

Factors Known to Affect the Quality of Teaching and Learning in South African Public Institutions: The Future Student

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ABSTRACT : Since the onset of democracy in 1994, South Africa has implemented education reforms aimed at improving equity, access and the quality of teaching and learning in public institutions of learning. Arguably, approximately 20 percent of the consolidated national government expenditure bill of R2.59 trillion was allocated to education, in the year 2025/26. This paper examines factors that have influenced the quality of teaching and learning in South African public schools and universities since 1994, with particular attention to curriculum reform, educator and lecturer professional development, educational infrastructure, language of learning and teaching, digitalisation, educational inequalities and community involvement. The rationale of the study is to offer evidence-based insights that may inform future educational policies, practice and research aimed at improving learning outcomes in South African public education system. Using the Arksey and O'Malley structured scoping review methodology, scholarly sources such as Google Scholar, Scopus and other notable publications between 1994 and 2026 are used to present a qualitative theory-led synthesis to build new analytic framework through the integration of existing perspectives to enrich policy and research. The findings identify three principal system-level priorities: (1) strengthening continuous professional development for educators and lecturers; (2) addressing educational inequalities through targeted and equity-sensitive resource allocation; and (3) promoting collaborative partnerships to support learner and student success. The findings shall contribute to body of literature on the issues of quality teaching and learning to inform future policy, research and educational practices aimed at improving learner outcomes simultaneously reducing persistent inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Public institutions, quality teaching, quality learning, teacher professional development, curriculum reform, educational inequality, language of learning and teaching, learner achievement, student success, South Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The transition from apartheid-colonialism to democracy in 1994 indeed enabled a fundamental funding turning point in the history of education in South Africa. The democratic government inherited an education system clothed by fragmented administration, racial segregation, unequal resource allocation, differentiated curricula and notable disparities in educational opportunities. The current government embarked upon extensive reforms tailored to transform the fragmented and racially divided system into an equitable and democratic system based on principles of non-discrimination, redress and equal access (Department of Education, 1995; The Presidency, 2024). Substantial progress has been made in expanding educational access and dismantling of formal racial barriers over the past three decades through signs of resistance are still lingering which adds to the unevenness of the quality of teaching and learning. This is further supported by Soudien (2024) that although South Africa has made meaningful progress in addressing racial, class and gender inequalities since 1994, historical inequalities continue to interact with spatial socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic inequalities. Analogously, Gruiters et al (2024) demonstrate that racial and socio-economic segregation continues to shape access to high-performing and well-resourced schools, thereby contributing to reproduction of educational advantage. Therefore, the contemporary education system should therefore be assessed not only according to the number of learners and students who enter the public institutions but also according to the quality of the educational experiences received and the achievable outcomes. The cardinal question is consequently no longer simply whether South Africans have access to education but whether the system provides learners and students with capabilities, resources and professional support required to succeed.

Furthermore, the above-shown expenditure alone cannot guarantee quality teaching and learning. The critical issue is whether resources are converted into effective teaching, meaning learning opportunities and improved educational outcomes. Additional investigation also depicts the complexity of the challenge with Ngoben, Chibambo and Divala (2023) arguing that successive curriculum reforms have not eliminated the socio-economic inequalities embedded in South African education. Similarly, Chuene and Teane (2024) demonstrate that resource inadequacy can constrain teachers' ability to implement the national curriculum

Effectively more especially when foundational challenges haven't been fully addressed. For instance, despite South Africa's high degree of linguistic diversity and its constitutional commitment to the equal status of its 12 official languages, English remains the dominant and a compromise language of instruction and communication within the education and business systems in the country. 'Native or vernacular African languages are used as the official medium of instruction in the foundational phase, after which students are expected to switch to English or Afrikaans, regardless of their home language. Languages other than English (LOTE) continue to play a role in the classroom, as it is quite common for teachers and learners to code switch, code mix and trans-language while engaging with academic discourse. Nevertheless, the fact that students are expected to learn content through books that are written exclusively in English and demonstrate proficiency through assessment practices that preclude the use of other languages creates systemic barriers to academic success which may further reproduce socio-economic inequities with racial and classist elements'' (Makalela, 2015). The quality of teaching and learning should therefore be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving teachers and lecturers, learners and students, curriculum, infrastructure, language, technology, institutional leadership, funding and relationships between educational institutions and their communities.

To prepare a future student, this paper argues that the quality of teaching and learning can be better understood through the interaction of three dimensions:

1. **Professional capability** – the knowledge, skills, pedagogical competence and professional development of educators and lecturers;
2. **Educational equity and capability** – the extent to which learners, students and institutions possess the resources and conditions necessary to benefit from education; and
3. **Collaborative capacity** – the extent to which educational institutions work with families, communities, government, business and other stakeholders to support educational success.

OECD and UNESCO (2023, 2021) advocate for a digitally fluent, adaptable, entrepreneurial, critically thinking, socially responsible and lifelong learner who actively constructs knowledge and applies it to complex real-world problems. The paper equally focuses particularly on the **future student** as one likely to encounter an educational environment characterised by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, multilingual learning, flexible modes of delivery, rapidly changing labour-market requirements and increasing demands for critical thinking, creativity and lifelong learning. Consequently, educational institutions should sharpen learners not only to succeed but to develop skills and knowledge to participate meaningfully in an increasingly FRAGILE (Fragmented, Rapid change, Ambiguity, Globalistic, Instability and Ethical uncertainty) socio-economic arena.

II. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has three objectives:

1. To examine the major factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning in South African public schools and universities since 1994.
2. To analyse how professional development, educational inequality, curriculum, language, infrastructure, technology and stakeholder collaboration influence educational quality.
3. To propose system-level interventions capable of improving educational outcomes for the future student while reducing persistent inequalities.

III. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This study adopts a theory-led approach rather than a single-theory explanation of educational quality. Three interconnected dimensions are used to organise the literature: **professional capability, educational equity and collaborative capacity**.

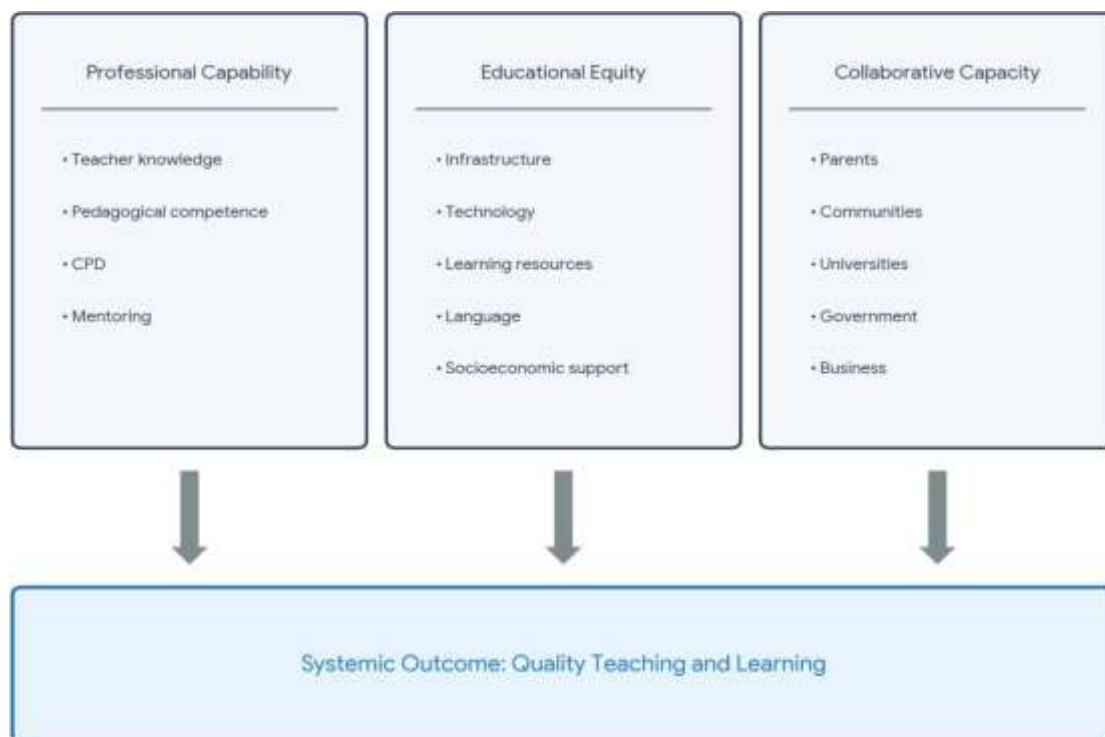
Professional Capability : Professional capability refers to the knowledge, skills, experience, pedagogical competence, judgement and collaborative capacity of teachers and lecturers. Quality teaching requires educators who understand both the content they teach and how students learn. Professional development is therefore not simply an administrative requirement but an important mechanism for strengthening teaching practice. Cilliers et al. (2022), in their evaluation of teacher-development interventions in South Africa, found evidence that teachers could retain knowledge and continue using resources after participation in professional-development programmes. However, the sustainability of these effects remains important because professional development can weaken over time if institutional support is inadequate. Similarly, Dyosini (2024) found that continuous professional development, mentoring and coaching are important for novice teachers and can strengthen

Pedagogical practice and professional wellbeing. Professional capability should consequently be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a once-off acquisition of qualifications.

Educational Equity and Capability : Chirinda, Ndlovu and Blessinger (2024) argue that class-based and historical socio-economic structures continue to limit access to *high-quality* education for the most marginalized. They further emphasise their point by mentioning that wealthier, white quintile 4–5 schools enjoy vastly superior funding, smaller class sizes, and digital tools, leaving historically disadvantaged quintile 1–3 schools struggling to convert access into equitable cognitive and socioeconomic outcomes. Educational equity concerns more than equal access to schools and universities. It concerns whether learners and students have meaningful opportunities to benefit from education. South Africa's continuing educational inequalities demonstrate this distinction. Schools and universities differ considerably in infrastructure, technology, teacher availability, socioeconomic context and institutional capacity. Soudien (2024) is again lamenting that post-1994 reforms have made progress in addressing historical inequalities, but spatial, racial, socioeconomic and linguistic inequalities continue to shape educational opportunities. This is also suggesting that equal resource allocation does not necessarily result in equitable educational outcomes, as institutions serving historically disadvantaged communities may require additional resources and stronger support mechanisms to overcome persistent structural inequalities.

Collaborative Capacity : Evidence of research by Teachers Institute (2025) also present a landmark synthesis by Henderson and Mapp which reviewed over 80 studies and ultimately found consistent, positive evidence that when families and communities are engaged in schools, children perform better academically, attend more regularly, and exhibit stronger behaviour which further portrayed the truth regardless of the family's socioeconomic background or parents' level of education. It should be acknowledged that educational institutions should not operate independently from their communities because the quality of teaching and learning is influenced by relationships between educators, learners, parents, school governing bodies, communities, government, universities, business, and civil society. Ngobeni (2024) found that sustainable school-community partnerships in under-resourced South African contexts can provide additional support and resources to schools and learners. Further demonstration of how effective school-community partnerships can contribute to problem-solving, social support and improved school conditions was accordingly supported by Nkambule et al. (2024). It is therefore trite that collaborative capacity provides an important mechanism for extending the educational resources available to learners beyond the immediate boundaries of the classroom.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Three dimensions interact to influence:

QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

which subsequently influences:

Learner achievement → progression → completion → employability → lifelong learning → social and economic participation

The framework proposes that weaknesses in one dimension can constrain the effectiveness of the others. For an example, highly qualified teachers may struggle to produce desired outcomes where learners lack basic infrastructure and learning resources. Similarly, adequate infrastructure may produce limited educational gains where teachers lack the professional capability to use it effectively.

V. METHODOLOGY

Research Design : A qualitative, theory-led scoping review was employed to map and synthesise literature relating to factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning in South African public institutions. The study draws on the established Arksey and O'Malley scoping-review tradition while recognising subsequent methodological refinements. The *JBIM Manual for Evidence Synthesis (2024)* confirms that the Arksey and O'Malley framework remains influential but has subsequently been strengthened through developments associated with Levac and colleagues and the Joanna Briggs Institute. The review therefore involved, identifying the research problem, developing guiding questions, identifying relevant literature, screening literature against inclusion criteria, organising and charting relevant evidence, undertaking thematic synthesis and identifying implications for policy, practice and future research.

Scope of the Literature : The study considered literature relating to South African education between 1994 and 2026 with particular attention placed on peer-reviewed literature published predominantly from 2021 onwards to ensure that the analysis reflects contemporary educational challenges. Searches were conceptually organised around terms such as South Africa and quality teaching, South Africa and quality learning, teacher professional development, lecturer professional development, curriculum reform, curriculum implementation, educational inequality, language of learning and teaching, educational technology, digital divide, infrastructure, learner achievement, student success; and school-community partnerships. The literature was thematically organised according to professional development, curriculum, language, infrastructure, digitalisation, educational inequality and collaborative partnerships.

VI. FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

Curriculum Reform and Curriculum Implementation : Curriculum reform has been central to South Africa's educational transformation since 1994. Curriculum 2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement, the National Curriculum Statement and CAPS were introduced with the intention of replacing the inequities associated with apartheid education. However, curriculum reform does not automatically produce improved educational outcomes. The quality of curriculum implementation depends on teachers' knowledge, institutional capacity, resources and professional support. Socio-economic inequalities embedded within the South African education system have not been effectively pulverised by the continuous curriculum reforms according to Ngobeni et al. (2023). Moreover, Nubia and Blignaut (2024) demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed challenges associated with curriculum implementation, particularly among rural science teachers. Their study highlights the importance of understanding curriculum implementation within the material and social contexts in which teachers work. While Chuene and Teane (2024) further identify resource inadequacy as a barrier to effective curriculum implementation by South African Life Sciences teachers, the implication is that curriculum policy must be accompanied by appropriate teacher development, resources, infrastructure and institutional support.

Continuous Professional Development: Teacher and lecturer professional development represents one of the strongest potential levers for improving educational quality. Cilliers et al. (2022) assertively provide evidence from South African teacher-development programmes that professional interventions can influence teaching practices beyond the immediate training period. However, sustaining these improvements remains a challenge and further supported by Nhlumayo and Chikoko (2022) who similarly demonstrate the importance of continuing professional teacher development, particularly in rural contexts and during periods of crisis such as COVID-19.

Dyosini (2024) emphasises mentoring, coaching and professional development for novice teachers. The study suggests that informal mentoring can be valuable but that institutions should create more formal structures to support teacher development.

Professional development should therefore encompass:

- subject knowledge;
- pedagogical knowledge;
- assessment literacy;
- digital competence;
- inclusive education;
- multilingual teaching;
- classroom management;
- learner support;
- curriculum implementation; and
- reflective practice.

In higher education, professional development should additionally include student-centred pedagogy, assessment design, digital learning, supervision and academic development. Leibowitz (2023) highlights the importance of institutional conditions in promoting quality teaching in South African higher education. Professional academic development therefore cannot be separated from the organisational environment in which lecturers teach. The author argues that focus should be placed on social and cognitive justice to overcome deeply entrenched historical inequalities.

Language of Learning and Teaching : Quan et al. (2024) argue that language policy can influence egalitarianism and a balanced approach in education and highlight the importance of sustained mother-tongue instruction. However, language is also one of the most significant factors influencing educational (non)participation and comprehension in South Africa. Although the Constitution recognises 12 official languages, English remains dominant in many educational contexts and to assert their position, the Afrikaners continue to either build their own institutions or sustain their language through traditionally Afrikaans universities which is generally welcomed by those value their cultural identities. The progression from African-language instruction in the early grades to English instruction from Grade 4 has also attracted significant scholarly concern. Probyn (2024) provides further evidence that multilingual pedagogies can improve learners' participation, motivation and opportunities to learn. Her study demonstrates that learners' home languages can function as educational resources rather than barriers.

Language should therefore be understood far from being a communication tool but in terms of being an educational capital that affects access to knowledge. For the future student, multilingual competence is continuously becoming increasingly important. South African institutions should consequently pursue approaches that strengthen African-language learning while simultaneously developing proficiency in English and other languages necessary for higher education and employment.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources : Spatial inequality signals a major determinant of educational quality. Chuene and Teane (2024) elucidate how inadequate infrastructural resources can constrain curriculum implementation. They further show how resources inequality is impacting on effective teaching and learning depending on suitability of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, sanitation, electricity, internet connectivity and digital devices in the digital age. All these inequalities play themselves out between disadvantaged and affluent communities. Therefore, infrastructure must consequently be considered part of the educational process rather than simply a facilities-management concern. For the future student, digital infrastructure will be particularly important because learning increasingly extends beyond the physical classroom.

Digitalisation and the Digital Divide : Digital technology is transforming education. Online learning, learning management systems, digital resources, artificial intelligence, and data-driven education are likely to become increasingly important in South African public institutions (Nkomo et al., 2026). However, technological adoption is not automatic hence scholars such as Hart (2023) identify five important factors affecting educational technology uptake in South

African schools: *access to technical resources; skills and competence; beliefs concerning effectiveness and efficiency; pedagogical compatibility; and supportive leadership and management structures.*

This finding is important because simply supplying schools with computers or internet connectivity does not guarantee effective digital learning.

The digital divide has at least three dimensions:

1. access to devices and connectivity;
2. digital competence; and
3. pedagogical capacity to use technology effectively.

Consequently, digital transformation must combine infrastructure investment with educator development and institutional leadership. The future student will require digital literacy, information literacy, critical evaluation of online information and the ability to use technology responsibly.

Educational Inequality: Although research is showing that despite the gains made since 1994, disparities attributed to race, class, geography, poverty, and language are reigning prominent which further displays that educational inequality remains a thorny issue in South Africa (Gruijters et al., 2024; Soudien, 2024). The authors view this a deep structural challenge whereby students from resource-marginalised households face multiple hurdles such as limited access to materials, poor digital connectivity, transport problems, and food insecurity due to endemic poverty despite bursary support. These barriers can reduce learners' capacity to benefit from teaching, even when educators perform effectively. Consequently, educational policy should move from a concept of equality of provision towards equity of opportunity. Soudien (2024) points out that educational equity in South Africa takes its impetus from the country's transition to democracy in April 1994.

COVID-19 and Educational Resilience : COVID-19 exposed the strengths and weaknesses of South Africa's education system. Schools and universities were required to move rapidly towards remote and blended learning. Institutions with established digital infrastructure and technological competence were better positioned to maintain teaching and learning. Rural and disadvantaged institutions experienced greater challenges. Nubia and Blignaut (2024) demonstrate that COVID-19 affected curriculum implementation and highlighted the importance of understanding educational policy within the contexts in which teachers operate. The pandemic therefore provides an important lesson for future educational planning: institutions must develop resilience before crises occur.

School-Community Partnerships : Educational institutions cannot address all educational challenges independently. Several scholars identified the value of school-community partnerships in under-resourced township contexts, while also demonstrating that establishing sustainable partnerships requires institutional commitment and effective management. Nkambule et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that school-community partnerships can support problem-solving, social support and improved internal school conditions. Ndlovu and Mafora (2024) further argue that strategic partnerships can generate educational synergies and contribute to improved learning outcomes and institutional sustainability. The partnerships may involve non-governmental organisations to governmental agencies. Their suggestion is that the purpose should not be to shift the responsibility for public education away from government. Instead, partnerships should supplement public provision and strengthen institutional capacity.

VII. THE FUTURE STUDENT

The future student represents an important consideration for educational policy. The future student is likely to require capabilities extending beyond traditional academic knowledge. These include digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity; communication, collaboration, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, adaptability, intercultural competence, multilingual competence and lifelong learning. This transformation has implications for teaching because the traditional model in which the educator is the primary source of information is becoming increasingly inadequate. Students can autonomously retrieve extensive information via digital platforms. The educator's role therefore increasingly involves helping students evaluate information, develop conceptual understanding, apply knowledge, and solve complex problems (Vääätäjä & Ruokamo, 2021)

The future student consequently requires a future-ready educator. Because the two cannot be separated. The latter should be capable of:

1. integrating technology meaningfully;
2. using inclusive and multilingual pedagogies;
3. facilitating active learning;
4. developing critical thinking;
5. using assessment to support learning;
6. recognising diverse learner needs; and
7. collaborating across professional and institutional boundaries.

VIII. INTEGRATED FINDINGS

The theory-led synthesis identifies three principal findings.

Finding 1: Continuous Professional Development Must Become Systemic

Professional development should move beyond short workshops towards continuous learning. Teacher and lecturer development should include mentoring, coaching, peer learning, professional learning communities and opportunities to apply new knowledge. The South African situation demonstrates that professional development can support teaching quality, but sustainability requires institutional support (Cilliers et al., 2022; Dyosini, 2024; Nhlumayo & Chikoko, 2022).

Finding 2: Resource Allocation Must Become More Equity-Oriented

The education system should recognise that institutions do not begin from equal positions. Equity-oriented resource allocation should prioritise institutions experiencing the greatest educational disadvantage. This includes targeted investment in, infrastructure, teacher availability, digital technology, libraries, laboratories, learner support, language resources and institutional development. The persistence of inequality identified by Soudien (2024) and Ngoben et al. (2023)

demonstrates that universal policy interventions are insufficient without targeted implementation.

Finding 3: Collaboration Must Become a Core Educational Strategy

Partnerships should be institutionalised rather than treated as a sporadic project. Education community partnerships can provide extra support and resources while university school partnerships can strengthen teacher development and educational research. Partnership with industry is the most important form of ensuring the relevance of education to the basic needs of society.

Partnerships should be institutionalised rather than treated as occasional projects. School-community partnerships can provide additional resources and support, while university-school partnerships can strengthen teacher development and educational research. The evidence clearly indicates that positive collaboration plays a significant role in enhancing educational conditions, however effective partnerships depend on clearly defined roles, adequate resources, mutual trust and strong accountability mechanisms (Ngoben, 2024; Nkambule et al., 2024).

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Establish Continuous Professional Learning Systems

Education departments and public institutions should develop and continue with structured professional-learning systems.

These should include:

- induction programmes for new teachers and lecturers;
- formal mentoring;
- coaching;
- peer observation;

- professional learning communities;
- subject-specific development;
- digital pedagogy;
- multilingual pedagogy; and
- evidence-informed teaching.

Professional development should be evaluated according to changes in teaching practice and learner outcomes rather than participation alone.

Recommendation 2: Introduce Equity-Weighted Resource Allocation

Funding should be allocated according to educational need. An equity index could incorporate:

- poverty;
- rurality;
- infrastructure;
- learner-teacher ratios;
- digital access;
- language;
- disability;
- learner achievement; and
- institutional capacity.

Such an approach would help ensure that greater resources reach institutions facing greater barriers.

Recommendation 3: Develop a National Digital Education Strategy Focused on Capability

Digital education policy should address three elements simultaneously:

Access + Skills + Pedagogy

Providing devices without developing teacher competence is unlikely to produce sustainable improvements. Hart (2023) demonstrates that technological adoption depends on resources, competence, pedagogical compatibility and supportive leadership.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Multilingual Education

The education system should strengthen African languages as languages of learning while ensuring that learners develop strong proficiency in English and other economically relevant languages. Teacher development should include multilingual teaching strategies. Probyn (2024) demonstrates that multilingual pedagogies can improve participation and opportunities to learn.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen School-University-Community Partnerships

Partnerships should become part of institutional strategy. Universities can support schools through:

- teacher development;
- research;
- learner enrichment;
- curriculum support;
- digital learning;
- mentoring; and
- educational innovation.

Businesses and community organisations can contribute expertise, infrastructure and learning opportunities.

Recommendation 6: Establish an Education Quality Dashboard

A national public education dashboard should monitor:

- attendance;
- literacy;
- numeracy;
- progression;
- completion;
- teacher stability;
- infrastructure;
- digital connectivity;
- professional development;
- student success; and
- resource distribution.

The purpose would be to shift attention from expenditure alone towards **educational outcomes and equity gaps**.

X. CRITICAL REFLECTION

The proposed framework has several limitations.

- ✚ Professional development alone cannot redress structural inequality. Teachers and lecturers cannot reasonably be expected to annihilate inadequate infrastructure, poverty, and institutional weaknesses as individuals.
- ✚ Equity-based resource allocation is administratively convoluted. It requires reliable data and strong institutional accountability to determine the appropriate level of differentiated support.
- ✚ Partnerships can create new inequalities if powerful stakeholders determine priorities without meaningful participation from schools and communities.
- ✚ Technological transformation can intensify inequality where digital access is imbalanced. Consequently, technological access should be treated as an educational core right rather than another sheer auxiliary infrastructure project.
- ✚ The scoping is theory-led and based on secondary literature. At this point, it does not provide new empirical evidence from teachers, lecturers, learners or students. Future empirical studies should therefore test the proposed framework in different provincial, rural, township and university contexts.

Implications for Policy : The central policy implication is that South African educational policy is widening the lens from a confined focus on access and inputs to a broader focus on educational capability and outcomes. In short, the policy question should therefore move from: *How much has been invested in education?* to: *What educational opportunities, capabilities and outcomes have been created through that investment?*

This shift would place greater emphasis on the relationship between expenditure, professional capacity, institutional conditions and learner outcomes.

Implications for Practice: Educational leaders should recognise that quality teaching is a collective institutional responsibility. School principals, university leaders, teachers and lecturers should create environments where professional learning is continuous and collaborative. Educational institutions should also develop stronger relationships with parents, communities and external stakeholders. The future student will require an educational environment that is *inclusive, multilingual, digitally capable, professionally supported, equitable and collaborative*.

XI. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should empirically investigate the proposed framework with specific research areas including the following:

- ✚ correlation between continuous professional development and learner achievement;
- ✚ effectiveness of mentoring and coaching;
- ✚ correlation between infrastructure and educational outcomes;
- ✚ the impact of multilingual pedagogy;
- ✚ correlation between digital competence and learning outcomes;
- ✚ the effectiveness of school-community partnerships;

-  university-school partnerships;
-  factors affecting student success in public universities; and
-  the impact of artificial intelligence on future teaching and learning.

Longitudinal studies would be particularly useful because educational interventions frequently require several years before their effects become visible.

XII. CONCLUSION

This study examined factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning in South African public institutions since 1994, with particular attention to the future student. The analysis demonstrates that educational quality cannot be explained by a single factor. Rather, it is produced through the interaction of professional capability, educational equity, institutional resources, curriculum, language, technology and collaborative relationships. South Africa has made considerable progress since 1994 in expanding educational access and transforming the formal architecture of the education system. Nevertheless, substantial inequalities remain. Recent scholarship demonstrates that curriculum reforms have not eliminated socioeconomic inequalities, that inadequate resources constrain curriculum implementation, that language continues to affect educational access and that digital inequality remains a significant challenge (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Chuene & Teane, 2024; Quan et al., 2024; Hart, 2023).

The study identifies three principal system-level priorities.

First, **continuous professional development for educators and lecturers must be strengthened.** Professional development should become a continuous process involving mentoring, coaching, collaboration and reflective practice. Evidence indicates that sustained professional development can strengthen teaching practice, particularly when supported by institutional structures (Cilliers et al., 2022; Dyosini, 2024).

Second, **educational inequalities must be addressed through targeted resource allocation.** The objective should not be identical provision but equitable educational opportunity. Institutions serving disadvantaged communities require differentiated support to compensate for structural barriers.

Third, **collaborative partnerships must become central to educational development.** Schools, universities, families, communities, government, business and civil society can collectively contribute to learner success. However, partnerships require clear accountability, mutual respect and sustainable institutional arrangements (Ngobeni, 2024; Nkambule et al., 2024; Ndlovu & Mafora, 2024).

The future student therefore requires more than access to an educational institution. The future student requires access to **quality educators, relevant knowledge, appropriate technology, inclusive language practices, adequate infrastructure, supportive institutions and collaborative networks.** The central argument of this paper is consequently that South Africa's next phase of educational transformation should move beyond the question of access towards the question of **educational capability.** The goal should be to create public educational institutions capable of converting public investment into meaningful learning, student success and social mobility. The future of South African education will ultimately depend on whether the system can develop **future-ready educators, future-ready institutions and future-ready students.** Improving quality teaching and learning while reducing inequality cannot just be an ordinary educational objective but a national development obligation.

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