Adams, Van de Vijver, and De Bruin 2012). During the apartheid regime in South Africa (1948–1994), White people dominated other racial groups. The non-White ethnic/racial groups were restricted from accessing the same educational, economic, and political opportunities as the White people. Black people suffered the most severe racial discrimination. They were denied free movement and land ownership, and they were offered the poorest quality of education. Coloured and Indian people were relatively less discriminated against and received better education than Black people (Adams, Van de Vijver, and De Bruin 2012; Chitsamatanga and Rembe 2020). The non-White education system was designed to generate unskilled and semi-skilled workers to benefit the White population (Ayubi 2023; Chisholm 2012). Hence, Black, Coloured, and Asian people could only obtain lower-paying jobs compared to White people. With the onset of the democratic era in 1994, educational institutions were transformed, and schools and education departments became integrated. The initial racially segregated education system was abolished, and

educational policies were aligned towards promoting equity and justice for all population groups (Moloi 2014).

According to Statistics South Africa (2022), the 2022 South African population was estimated to be 60.6 million with a growth rate of 1.06% from 2021–2022. Females made up 51.1% of the entire population, approximately 30.98 million. Over 80% of the populace are Black Africans, with Coloured, White, and Indian/Asian people constituting 8.8%, 7.7%, and 2.6% of the total population, respectively. About 28% of the entire population is younger than 15 years while those who are older than 59 years make up roughly 9.2%. The life expectancy at birth was estimated at 65.6 years for females and 60 years for males. The crude death rate was estimated at 11 deaths per 1,000 people and the infant mortality rate was estimated at 24.3 per 1,000 live births. The prevalence of HIV was estimated at 13.9%, accounting for about 8.45 million infected people, making South Africa the country with the highest number of people living with HIV in the world (Govender et al. 2021).

Racial-Based Disparities in Education

Racial or ethnic-based inequalities in education within countries are indications of existing discrimination. Based on Flores-González's (2002) explanation of the reproduction theory, the educational system "reproduces" racial/ethnic-based discrimination that occurs in society. People from the dominant racial/ethnic group will surpass the inferior group in educational attainment and will subsequently get relatively well-paying jobs. The recycling of this phenomenon will sustain an intergenerational transfer of socioeconomic disparity. In the United States, non-White populations like Hispanic and Black people have higher drop-out rates than White people. Additionally, the high-school completion rate is higher among White people than among Hispanic and Black people. Asian and White students rank above Hispanic, Black, and other racial groups in college participation (De Brey et al. 2019). This is largely because those from non-White families do not enjoy as much financial support from parents to further their education as White people (Nam 2020). In India, the caste system was used to profile people based on their social hierarchy. This Hindu-inspired social stratification system classified them into four groups. The "Brahmins," "Kshatriyas," "Vaisyas," and "Sudras," who were to serve as intellectuals and priests, soldiers and government officials, merchants, and artisans or servants in that order. Other tribal groups such as the "Adivasi" (Scheduled Tribes) who were an indigenous group and the "Dalits" (Scheduled Caste) were socially stigmatised and were not part of the four-group "Varna" system. Members of the upper caste, which is made up of the "Brahmins," "Kshatriyas," and "Vaisyas," were able to accumulate wealth over the years. Meanwhile the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Caste, and "Sudras" were economically disadvantaged (Deshpande 2010; Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2011). Although this system is no longer practised, education inequalities along this tribal divide remain an issue in India (Bapuji and Chrispal 2020). In Europe, racial inequalities in education are orchestrated by offering uneven access to education to the disadvantage of minority groups such as

the Roma people, which hinders their social mobility (FRA 2016; Zentai 2014). Therefore, unemployment or employment with lower income and poverty become more concentrated in the marginalised group (Assari and Zare 2024).

Gender-Based Disparities in Education

In most developed countries, gender-based inequality in education has been eliminated or overturned in favour of females over males. This is because these developed countries have the financial resources to provide education to all their country members (Dube 2015; World Economic Forum 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, gender-based inequality in enrolment and attainment does exist and is prominent among poor countries. In these countries, females are confronted with a mirage of challenges that limit their chances, thereby leaving them behind males educationally. This includes early marriage and childbirth, as well as patriarchal beliefs that promote male child preference and propose that women are of less economic value and should be relegated to performing domestic activities at home. Patriarchal beliefs put forth that investment in the education of male children will bring social security in old age, as opposed to women who will become married to another family (Koissy-Kpein 2020; Shahidul and Zehadul Karim 2015). Families with such a belief system are reluctant to invest in the education of female children because they feel it will not yield as much economic benefit compared with that of male children. Parents are also discouraged from investing in the education of their female children because of gender discrimination against women in the labour market in the form of access restrictions and wage gaps (Koissy-Kpein 2020). Lack of improved sanitation facilities in schools, which is typical in low-income countries, deters girls from enrolling or continuing schooling (Adukia 2017; Msoffe and Mohamed 2023). Girls require a more conducive environment and privacy for maintaining menstrual hygiene. If schools do not have safe and separate sanitary facilities, they prefer to stay at home (Chinyama et al. 2019). This makes sanitary infrastructure in schools more important for female school participation than for males. According to Yassin (2020), there are security concerns for girls, especially in rural areas if they have to travel long distances to get to school. They are more vulnerable to violence including sexual harassment. When there are security risks, their parents become anxious and the need for their safety overrides the pursuit of education. Additionally, boys are biologically built to withstand the physical demands of walking longer distances than girls (Msoffe and Mohamed 2023). Therefore, long distances to school have a more negative impact on girls' school participation. Poverty is also implicated as a hindrance to female education. Poverty increases the likelihood of early marriage, and pregnancy coupled with domestic responsibilities puts additional constraints on the education of the girl child (Delprato, Akyeampong, and Dunne 2017; Dube 2019; Lewin 2009; Mwakio 2017; UNESCO 2015). In some countries with strong Islamic foundations, girls are restricted from attaining the same education as boys (Evans, Akmal, and Jakiela 2019; World Economic Forum 2017). These factors make women less educated than men in low-income countries.

Methodology

The data used in this article is from the General Household Survey, which is annually conducted by the government agency responsible for collecting, producing, and disseminating official statistics—Statistics South Africa. A two-stage sampling procedure was used to select dwelling units in the General Household Surveys. The first stage involved a proportionate stratified sampling; thereafter systematic sampling was applied for the selection of dwelling units. Those residing in student or military accommodation, nursing homes, healthcare facilities, and prison facilities were excluded from the survey (Statistics South Africa 2020). Nationally representative cross-sectional secondary data from the General Household Surveys (GHS) from 2015 to 2019 was used in this article to demonstrate the disparities in school completion based on race and sex. From 2020 schooling was interrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this disruption continued until 2022 (DBE 2022; Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey 2022). As a result, there was a substantial decline in the academic performance of learners, with those from low socioeconomic backgrounds having the worst learning deficit. Leniency was exercised in the promotion of learners for them to progress (Van der Berg and Böhmer 2024). This article does not intend to capture completion rates during the COVID-19 disruption or immediately thereafter (2023)—hence data from the GHS 2015 to 2019 survey were used. School completion was computed based on the percentage of those aged three to five years older than the official age for the last grade of upper-secondary education who have completed Grade 12 or the vocational equivalent education or have obtained a higher level of education (UNESCO 2020). The analysis focused solely on individuals between the ages of 21 and 23, as the designated age for entering the final year of upper-secondary school (Grade 12) in South Africa is 18 years (DBE 2018). The participants who did not have a specified highest education level attained were excluded. Using sample weights, descriptive analysis was carried out to show the distribution of study participants based on their age, racial group, and sex. Cross-tabulation was used to illustrate the differences in school completion based on the study participants' race and sex. The chi-square test was used to indicate a significant difference in upper-secondary school completion based on participants' race and sex. Results were interpreted using 5% as the level of significance ($p < 0.05$). In case a *p*-value is less than 5%, this means that the test is statistically significant. The data were analysed using the IBM SPSS version 29 software.

Result

There were 3,132,833, 3,005,540, 3,044,794, 2,949,513, and 2,943,586 participants in the years 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively, who had known upper-secondary school completion status. Each of the ages (21, 22, and 23 years) made up more than 30% of the study population across the years. There were more females than males in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2019, accounting for 50.1%, 51.5%, 50.8%, and 50.3%, respectively, of the participants. In year 2018, males accounted for 50.2% of the study participants. The Black African racial group represented the majority with more than 83% of the participants over the study period. The Coloured participants comprised

8.1% to 8.7% of the participants while Asian participants made up the smallest groups constituting between 1.7% to 2.3% of the study population. The White participants accounted for 4.9% to 5.7% of the study population over the study period (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of study participants

Variables	2015 Frequency (%) *n* = 3,132,833	2016 Frequency (%) *n* = 3,005,540	2017 Frequency (%) *n* = 3,044,794	2018 Frequency (%) *n* = 2,949,513	2019 Frequency (%) *n* = 2,943,586
Age					
21 years	1,066,531 (34.0)	1,000,495 (33.3)	1,059,424 (34.8)	966,878 (32.8)	947,873 (32.2)
22 years	1,011,263 (32.3)	1,017,703 (33.9)	945,347 (31.0)	995,485 (33.8)	1,012,767 (34.4)
23 years	1,055,039 (33.7)	987,342 (32.9)	1,040,022 (34.2)	987,149 (33.5)	982,946 (33.4)
Sex					
Male	1,561,786 (49.9)	1,456,205 (48.5)	1,497,814 (49.2)	1,480,056 (50.2)	1,462,550 (49.7)
Female	1,571,047 (50.1)	1,549,335 (51.5)	1,546,980 (50.8)	1,469,457 (49.8)	1,481,036 (50.3)
Race					
African/Black	2,643,113 (84.4)	2,537,913 (84.4)	2,548,920 (83.7)	2,467,203 (83.6)	2,480,162 (84.3)
Coloured	252,489 (8.1)	253,895 (8.4)	259,715 (8.5)	253,288 (8.6)	256,498 (8.7)
Indian/Asian	71,233 (2.3)	66,894 (2.2)	61,124 (2.0)	68,985 (2.3)	49,953 (1.7)
White	165,999 (5.3)	146,838 (4.9)	175,034 (5.7)	160,037 (5.4)	156,972 (5.3)

Upper-Secondary School Completion 2015–2019

The upper-secondary school completion rate in the South African population was 48.1% and 48.9% in 2015 and 2016, respectively. In 2017 it declined to 48.5% then increased to 51.5% in 2018 and peaked at 53.7% in 2019 (Figure 1).

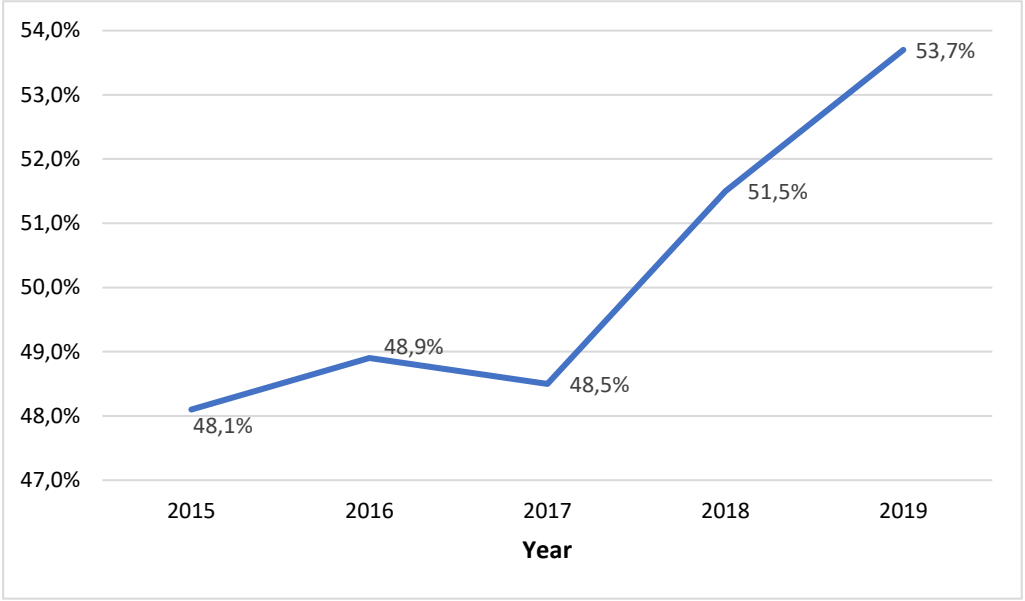

Figure 1: Trend in upper-secondary education completion in South Africa

Differences in School Completion by Racial Group

In the years 2015 and 2019, the White population was at the forefront of upper-secondary completion with 86.1% and 90.9% completion rates, respectively. The Indian/Asian population was the highest in school completion from 2016 to 2018 (89.7%, 83.6%, and 83.4%, respectively). Meanwhile, those from the Black racial group had the lowest completion rate in 2015, 2016, and 2019 (44.7%, 45.6%, and 50%, respectively). From 2017 to 2018 the Coloured population group had the lowest school completion rate (46.1% and 48.4%, respectively). Over the study years, the chi-square test indicated significant differences in upper-secondary school completion based on the racial group in the South African population (χ^2 = 142224.734, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 138246.017, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 87934.429, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 81742.207, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 130951.295, $p < 0.001$, respectively). This means that the upper-secondary school completion rate is not the same among the racial groups in South Africa. The White and Asian racial groups are relatively ahead of the Coloured and Black groups in terms of school completion in South Africa (Table 2).

Table 2: Differences in school completion by racial group

Year	Racial Group	Completed School	Not Completed School	Chi-square (χ^2)	*p*-value
		Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)		
2015					
	African/Black	1,181,045 (44.7)	1,462,068 (55.3)	142224.734	<0.001
	Coloured	124,590 (49.3)	127,898 (50.7)		
	Indian/Asian	58,806 (82.6)	12,427 (17.4)		
	White	142,866 (86.1)	23,132 (13.9)		
2016					
	African/Black	1,156,942 (45.6)	1,380,971 (54.4)	138246.017	<0.001
	Coloured	124,552 (49.1)	129,343 (51.9)		
	Indian/Asian	59,975 (89.7)	6,919 (10.3)		
	White	126,863 (86.4)	19,976 (13.6)		
2017					
	African/Black	1,174,133 (46.1)	1,374,788 (53.9)	87934.429	<0.001
	Coloured	118,217 (45.5)	141,498 (54.5)		
	Indian/Asian	51,119 (83.6)	10,005 (16.4)		
	White	131,994 (75.4)	43,040 (24.6)		
2018					
	African/Black	1,212,777 (49.2)	1,254,426 (50.8)	81742.207	<0.001
	Coloured	122,590 (48.4)	130,698 (51.6)		
	Indian/Asian	57,542 (83.4)	11,443 (16.6)		
	White	125,862 (78.6)	34,175 (21.4)		
2019					
	African/Black	1,239,078 (50.0)	1,241,085 (50.0)	130951.295	<0.001
	Coloured	154,016 (60.0)	102,482 (40.0)		
	Indian/Asian	44,658 (89.4)	5,296 (10.6)		
	White	142,645 (90.9)	14,327 (9.1)		

Differences in School Completion by Sex

From 2015 to 2019, females had higher upper-secondary school completion rates than males (52.6%, 52.9%, 50.8%, 54%, and 58.4%, respectively). The chi-squared test showed that there were significant differences in school completion rate based on the sex of the study population across the study period (χ^2 = 25646.052, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 21171.693, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 7117.217, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 7114.812, $p < 0.001$; χ^2 = 26204.933, $p < 0.001$, respectively). This means that more females in South Africa complete upper-secondary school than males (Table 3).

Table 3: Differences in school completion by sex

Year	Sex	Completed School	Not Completed School	Chi-square (χ^2)	*p*-value
		Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)		
2015					
	Male	680,614 (43.6)	881,172 (56.4)	25646.052	<0.001
	Female	826,694 (52.6)	744,353 (47.4)		
2016					
	Male	648,400 (44.5)	807,806 (55.5)	21171.693	<0.001
	Female	819,931 (52.9)	729,404 (47.1)		
2017					
	Male	689,039 (46.0)	808,775 (54.0)	7117.217	<0.001
	Female	786,424 (50.8)	760,556 (49.2)		
2018					
	Male	725,915 (49.0)	754,141 (51.0)	7114.812	<0.001
	Female	792,856 (54.0)	676,601 (46.0)		
2019					
	Male	715,993 (49.0)	746,557 (51.0)	26204.933	<0.001
	Female	864,404 (58.4)	616,632 (41.6)		

Discussion

This article discusses the various expressions of socioeconomic disparities and presents racial- as well as gender-based inequality in school completion in South Africa from 2015 to 2019. It utilises cross-sectional data from the General Household Survey, a nationwide survey. Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests were performed to demonstrate the differences in school completion among those aged 21 to 23 based on race and gender.

This work shows that Black and Coloured racial groups are behind Asian and White racial groups in school completion. This finding corresponds with what was presented in a previous work by Heaton, Amoateng, and Dufur (2014) where the educational disadvantage of Black and Coloured people in South Africa was demonstrated. Although in this article school completion does not necessarily mean that the required pass grade for admission into tertiary education was obtained, it was observed that about half (44.7% to 60%) of the Black and Coloured participants completed upper-secondary education. This implies that about half (44.7% to 60%) of them will not acquire tertiary education except perhaps when they return to school, which is very unlikely as overaged learners are likely to drop out of school (UNESCO 2016). Based on their level of qualification, the kind of job opportunities available to them will be low-paying jobs with limitations in career progression. Those who do not get formally employed may frequently engage in short-term manual labour (Erickcek 2019). Consequently, these racial groups will be financially unstable or have limited resources to support the education of their children to an advanced level. Their financial status will impede their access to quality healthcare (Gordon, Booysen, and Mbonigada 2020). The feeling of

deprivation and mental health conditions such as depression will likely be amplified among them when compared with other groups (Lund and Cois 2018). Where there are no ways of earning a decent income, the tendency towards committing crimes will increase among the Black and Coloured population (Breetzke 2018; Coccia 2017). If Black and Coloured people do not have as solid an educational background as other racial groups, their chances of social mobility cannot be guaranteed. Meanwhile, White and Asian people will have economic dominance over others since they have more than a 15% gap over the other racial groups in school completion over the years. This highlights a situation where there is a cycle of intergenerational transfer of socioeconomic inequality. Although the democratic government has introduced policies to redress the injustices perpetrated during the apartheid regime in South Africa, inequality in education along the racial divide still lingers. Recognising that Black and Coloured individuals represent a significant portion of the South African demographic, this necessitates heightened scrutiny as it will be unfair to have few with unlimited opportunities and a majority who are at an economic disadvantage (Statistics South Africa 2022). The idea is not to have a society where everyone is equal (equal level of education), but for the educational attainment of the South African populace to be independent of race.

As indicated in this work, females were ahead of males in school completion. This is a remarkable feat as most African countries have females behind males in secondary education (Koissy-Kpein 2020; Lewin 2009). However, in Southern African countries like Botswana, Lesotho, and Namibia females are no longer behind males in education (World Economic Forum 2017). This means that the challenges that constrain girls, especially within the African context, from attaining a comparative education as with boys have been significantly addressed in South Africa. While girls are maximising the educational opportunities available to them to complete school, boys appear to be lagging. A key issue pointing to this phenomenon is a higher grade-repetition rate of boys compared to girls (DBE 2018). Studies have shown that more boys eventually drop out for repeating grades than girls (Fleisch and Shindler 2009; Van der Berg et al 2019). Therefore, provided boys do not drop out after grade repetition, they stand a chance to still complete school but at a later age than girls. Though the gap in school completion for both sexes is not as severe as the one observed among the racial groups, it calls for concern. Over time, if the situation remains, the economic opportunities and income prospects for men will be limited. A society where everyone has a fair chance to participate in economic opportunities should be pursued globally and in South Africa. It is imperative for further research to uncover the factors associated with the higher failure and drop-out rates for boys than girls. Early identification and support for at-risk male learners who are underperforming academically can be initiated. Additionally, ensuring that alternative vocational education is available and desirable for transition into the labour market can help to sustain higher completion for those who do not perform well in the general education system.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic disparities are largely influenced by inequality in education. One's education will determine one's earnings from employment and ability to afford quality healthcare. Secondary education enables the transition to the next level of education or at least better jobs than being without secondary education. Although the democratisation of education has been instituted to redress previous injustices to non-White racial groups, racial inequality in education in South Africa persists. These disparities in school completion will foster the intergenerational transfer of socioeconomic disadvantage among the Black and Coloured communities in South Africa. To address this issue, education for these groups should be extremely subsidised on a need basis and followed through to the advanced level of education. Welfare programmes to support the well-being of the poorest among them should be put in place. More so, it is critical to engage in discussions with tribal group leaders of the Black and Coloured racial groups to keep them informed and help to navigate a way to circumvent this challenge. Certain positions that will improve the socioeconomic status of these racial groups should be reserved and allotted to them. This will lead to an enhancement of their productivity, which will be beneficial to the overall growth and development of the country.

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