# EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

## Toward Sustainable Learner Success in South Africa

**Bonginkosi H. Mutongoza & Eleanor A. Hendricks**

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*To all Africa's children living and learning in precarious conditions, whose resilience and aspirations light up the path toward a brighter, more equitable future.*

# About the authors

Bonginkosi Hardy Mutongoza is a transformative education researcher and social justice advocate. With a PhD in Education from the University of Fort Hare, his work focuses on decolonisation, reducing inequality, and addressing violence within educational systems. He has held teaching and research roles at various institutions, including serving as a lecturer at the University of Fort Hare and as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Walter Sisulu University in South Africa. Dr Mutongoza's research is widely published in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters, exploring topics such as curriculum violence, gender-based violence, and the psychosocial outcomes of inequality in education. His commitment to community engagement is evident in his efforts to support disadvantaged schools and develop innovative strategies for sustainable education reforms. In this book, Dr Mutongoza contributes his deep insights into the transformative potential of equitable and inclusive education systems, drawing from both scholarly rigour and practical experience.

Eleanor Alvira Hendricks is a dedicated and seasoned social work professional with extensive academic and practical experience. She currently serves as an Associate Professor at North-West University, focusing on social work education and research. Prof Hendricks earned her PhD in Social Work from the University of Fort Hare in 2017 and has since contributed significantly to the field through her research on youth development, gender-based violence, and the psychosocial well-being of vulnerable populations. Her scholarly work includes numerous publications in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, addressing critical social challenges such as school violence and adolescent pregnancy. She is a sought-after supervisor, mentoring postgraduate students across multiple institutions. In addition to her academic pursuits, Prof Hendricks engages in community development initiatives, including youth counselling and crime prevention programmes. With a strong commitment to education, policy development, and social justice, Prof Hendricks continues to influence the academic and social work landscapes in South Africa and beyond. In this book, Prof Hendricks brings her wealth of knowledge and lived experiences to explore innovative pathways for creating equitable and effective educational environments.

# Contents

# List of abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| AU | African Union |
| CAPS | Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement |
| CESA | Continental Education Strategy for Africa |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease |
| DBE | Department of Basic Education |
| DHET | Department of Higher Education and Training |
| FET | Further Education and Training |
| FP | Foundation Phase |
| IP | Intermediate Phase |
| LGBTQ+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other identities |
| LiEP | Language in Education Policy |
| NCS | National Curriculum Statement |
| NDP | National Development Plan |
| NSC | National Senior Certificate |
| NSFAS | National Student Financial Aid Scheme |
| SAHRC | South African Human Rights Commission |
| SAPS | South African Police Services |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| SGB | School Governing Body |
| STEM | Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Emergency Fund |

# Foreword

The role of education in human society has always been contested. From a structural-functionalist perspective, education is instrumental to the socialisation of members of society and the maintenance of social order through the conveyance of values from one generation to another. In addition, and importantly too, education allocates roles to individuals. Such roles that diverse individuals play help maintain social dependence and, therefore, stability. On the other hand, from a critical theory perspective, such a structuralist notion of education based on maintaining order and the status quo is not *transformational* and, therefore, cannot change society. Therefore, the critical theoretical perspective would reason that education must be seen as an instrument of change that challenges established notions, principles and rules that favour 'privilege' vis-à-vis other classes of society.

In the postmodern society, the role of education as a force of cohesion continues to be contested. Education has broken social divides through relative universal accessibility, especially in the post-1945 world and its wave of decolonisation. However, education in this period has equally created its own organic divides such as secretarial/humanities versus technical/engineering, among others. While the emergent post-1945 nations focused on massifying graduates to meet their administrative needs, the developed nations focused on STEM, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Since modern science has led the way in innovation and breaking of ceilings through awe-inspiring discoveries, different nations which have not caught up with the advanced ones rile in their technological backwardness and are subject to exploitation.

In South Africa, for example, we can draw this analogy down to the monetisation of education and how it has created well-resourced exclusive private schools versus poorly resourced public schools, classes of the same qualification, racialised schools, examination boards (*Umalusi* and IEB), among others. Hence, the inevitable questions: Is education a force for social cohesion? Should governments, such as in South Africa, intentionally develop a single educational system that is universally accessible for their citizens? If so, would that not deny a section of society their inalienable rights of choice? Will a forced, unitary educational system not impinge on the democratic ethos we all aspire for? These are some of the relevant but knotty questions addressed in this book.

**Prof Ikechukwu Umejesi**
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# Preface

In the early hours of a chilly winter morning, I found myself standing outside a modest school in a rural village in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The sun had just begun to rise, casting a soft, golden light over the rolling hills and the sparse, scattered homes. As the school's opening time drew closer, children in worn uniforms eagerly streamed in, their faces lit with hope and anticipation. This scene, though heart-warming, starkly contrasted with the harsh realities many of these learners faced daily.

South Africa's education system is a landscape of contrasts. On the one hand, there are schools with state-of-the-art facilities, dedicated teachers, and abundant resources. On the other hand, countless institutions are struggling with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a severe lack of basic educational materials. This dichotomy is not just a reflection of economic disparity, but it is a manifestation of historical injustices reverberating throughout the nation's classrooms.

In this book, we aim to explore the complex barriers to success within the South African education system. From the lingering effects of apartheid-era policies to contemporary socio-economic challenges, the factors impeding educational success are complex and deeply entrenched. We hope to shed light on the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and the potential pathways to a more equitable and effective education system through a detailed analysis of these barriers.

Drawing on extensive research and personal experiences from years spent in various educational settings across South Africa, this work addresses two primary themes: social cohesion and education in South Africa. Through examining these problem areas in depth, we can better appreciate the resilience and determination of those working tirelessly to overcome them and pave the way for a brighter future for all South African learners.

As we embark on this journey, we invite you to reflect on the power of education to transform lives and the collective responsibility we share in ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to succeed.

# Acknowledgements

# Introduction and Background

The legacy of apartheid has left an indelible mark on the South African education system. Under apartheid, education was racially segregated and deliberately unequal, with Black South Africans receiving an inferior education designed to perpetuate socio-economic disparities. This system created significant disparities in infrastructure, resources, and educational outcomes between the racial groups. Schools serving Black communities were systematically underfunded, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and poorly maintained facilities (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021; Ndimande, 2012). The quality of education provided to Black learners was deliberately diminished to limit their socio-economic mobility and maintain the status quo of racial inequality.

In the post-apartheid era, the South African government has implemented numerous reforms to redress these historical injustices and foster a more equitable and inclusive education system. Policies, such as outcomes-based education and the National Curriculum Statement, were introduced to standardise educational quality across the nation and ensure equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their racial or socio-economic background. These reforms sought to create a uniform curriculum that emphasised critical thinking and problem-solving skills and improved teacher training and resource allocation (Maringe et al., 2015). Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain and these form barriers to South Africa fully achieving the goals of equity and inclusion as the education system continues to grapple with the lingering after-effects of its apartheid past.

The South African education system is divided into several phases, each catering to different age groups and educational needs. The Foundation

Phase (Grades R-3) focuses on foundational literacy, numeracy, and life skills, laying the groundwork for further learning. The Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6) builds on this foundation by introducing additional subjects, including a second language. In the Senior Phase (Grades 7-9), learners develop critical thinking skills and apply their knowledge across various disciplines. The Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10-12) allows learners to specialise in subjects aligned with their career aspirations, culminating in the National Senior Certificate examinations, which determine eligibility for tertiary education.

The governance of the South African education system involves multiple layers, ensuring that national policies are effectively implemented at the provincial and local levels. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) oversees primary and secondary education, sets national policies, and oversees curriculum development. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is responsible for tertiary education and vocational training, including universities and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. Provincial Education Departments implement national policies at the provincial level, manage public schools, and allocate resources. School governing bodies, comprising parents, teachers, and community members, play a crucial role in school management, ensuring community participation in educational governance.

South Africa's education landscape includes various schools that cater for diverse educational needs. Public schools, funded and managed by the government, constitute the majority of schools, but they vary significantly in terms of quality and resources, often reflecting broader socio-economic disparities (Ndimande, 2012). Independent schools, which are privately funded and managed, often offer alternative curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate or Cambridge programmes. They generally have better resources and infrastructure than public schools (Soudien, 2010). Special needs schools cater for learners with disabilities, providing tailored educational support and resources. TVET colleges focus on practical skills and industry readiness, offering vocational training that aligns with labour market needs.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) serves as the national curriculum framework for Grades R-12, detailing the content and assessment methods to be taught. CAPS aims to standardise educational quality and ensure that learners across the country receive a consistent and comprehensive education. The National Senior Certificate (NSC)

examination, taken at the end of Grade 12, is a critical assessment that determines learners' eligibility for tertiary education, playing a crucial role in shaping their future educational and career opportunities.

Language of instruction is a critical aspect of the South African education system. While efforts are made to incorporate indigenous languages, especially in the lower grades, South Africa's bilingual policy promotes using English and Afrikaans (Mutongoza et al., 2023a). The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) aims to promote multilingualism, ensuring that indigenous languages are preserved and that learners achieve proficiency in English and Afrikaans. This policy acknowledges the cultural and linguistic diversity of South Africa and seeks to create an inclusive educational environment that respects and values all languages.

Despite extensive reforms, the South African education system continues to grapple with significant challenges. Resource inequality is a major issue, with stark disparities remaining in resources and infrastructure between urban and rural schools, as well as between former white and Black schools (Jansen, 2019). Khumalo and Mji (2014) argued that many schools lack basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and adequate sanitation. Teacher quality and training also remain problem areas, with concerns about qualifications, continuous professional development, and teacher absenteeism affecting the quality of education (Olawale, 2022). Socio-economic barriers, including high levels of poverty, malnutrition, and health problems among learners, affect their ability to learn effectively, contributing to high levels of absenteeism and drop-out rates (Allais et al., 2019). Ramrathan (2013) noted that high drop-out rates are especially problematic during transitions from primary to secondary education and within the FET phase, often caused by socio-economic pressures and a lack of support structures.

Higher education and vocational training are crucial components of the South African education system. South Africa has 26 public universities offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. They play a vital role in research, innovation, and the development of skilled professionals. TVET colleges provide practical skills training in various trades and professions, catering to labour market needs. They offer an alternative pathway for learners who do not pursue traditional academic routes. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) provides financial assistance to disadvantaged learners pursuing higher

education, ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent access to tertiary education.

## Rationale

Writing this book is not only a scholarly endeavour, but it is also a moral imperative aimed at addressing the critical barriers that hinder the success of South Africa's education system. The persistent inequalities that plague the South African schooling system are not just remnants of a painful past, but they reflect the ongoing challenges that demand our collective attention and action. For in-service and pre-service teachers, this book provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and historical contexts that shape the educational experiences of their learners. It equips educators with the knowledge and insights needed to navigate and address the unique challenges faced in their classrooms, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This book aims to empower teachers to become catalysts for change, ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to succeed.

Learners of sociology and allied disciplines stand to benefit significantly from the insights offered in this book as it amplifies their often-forgotten voices and experiences, shedding light on the systemic barriers they face. Through understanding these obstacles, learners are pivoted to better advocate for themselves and their peers, becoming active participants in pursuing educational equity. The book also serves as a source of inspiration, showcasing stories of resilience and perseverance that demonstrate the transformative power of education. It underscores the importance of community and collective effort in overcoming adversity, encouraging learners to remain hopeful and committed to their educational journeys.

For responsible citizens and policymakers, this book is a call to action. It lays bare the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and sustained investments in the education sector. The detailed analysis of existing challenges and proposed solutions provides a roadmap for meaningful change, emphasising the role of community engagement and political will in driving progress. This book offers practical guidance for promoting equity and access by highlighting successful initiatives and best practices drawn from both local and international contexts.

Moreover, this book serves as a valuable resource and a rallying cry for organisations and individuals working toward equal access to quality education. It brings to the forefront the critical problems that need to be addressed and fosters a shared understanding of the complexities of achieving educational equity. The collaborative spirit encouraged by this book can help forge stronger partnerships and networks, enhancing the effectiveness of efforts to create a more just and equitable education system.

In essence, this book is a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the barriers to success in South Africa's education system, grounded in rigorous research and informed by the lived experiences of educators, learners, and communities. It aims to inspire, inform, and mobilise all stakeholders toward the common goal of ensuring that every South African child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. By shedding light on the challenges and proposing actionable solutions, this book endeavours to contribute to the creation of an education system that is truly inclusive and equitable, reflecting the democratic ideals upon which this nation was founded.

## A theoretical overview of education and social cohesion

Functionalist theory is one of the earliest frameworks explaining the role of education in society, rooted in Émile Durkheim's sociological work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It emerged during the industrial revolution, a time marked by rapid urbanisation and societal shifts, to explain how institutions such as education could maintain social stability and order (Durkheim, 1915). Functionalism views society as a system of interdependent parts working together to promote cohesion and balance. Education is seen as a critical institution for socialisation, transmitting shared cultural values, such as democracy, tolerance, and respect for authority (Fletcher, 1956). It prepares individuals for their societal roles by instilling discipline, imparting knowledge, and fostering a sense of belonging. In developing countries, this theory remains especially relevant as education is often central to nation-building (Wandi, Afnita, & Hefni, 2021). In South Africa, Moloi (2018) argued that post-apartheid education reforms emphasise fostering a unified national identity, bridging historical divides, and instilling democratic values to stabilise the fragile social

fabric. Thus, Durkheim's functionalism provides a blueprint for using education to promote societal stability and cohesion in contexts marked by diversity and inequality.

The conflict theory, developed in the late 19th century and associated with Karl Marx, presents a stark contrast to functionalism by highlighting the role of power and inequality in shaping social institutions, including education. It critiques the notion that education uniformly promotes social cohesion, arguing instead that it often reinforces societal hierarchies and privileges (Collins, 1971). According to this theory, education serves the interests of dominant groups, perpetuating inequality through a hidden curriculum that subtly endorses existing power structures (Prayogi, 2023). For example, disparities in resource allocation between schools in affluent and impoverished areas reflect broader societal inequities, which are especially pronounced in developing countries (Munje & Maarman, 2017). In South Africa, the lingering after-effects of apartheid-era segregation are evident in the unequal distribution of educational resources, with historically marginalised communities often receiving substandard facilities and instruction (Oberschall, 1978). Despite reforms aimed at inclusivity, the education system sometimes exacerbates social divisions rather than mitigating them. The conflict theory provides critical insights into the structural barriers that undermine social cohesion in developing contexts and highlights the need for transformative policies to address systemic inequalities.

Additionally, the feminist theory, which emerged in the mid-20th century as part of broader movements for gender equality, provides a critical lens for examining the intersection of education and social cohesion. According to Mama (2015), feminism challenges patriarchal norms embedded within educational institutions and curricula, advocating for equality and inclusivity. Feminist theory critiques how traditional schooling often perpetuates gender stereotypes and marginalises women, especially in conservative or patriarchal societies (Crenshaw, 1989). In South Africa, feminist perspectives are especially relevant, given the historical and ongoing gender disparities in education. While progress has been made, challenges such as gender-based violence (GBV), teenage pregnancy and early marriage, and cultural norms continue to impede access to education for many girls, especially in rural areas (Gouws, 2017). Feminist theory emphasises the need for gender-sensitive policies, inclusive curricula, and safe learning environments to empower

marginalised groups and foster mutual respect (Mama, 2015). Thus, this theory contributes to creating more cohesive societies, where diverse voices are valued and respected, by addressing gender inequalities and promoting intersectionality—considering the overlapping effects of race, class, and gender.

Furthermore, one can consider the human capital theory, which emerged in the 1960s from economic scholarship, especially the work of Becker (1962), as societies sought to modernise and leverage education for economic development. Becker conceptualised education as an investment in individuals through enhancing their skills, productivity, and potential to contribute to economic growth. This perspective gained traction as countries recognised the role of education in fostering innovation and addressing poverty (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2015). In developing contexts, the human capital theory underscores the importance of equipping individuals with skills relevant to the labour market (Weiss, 2015). In South Africa, where unemployment and poverty are serious challenges, education is a critical tool for economic empowerment and social mobility (Hendricks & Thengela, 2020). Programmes aimed at vocational training and skills development exemplify the application of this theory, seeking to reduce youth unemployment and bridge economic divides. As such, the human capital theory aligns with the broader goals of social cohesion through highlighting the interplay between education and economic empowerment in fostering stable and equitable societies.

A case can also be made for the social capital theory, associated with Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman in the late 20th century, which explores how social networks, trust, and shared norms contribute to individual and collective success (Julien, 2014). It views education as a means of building social capital, fostering connections and a sense of belonging within communities (Grenfell, 2009). Schools are therefore seen not only as sites for academic learning, but also as hubs for nurturing relationships that strengthen societal bonds (Rogoå¡iÄ‡ & BaranoviÄ‡, 2016). In developing countries, where communal ties often play a significant role, the social capital theory highlights the importance of collaborative approaches to education. Machimana, Sefotho and Ebersöhn (2018) argued that in rural areas, schools frequently serve as focal points for community engagement, fostering trust and cooperation. For example, in South Africa, initiatives that encourage parental involvement in education help bridge divides between the different

social groups and promote a shared sense of purpose (Sedibe, 2012). Thus, the social capital theory underscores the potential of education to build inclusive and resilient communities, especially in societies grappling with historical divisions.

Another perspective can be gleaned from critical pedagogy, introduced by Paulo Freire in the late 20th century, which offers a transformative approach to education by critiquing traditional methods that reinforce oppression (Giroux, 2010). Freire's work, especially Pedagogy of the Oppressed, emphasised dialogical learning, where teachers and students engage in mutual reflection and action to challenge existing power dynamics (Freire, 1970). This theory is especially relevant in post-colonial and developing contexts, where education systems often reflect colonial or discriminatory legacies. Critical pedagogy advocates for curricula that empower marginalised groups and foster critical consciousness about the challenges caused by inequality, identity, and power (Shih, 2018). In South Africa, decolonisation of the curriculum aligns with the Freirean principles, encouraging students to question historical narratives and embrace cultural diversity (Mutongoza et al., 2023a). This approach promotes a more inclusive education system that values diverse perspectives and empowers communities by fostering critical thinking and active engagement (Razzak, 2020). Critical pedagogy thus serves as a powerful tool for fostering social cohesion in societies striving to overcome historical injustices and build equitable futures.

## The Sustainable Development Goal 4 and social cohesion

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is closely linked to social cohesion. It aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Social cohesion enhances efforts to create safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments. When communities are cohesive, they are more likely to prioritise and advocate for the safety and well-being of all students (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2024), thus significantly improving the students' prospects for success. This includes combating pervasive problems, such as bullying, violence, and discrimination in schools. Collaborative community efforts can also improve infrastructure, ensuring that schools are welcoming spaces for all learners, regardless of their background. Cohesive societies

value the role of educators and invest in their training, development, and well-being. Teachers are often seen as key agents in fostering unity and bridging divides within communities (Shikalepo & Kandjengo, 2021). Social cohesion ensures that teachers are supported through the relevant resources and collaborative networks that strengthen their ability to deliver quality education and address diverse learners' needs. Social cohesion fosters an environment, where communities work collaboratively, trust is nurtured, and societal divisions are bridged—conditions essential for achieving some of SDG 4's targets and in line with social cohesion as discussed below:

### Target 4.1: Universal primary and secondary education

Social cohesion plays a pivotal role in safeguarding societies' well-being by reducing societal barriers, such as discrimination, inequality, and prejudice that often prevent marginalised groups from accessing education. This aligns with Khan (2016), who noted that cohesive and progressive communities are more likely to demand and support inclusive policies that ensure girls, children with disabilities, and minority groups can attend school without facing stigmatisation and systemic exclusion.

### Target 4.2: Early childhood development and pre-primary education

Social cohesion strengthens the collective responsibility of communities to support young children's educational needs. Studies, for example Mahlangu (2014), convince us that cohesive societies are more likely to have stronger networks of families, local leaders, and organisations that advocate for access to early childhood education than dysfunctional and non-cohesive societies. Through cooperation and shared values, communities can work to ensure equitable access to pre-primary education, especially in underserved areas, thereby addressing and combatting developmental disparities from an early age.

### Target 4.3: Equal access to technical, vocational, and higher education

Achieving social cohesion stimulates equal access to diverse educational pathways beyond primary and secondary schooling. In cohesive societies, there is also greater collaboration between educational institutions, governments, and communities to create inclusive technical and vocational programmes. According to Kaburise (2014), this ensures

inclusive and equitable opportunities for technical and vocational education, which is critical for reducing inequalities, empowering marginalised groups, and driving sustainable societal and economic development. Thus, programmes tailored to promote upward mobility and reduce societal inequalities reinforce a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

### Target 4.5: Gender equality and inclusion

Social cohesion directly supports efforts to eliminate disparities in education based on gender, disability, and socio-economic status. Cohesive communities are more likely to implement and support programmes that empower marginalised groups (Munje & Mncube, 2018), which include scholarships for girls and safe school environments for children with disabilities. Gwiza and Hendricks (2024) reported that the promotion of tolerance and respect within learning communities fosters an inclusive culture, ensuring that no one is left behind in accessing education.

### Target 4.6: Universal literacy and numeracy

Promoting literacy and numeracy for all youth and adults requires widespread collaboration and trust between government, educational institutions, and communities—the key components of social cohesion. Olawale (2023) argued that in cohesive societies, community-driven literacy campaigns and adult education programmes thrive, and they help to address gaps in access to education for adults who were previously excluded, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas.

### Target 4.7: Education for sustainable development and global citizenship

Education aimed at fostering sustainable development and global citizenship is closely aligned with social cohesion. According to Machimana et al. (2018), such education emphasises values that include mutual respect, diversity, and cooperation, which are foundational to cohesive societies. Through teaching students to appreciate different cultures and work collaboratively toward shared goals, this target reinforces both social cohesion and the broader goals of peace and sustainability.

# The Continental Education Strategy for Africa and social cohesion

The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) provides a robust framework for advancing social cohesion across the continent by addressing systemic barriers to equitable education and fostering shared African values (African Union, 2015). CESA contributes to building cohesive societies that promote unity, equity, and sustainable development at local, national, and regional levels by revitalising education systems to nurture skills, innovation, and cultural identity. One of CESA's key contributions to social cohesion lies in its focus on improving access to quality education for all demographic groups, including marginalised and underserved populations (Awaah, Okebukola, & Shabani, 2022). This commitment includes rehabilitating infrastructure, ensuring safe learning environments, and eradicating illiteracy through widespread literacy campaigns. According to Takyi-Amoako and Assié-Lumumba (2018), such efforts reduce societal divides, create opportunities for economic participation, and cultivate a sense of belonging and shared purpose among diverse groups.

The strategy also emphasises gender equity and parity, crucial for reducing disparities that fuel societal tensions. CESA promotes a culture of equality, empowering women and girls as active contributors to cohesive communities by accelerating efforts to address gender imbalances, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields and leadership roles (African Union, 2015). CESA further highlights the role of education to further peace by preventing and resolving conflicts. By integrating curricula that teach conflict resolution, tolerance, and mutual respect, education systems under CESA are poised to foster an ethos of cooperation and understanding, essential for maintaining societal harmony in Africa's diverse and historically fragmented contexts (Awaah et al., 2022).

The promotion of regional integration through harmonised educational processes also directly strengthens social cohesion. CESA's commitment to aligning curricula and qualifications across countries supports mobility, mutual recognition, and shared development goals (Bisanda, 2022). This not only enhances collaboration among nations, but it also fosters a continental identity that transcends ethnic or national divides. The focus on stakeholder coalitions also encourages inclusive governance

in education, involving communities, policymakers, and international partners (African Union, 2015). Such coalitions ensure that reforms reflect diverse perspectives and address localised needs, thereby reinforcing the social compact between governments and citizens (Awaah et al., 2022). Thus, CESA enhances individual opportunities and lays the foundation for cohesive, resilient societies across Africa, ensuring that education becomes a unifying force in the continent's development.

## South Africa's National Development Plan and social cohesion

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 is deeply connected to the concept of social cohesion, especially in its vision of fostering a more unified, equitable, and prosperous South Africa. The work by Matyana and Thusi (2023) revealed that social cohesion is both a goal and a mechanism within the NDP's broader framework to address South Africa's historical and contemporary challenges. The NDP recognises that building a cohesive society requires addressing systemic inequalities and fostering opportunities for all citizens, especially those who were historically marginalised. Education plays a critical role in this regard, serving as both a foundational element of national development and a vehicle for fostering unity.

The transformative potential of education lies in its ability to create a cohesive society. Enhancing access to quality education, addressing historical inequities, and fostering cultural awareness all contribute to a shared vision of a national identity (Ngcobo et al., 2024). Strategies include developing inclusive curricula that reflect South Africa's diverse cultures and histories, promoting multilingual education, and encouraging interaction across socio-economic and ethnic divides within schools (Mutongoza et al., 2023b). These measures cultivate mutual respect, empathy, and collaboration, which are essential for nurturing a sense of belonging among citizens.

Equity and justice are at the heart of the NDP's vision for social cohesion. Addressing disparities in access to education and other opportunities ensures that all South Africans will be able to participate meaningfully in society (Engelbrecht, 2020). Removing barriers that perpetuate inequality and distributing resources equitably empowers marginalised groups. This effort reduces tensions and promotes social

harmony, fostering a society, where individuals feel valued and included. The NDP also highlights that a unified society attracts investment, fosters innovation, and sustains economic growth. According to Ngcobo et al. (2024), inclusive economic policies that reduce poverty and create employment opportunities further social cohesion by bridging socio-economic divides and mitigating potential sources of discord.

While the NDP outlines a clear vision for achieving social cohesion, significant challenges remain, including resource disparities, legacy systems, and entrenched prejudices (Matyana & Thusi, 2023). However, the plan incorporates actionable measures to address these challenges, such as teacher training programmes to manage diversity effectively, infrastructure improvements to ensure equitable access, and the integration of social cohesion themes into school activities (Zulu & Singh, 2023). These initiatives create an environment, where individuals from different backgrounds can thrive together.

# Social Cohesion and Dysfunction in South Africa

## Introduction

In the town of Siyathemba, South Africa, residents lived with a deep divide between two neighbouring communities. One side of the town, Ikhaya Park was a close-knit community, where neighbours knew each other by name, children played freely in the streets, and local leaders organised weekly clean-ups and community markets. The residents of Ikhaya Park believed in working together to overcome the challenges of poverty, poor infrastructure, and unemployment. Their sense of unity had helped them make small but significant strides toward improving their quality of life.

Just across the railway tracks was Mveleni, a community marked by dysfunction. Unlike Ikhaya Park, Mveleni had been fractured by crime, corruption, and political infighting; decades of neglect had bred distrust among its residents, who felt abandoned by both the government and each other. Gang violence was rampant, and even simple communal projects, such as fixing a broken water pipe, often fell apart because of a lack of cooperation. The people of Mveleni struggled daily with feelings of powerlessness and isolation, unable to foster the cohesion that had benefited their neighbours in Ikhaya Park.

The stark contrast between these two communities reflected South Africa's broader challenges. While powerful in some places, social cohesion was fragile in others, shaped by factors that included historical

inequalities, socio-economic conditions, political leadership, and communal trust. The story of Siyathemba was a microcosm of South Africa as a whole, where social cohesion had the potential to foster progress, but dysfunction could just as easily undermine it.

To give credence to the anecdotal story above, it is imperative to provide an overview of some of the realities reigning in South Africa presently. According to Crowling (2024), South Africa has a crime index of 75.4. While this is one of the lowest indices recorded in the country since 2017, South Africa has the highest crime index in Africa and ranks as the fifth most dangerous country globally according to the same index. Additionally, Sulla (2020) revealed that although South Africa has made progress in reducing poverty since 1994, approximately 55.5 percent (30.3 million people) of the population are living in poverty at the national upper poverty line (~ZAR 992), while a total of 13.8 million people (25 percent) are experiencing food poverty. Equally concerning is the fact that despite the duty to deliver quality public services, South Africa has perennially struggled to deliver on this mandate. According to Morisset (2023), despite spending as much as 15 percent of GDP on education and health, South Africa was ranked 135th (out of 173) on the World Bank's Human Capital Index. Therefore, this chapter explores the complexities of social cohesion and dysfunction in South Africa. We also delve into the factors that either strengthen or fracture the bonds between people and communities across the country.

## The concept of social cohesion

Social cohesion is a complex concept that encompasses various interpretations across different disciplines, including Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Psychology, and Cultural Studies. Attaining social cohesion is essential for the stability and peace of communities.

From a sociological perspective, social cohesion refers to the relationships and interactions among individuals and groups within a community (Friedkin, 2004). This perspective emphasises shared values, norms, and trust that bind members together, highlighting the importance of social networks and community engagement (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). This perspective posits that a strong sense of belonging and interconnectedness fosters a cohesive society, where individuals work collaboratively toward common goals. In this sense, social cohesion is

characterised by mutual support, shared responsibilities, and a collective identity that transcends individual differences, enabling communities to thrive even in the face of adversity. Thus, cohesive societies are less prone to conflict, as individuals are more likely to engage in constructive dialogue and resolve differences amicably (Williams et al., 2020). When trust and cooperation are prevalent, the likelihood of tensions escalating into violence or discord diminishes. By fostering a culture of collaboration and understanding, social cohesion can significantly contribute to social harmony, allowing communities to thrive in an environment, where individuals feel safe and valued (Klein, 2013). For instance, neighbourhoods with strong social ties often demonstrate lower crime rates and higher levels of community engagement, as residents take pride in their surroundings and work together to address local problems and challenges.

In contrast, the economic perspective on social cohesion focuses on social capital, which encompasses the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and collaboration for mutual benefit (Gradstein & Justman, 2002). Economists argue that socially cohesive societies are better positioned for economic growth, as they exhibit higher levels of trust and cooperation, leading to increased innovation and productivity (Larsen, 2014). This perspective underscores the connection between social cohesion and economic development, suggesting that investment in social capital can yield significant economic returns. For instance, businesses in cohesive communities often benefit from strong local networks that foster collaboration, enhance customer loyalty, and promote a favourable business climate. By building social capital, communities can create a more conducive environment for entrepreneurship and economic prosperity. Thus, high trust and cooperation among individuals facilitate collaboration and innovation, improving productivity and economic outcomes. Socially cohesive societies are better equipped to mobilise resources and attract investment, and to create opportunities for growth and prosperity (Pervaiz & Chaudhary, 2015). Strong social networks and shared goals enhance the community's capacity to respond to economic challenges and capitalise on new opportunities (Larsen, 2014). For example, regions characterised by strong social cohesion often experience greater resilience during economic downturns, as communities come together to support local businesses and foster a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Political scientists often define social cohesion as political stability and effective governance. A cohesive society is one where citizens feel a sense of belonging and loyalty to their nation or community, which fosters greater civic engagement and lower levels of conflict (Novy et al., 2021). In this context, social cohesion is essential for maintaining democratic institutions and promoting political participation. Political stability is strengthened when individuals are invested in their communities and feel their voices are heard, leading to more accountable governance. As Olawale (2022) argued, cohesive societies tend to exhibit higher levels of political trust, where citizens believe in the legitimacy and effectiveness of their government, and this facilitates cooperation between the state and its citizens in addressing societal challenges. Harris (2010) argued that when individuals feel a sense of belonging and shared purpose, they are more likely to participate in community activities, volunteer, and engage in political processes. This heightened level of engagement strengthens democratic institutions and promotes accountability and responsiveness in governance. In cohesive societies, citizens are empowered to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes, fostering a vibrant civic culture that enhances the overall health of democracy (Olawale, 2022). Carbone and McMillin (2019) revealed that when communities are united, they can advocate more effectively for their interests, leading to more equitable policies and outcomes that reflect their members' diverse needs.

Psychologically, social cohesion is linked to individual well-being and mental health. It highlights the importance of social support systems and the detrimental effects of social isolation on individuals. In this view, social cohesion is vital for fostering a sense of security and belonging, contributing to overall psychological resilience (Klein, 2013). Individuals in cohesive societies are more likely to seek help and support from their communities, leading to improved mental health outcomes and a greater sense of community (Williams et al., 2020). The psychological benefits of social cohesion can manifest in reduced stress levels, increased life satisfaction, and a lower incidence of mental health disorders as individuals find solace and strength in their social connections. Thus, cohesive societies provide social support networks that are essential for coping with life's challenges. According to Choi and Matz-Costa (2018), strong social ties and a sense of belonging contribute to improved mental health, reduced feelings of isolation, and enhanced resilience. Individuals in cohesive communities are more likely to seek help from their peers

and engage in supportive relationships, creating an environment of care and compassion that benefits everyone (Ballet et al., 2020). The psychological benefits of social cohesion can manifest in various ways, including increased happiness, reduced anxiety, and improved overall life satisfaction, ultimately contributing to healthier communities.

Culturally, social cohesion can be defined by the shared cultural identities, values, and traditions that unite diverse groups within a society. This perspective acknowledges the need to recognise and celebrate cultural diversity, while it fosters a common identity and purpose (Pagani, 2014). In this sense, social cohesion becomes a bridge that connects various cultural groups, enabling them to coexist harmoniously while respecting and valuing each other's unique contributions (Meer & Tolsma, 2014). By promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding, societies can cultivate a sense of unity that transcends cultural differences, allowing for the rich tapestry of diversity to be woven into the fabric of social life. Cohesive societies are better equipped to adapt to social, economic, and environmental shifts, as individuals are more likely to work together to address challenges and find innovative solutions (Ling, 2021). This resilience is especially crucial during times of crisis, such as natural disasters or economic downturns, when collective action and solidarity can make a significant difference in outcomes (Townsend et al., 2015). Communities with strong social cohesion often demonstrate a greater capacity to bounce back from adversity, leveraging their social networks to mobilise resources and support for one another during difficult times.

Achieving social cohesion often involves addressing the persisting problems of inequality and exclusion. Social cohesion promotes inclusivity and equity, ensuring that all members of society can participate and thrive by fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect among diverse groups. This focus on equity is essential for building a just society, where everyone can contribute to and benefit from social and economic progress. Inclusive policies and practices that prioritise social cohesion can help bridge divides, reduce disparities, and create a more equitable landscape, where diverse voices are heard and valued, which will ultimately lead to more robust, resilient communities.

# The concept of social dysfunction

Social dysfunction is a complex concept that has been widely debated and interpreted through various theoretical lenses. At its core, social dysfunction refers to patterns of behaviour, institutions, or structures within a society that impede the functioning and well-being of individuals or the collective (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). However, the contestations surrounding this concept arise from differing perspectives on what constitutes dysfunction, its causes, and the appropriate responses to it.

Fletcher (1956) revealed that from a functionalist perspective, social dysfunction is viewed as deviating from the norms and values that maintain social order and stability. Functionalists, such as Durkheim (1915), argued that every part of society serves a purpose in promoting equilibrium. When any part fails to fulfil its role, it results in dysfunction. For example, high crime rates can be seen as a social dysfunction, because they disrupt the social order and threaten the safety and cohesion of the community. According to Koch (2020), functionalists believe that social institutions such as the family, education, and law enforcement are crucial in addressing and mitigating dysfunction to restore balance.

In contrast, the conflict perspective, rooted in the works of Karl Marx and others, views social dysfunction through the lens of power dynamics and inequality (Hoselitz, 1964). Conflict theorists argue that what is labelled as dysfunction often stems from systemic inequalities and the exploitation of marginalised groups (Marx & Engels, 1973). For instance, poverty and unemployment might be seen not merely as dysfunctions to be managed, but as outcomes of capitalist systems that prioritise profit over people's well-being. From this view, addressing social dysfunction involves challenging and changing the power structures that create and perpetuate inequality (Jaeggi, 2016).

Symbolic interactionists focus on individuals' subjective experiences and meanings of social phenomena, including dysfunction. This perspective suggests that social dysfunction arises from the interactions and interpretations of individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2016). What one group considers dysfunctional, another might see as normal or even necessary (Denzin, 2004). For example, youth rebellion might be viewed as dysfunction by older generations, but it would be seen as a critical form of self-expression and identity formation by the youth. Thus, symbolic interactionists emphasise the importance of understanding

these differing perspectives to address the root causes of perceived dysfunction (Madonsela, 2017).

Studies such as Segalo (2015) and Meera (2016) revealed that feminist theorists highlight how social dysfunctions are often gendered, affecting men and women differently because of the prevalent patriarchal structures. They argued that problems such as domestic violence, gender discrimination, and unequal pay were not merely individual problems but systemic dysfunctions rooted in gender inequality (Frye, 2007). The work by Mama (2015) revealed that feminists advocate for structural changes and increased awareness to address these dysfunctions, emphasising the need for a gender-sensitive approach to social policy and intervention.

According to Ashdown (2023), postmodernists challenge the very notion of social dysfunction, questioning whose standards are used to define it. They argued that concepts such as dysfunction are socially constructed and often reflect the biases and interests of dominant groups (Agger, 1992). To postmodernists, the idea of dysfunction is fluid and context-dependent, making it critical to deconstruct these concepts and understand the power relations behind them (Bowden, 2020). This perspective encourages a more nuanced and critical approach to addressing social problems, recognising the diversity of experiences and perspectives within any society.

Understanding social dysfunction also requires considering the intersectionality of various social identities and structures. Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, examines how different aspects of a person's identity (such as race, gender, class, and sexuality) intersect and create unique experiences of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw, 2010). Social dysfunctions often affect people differently, based on these intersecting identities. For instance, a Black woman might experience workplace discrimination differently than a white woman or a Black man because of the combined impact of racism and sexism.

# Factors affecting social cohesion in South Africa

### *Gender inequality*

Gender inequality creates divisions and tensions within communities and it perpetuates social and economic disparities that undermine the collective well-being in various spheres, including the labour market, education, health, and domestic life (Musetsho et al., 2021). Despite progressive laws aimed at promoting gender equality, women and girls continue to face significant challenges. We believe that economic disparities are a significant aspect of gender inequality. Women in South Africa are disproportionately affected by unemployment and poverty. Studies such as Scarlato and d'Agostino (2019), Scott et al. (2012), and Madela et al. (2024) revealed that employment opportunities are more limited for women, and where employed, women are more likely to be employed in low-paying and less secure jobs than men. This economic marginalisation limits women's opportunities and reinforces dependency, which can lead to social tension and discontent. Educational inequality is another critical area of concern. Although there has been progress in achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education, disparities remain at the tertiary level and in specific fields (Mudavanhu & Batisai, 2023). Women are serially underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, which are critical for economic advancement. This underrepresentation not only limits women's career opportunities, but it also perpetuates gender stereotypes that hinder social cohesion (Idahosa & Mkhize, 2021; Sikhosana et al., 2023).

### *Sexuality-based discrimination*

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is another significant barrier to social cohesion in South Africa. Despite constitutional protections, LGBTQ+ persons face widespread stigma, discrimination, and violence. According to Mutongoza (2024), while South Africa is one of the few African countries with a constitution that explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, societal attitudes continually lag behind legal advancements. This disconnect between legal rights and social acceptance creates an environment of exclusion and hostility for LGBTQ+ persons, who are often targets of

hate crimes (Hassan et al., 2018). Reports of "corrective rape" — a brutal practice aimed at "curing" individuals of their homosexuality — highlight the extreme violence faced by this community. Social cohesion relies on trust and mutual respect among community members. When sexual minorities feel unsafe in their communities, it undermines the sense of solidarity necessary for cohesive social relationships. Marginalised groups are less likely to participate fully in the communities' social, economic, and political life. For instance, women facing economic and educational barriers are less able to contribute to the better-educated workforce or engage in civic activities. Similarly, LGBTQ+ persons who fear discrimination might withdraw from community participation. This reduced participation limits the diverse contributions essential for a vibrant and cohesive society. Persistent gender and sexuality-based discrimination reinforces harmful stereotypes and norms used to justify continued discrimination and it also hinders efforts to promote understanding, tolerance and acceptance.

### *Poverty*

South Africa stands out for being a highly unequal country, with these inequalities based mainly along racial lines between the most significant white minority in sub-Saharan Africa and the majority population of Black African origin (Gradin, 2014). This inequality was the main consequence of the country's history, in which the former ruled the country for many years, enforcing the economic, social and political exclusion of the latter, an exclusion that intensified significantly during the years of apartheid (1948-94) (Gradin, 2014). After the fall of that regime, the country engaged in a national project of de-racialisation, attempting to construct a society in which race or ethnicity no longer determines the course of people's lives (Gradin, 2014). However, despite the advent of democracy and the promise of a more cohesive society, South African communities still grapple with the challenges caused by poverty, inequality and unemployment (Mdluli & Dunga, 2022; Satumba et al., 2017; Van der Westhuizen & Swart, 2015). This is notwithstanding the various measures instituted by the government (c.f. social grants as protection) to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots (Satumba et al., 2017). Interestingly, Cowling (2023) revealed that any person living in South Africa earning less than R1 058 per month was considered poor in 2023, while anyone living with less than R780 was living below the

poverty line (the amount of money considered essential to sustain a minimum standard of living for an individual).

Based on statistics from the World Bank (2018), Mdluli and Dunga (2022) argued that poverty is a consistent predicament that has led to socio-economic and political challenges remaining in South Africa. Data from the South African Human Rights Commission (2018) revealed that South Africa has one of the highest proportions (55 percent) of people living below the poverty datum line, with 64 percent of these being Black, 41 percent coloured, 6 percent Indian, and 1 percent white people. The gap between other races and white people is so prominent in South Africa that it has brought much attention to the analysis of income distribution and other relevant dimensions of well-being (Gradin, 2014). Statistics further show that 66.8 percent of children in South Africa live in poverty. This essentially indicates that certain groups in the country are more vulnerable to poverty than others, and this includes children, women and Black people. The provinces affected mainly by poverty are the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, accounting for 72.9 percent and 72.2 percent, respectively (Wilkinson, 2018).

### Unemployment

As with other developing countries in Africa, South Africa has an ever-burgeoning level of unemployment, and an especially high level of youth unemployment mainly caused by the demand for experienced employees (Mseleku, 2022). From an analysis of students from five South African universities, Mseleku (2022) revealed that as students graduate, the unemployment rate increases in South Africa, and graduates become hopeless in terms of securing employment. The study attributed this high level of unemployment to multidimensional factors, including limited labour market demand, a skills mismatch and the lack of work experience. Agüero and Fasola (2022) were of the view that the astronomically high levels of youth unemployment in South Africa (a destination of choice for immigrants) have the potential to fuel the challenges of integrating migrants and refugees. As of 2021, the official unemployment rate in South Africa was 32.6 percent, while that for youth (15-34) was 46.3 percent, which implies that almost one in every two young South Africans do not have a job. The work by Ngcaweni (2016) is instructional in demonstrating how youth unemployment hinders social cohesion:

- Unemployment is a significant contributor to poverty, contributing up to 39.8 percent to poverty outcomes in the country.
- About 65 percent of young Black people comprise the unemployed cohort of under 35 persons.
- Chances of beating poverty are greatly diminished if one is unemployed by age 24.
- A noteworthy 33.5 percent of young people aged 15-24 are neither employed, nor enrolled at education institutions, or undergoing skills training.

One must consider the implications of the high level of youth unemployment in attempts to forge greater social cohesion in the country. Beyond the tangible rewards of being employed, such as having a source of income and attaining skills, the intangible benefits of employment play a significant role in establishing lasting social cohesion in South Africa. That is, people must have a sense of independence, achievement, and freedom to be able to embrace diversity fully, have a sense of belonging, and have a high level of political and social participation in building and unifying South Africa into a country of shared prosperity and development. For this to happen, all South Africans, including the youth, must be included in this process. It is, therefore, important that people have the opportunity to work and make a meaningful contribution to the productivity of the economy and society, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity or level of education. Most importantly, priority must be given to the youth and the less skilled, or less experienced.

### *Race and racism*

Although the socio-political act of liberation began with the advent of democracy in 1994, the actual benefits of the promised non-racial democracy are not yet enjoyed by all. Modiri (2012) contended that prevailing conceptions of race (and, to some extent, culture and identity) have institutionalised white supremacy and white racial privilege, which presently coexist with ongoing forms of anti-Black racism and racial exclusion. In fact, racism is alive and well in contemporary South Africa, igniting and reigniting its persistent derivative narratives (Modiri, 2012; Pirtle, 2022). According to Seekings and Nattrass (2008), the eternal legacy of the apartheid system of (mis)governance is the prevailing outlook of racialised societies that are as unequal as they are different in colour. In fact, the reason why apartheid categorisation still subsists today is

the retainment of the cultural meanings of these categories – i.e., the social 'worlds' (such as residential areas, schools, religious sites, among others) of South Africans, which are primarily defined by race, and many express negative views of other racial groups (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008).

Seekings (2008) attested that in 1994, the average per capita income among the Black population was one-tenth that of white people (Seekings, 2008). The findings from a study by Gradin (2014) revealed that poverty and deprivation rates faced by Black people in South Africa are significantly higher than those in countries traditionally known for racial inequalities (Brazil and USA). It was the contention of Gradin (2014) that the higher levels of financial poverty and extreme material deprivation among Black people are explained mainly by the accumulation of past and present disadvantaged characteristics. Additionally, the accumulation of mainly pre-labour market disadvantages among Black people produces higher levels of poverty. A more damning indictment on South African society was offered by Fourie and Moore-Berg (2022), who revealed that owing to the reduced perceptions of structural racism (the way power is positioned), white South Africans were less accommodating of the idea of opposing structural racism, and also less willing to engage in reconciliatory cross-racial dialogues. While the post-apartheid policy framework was geared toward eradicating racism and inequalities in South Africa, the obtaining environment has demonstrated that the roots of racism are deeply entrenched, and very few of the envisaged changes have materialised (Pillay, 2014). Pillay (2014) concluded that despite the many years that have passed since the dawn of democracy, racism remains a serious problem in schools.

### *Violence, crime and lawlessness*

Violence, crime, and lawlessness are significant factors undermining social cohesion in South Africa. Despite the transition to democracy, serious and violent crimes persist, leaving many South Africans living in fear and insecurity (Mutongoza, 2023). Vulnerable groups, including women, children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by these realities (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2024). The pervasive nature of crime disrupts the social fabric, impedes economic development, and hampers individuals' ability to reach their potential. Since the apartheid era, South Africa has been plagued by violent crimes. Although there was a brief decline in crime rates between

1994 and 1996, violent crime resurged from 1996 onwards, continuing to the present day (Olutola & Bello, 2016). Especially troubling is the high prevalence of violent crimes, which account for one-third of all reported offences, according to the South African Police Service (SAPS). A time series survey by Statistics South Africa (2015) revealed an alarming increase in household perceptions of violent crime, with 43.6 percent of households reporting an uptick in violence between 2011 and 2014, compared to 31.2 percent between 2008 and 2010.

Further emphasising the destabilising effect of crime on social cohesion, the same survey reported that 65.9 percent of households identified housebreaking or burglary as the most prevalent crime, followed by home robbery, street robbery, and pick-pocketing (Statistics South Africa, 2015). Factors driving crime in South Africa include entrenched inequality, domestic violence, and other socio-economic challenges affecting homes, neighbourhoods, and schools. Holtmann and Domingo-Swarts (2008:113) argued that crime thrives in environments where societal problems, such as unemployment, extreme poverty, and a legacy of violence, are prevalent. Bornman et al. (2011) attributed the high crime rates to substance abuse, the easy availability of firearms, and limited access to social services. These factors foster vulnerability within communities, eroding social solidarity and heightening both victimisation and criminal activity, thus threatening the social cohesion of South African society.

### Access to and success in education and training

Education is widely recognised as a key instrument in combating poverty, both globally and in South Africa, which explains the expanding budgets allocated to education. However, significant barriers within the education system remain, most notably the high drop-out rates among youth aged 15–18. This problem is especially concerning as school drop-outs have a diminished likelihood of securing employment in an economy that is increasingly reliant on technological advancements (Ngcaweni, 2016). Consequently, many of these young people find themselves trapped in structural unemployment, often depending on family for support. The situation is especially dire for vulnerable groups, with 57.1 percent of Black youth and 70.1 percent of coloured youth aged 24–34 failing to complete matric, a minimum qualification for university admission and improved employment prospects (Ngcaweni, 2016). Prolonged unemployment

further exacerbates the difficulty in securing a job in future (David et al., 2018).

The inability to access higher education and employment opportunities has far-reaching implications for social cohesion, as it increases the likelihood that marginalised youth will turn to deviant behaviours, including criminal activities (Lamb, 2019). Research indicates that young people are disproportionately represented among both the victims and perpetrators of crime (Muncie, 2009; Plagerson, 2023). Alarming statistics reveal that youth aged 16–24 accounted for 54.4 percent of assault crime victims in 2011 and 53.4 percent in 2014, rates significantly higher than those of other age groups. This concerning trend is underscored by 92 percent of South African youth participants in millennial dialogue sessions, who expressed deep anxiety about the impact of crime on their futures. These realities demonstrate that a failure to address educational shortcomings can contribute to a cycle of poverty, crime, and social instability, ultimately threatening the cohesion of South African society.

## Reflection questions

1. How do historical events in South Africa shape current social cohesion dynamics?
2. What are some of the key factors entrenching social dysfunction in South African communities?
3. In what ways can communities overcome entrenched distrust and divisions to foster greater social cohesion?

# 3

# Agency, Social Cohesion and Education

## Introduction

In the rural village of KwaMvelo, deep in South Africa's Eastern Cape, a young woman named Ntombi stood before a makeshift classroom. The sun had just risen, and despite the dilapidated state of the building—its cracked walls and broken windows—learners filled the room, eager to learn. Ntombi, a recent university graduate, had returned to her home village determined to change the cycle of poverty and hopelessness that had gripped her community for generations. Ntombi's story was one of agency in the face of adversity. Growing up, her education had been interrupted by frequent strikes, overcrowded classrooms, and the ever-present shadow of poverty. Nevertheless, with determination and her community's support, she persevered. Now, Ntombi was using her agency to bring change to KwaMvelo, teaching and mentoring children who, like her, faced enormous obstacles. Her vision extended beyond just education—she believed the village could pull together and transform its future by fostering a strong sense of social cohesion. KwaMvelo, like many Black South African communities, had long struggled with deep-seated challenges. Fragmented by apartheid's legacy and ongoing socio-economic inequalities, the village had often experienced a lack of unity. However, Ntombi saw the potential for change. She began organising community gatherings after school hours, where elders would share stories of resilience, and parents discussed how to support their children's education despite limited resources. Slowly, bonds between neighbours grew stronger, and education became not just the responsibility of teachers but a shared goal for the entire community.

Although hypothetical, the anecdotal story above paints a picture of the pervasive poverty conditions confronting rural and township communities in South Africa – a heavily polarised society, where the rich–poor gap continues to widen. A recent report by Biney, Borman and Chambers (2023) entitled 'Schooling under unusual conditions' revealed that more than 50 percent of the country's public schools (mostly in rural areas) require sanitation upgrades, and almost 25 percent of schools were still using pit toilets. Barney et al. (2023) summarised the national critical backlogs as follows: 3 677 schools have inappropriate structures, 13 655 schools have critical problems with sanitations, 8 265 schools' classrooms are not conducive for teaching and learning, and 6 319 schools require water supply. They concluded that these conditions have a significant impact on learning outcomes, especially for rural and township areas that are not well-serviced.

This chapter explores the relationship between agency, social cohesion, and education in South Africa, focusing on how individuals and communities can take control of their circumstances, especially within Black South African communities. It highlights the influential role that education plays in fostering social cohesion and how, in turn, a united community can better support educational success. Ntombi's story represents the larger struggle—and hope—of South African communities striving to uplift themselves through education and collective action.

## Agency and social cohesion in Black South African communities

In the face of historical oppression, systemic inequality, and ongoing socio-economic challenges, Black South African communities have exhibited remarkable agency in fostering social cohesion. This chapter critically examines how these communities have mobilised to create more inclusive and supportive environments, highlighting these efforts' successes and limitations. Through an exploration of grassroots initiatives, cultural preservation, youth empowerment, and economic resilience, we seek to understand the complexities and dynamics of social cohesion in the post-apartheid era. The chapter closes by making a case for social cohesion in the context of South African education.

### *The legacy of apartheid and the need for agency*

To fully appreciate the agency demonstrated by Black communities in South Africa, it is essential to contextualise it within the nation's history. A reading of Schensul and Heller (2011) revealed that apartheid not only entrenched racial divisions, but it also systematically deprived Black South Africans of economic, educational, and social opportunities. According to Noble and Wright (2013), the spatial legacy of apartheid, with townships and homelands designed to isolate and marginalise, continues to have an impact on social cohesion today. In this context, agency within Black communities often emerges as a response to structural violence and a means of reclaiming dignity and autonomy.

### *Education as a tool for social cohesion*

Education has long been recognised as a critical tool for social cohesion; yet, the inequities in South Africa's education system pose significant challenges. Aware of these disparities, Black communities have taken matters into their own hands by establishing community-led education initiatives. One such example is IkamvaYouth, which provides tutoring, mentorship, and career guidance in under-resourced schools, especially in townships such as Khayelitsha and Mamelodi (Spaull et al., 2012). By addressing gaps left by the formal education system, these initiatives empower learners, promote social mobility, and foster a sense of collective responsibility. However, while these efforts are laudable, Levy et al. (2021) revealed that they also highlight the systemic failures of the state to provide equitable education, forcing communities to compensate for structural inadequacies. The #FeesMustFall movement further underscored the role of agency in education. Driven largely by Black students, this movement demanded not only free education but also a decolonised curriculum. According to Godsell et al. (2016), while it successfully brought problems of inequality to the forefront, its mixed outcomes—especially the violence and repression it faced—reflect the ongoing tensions between grassroots agency and the state's power. The movement also sparked debates about the sustainability of such initiatives and whether they can truly transform a deeply entrenched system.

### *Cultural preservation and expression: A double-edged sword?*

Cultural preservation and expression are central to the identity and cohesion of Black communities. Heritage Day celebrations and events such as the Cape Town Carnival offer opportunities for communities to showcase their traditions, fostering pride and unity. These cultural activities serve as a reminder of the resilience of Black South Africans in maintaining their heritage despite decades of cultural erasure under apartheid. However, as Akpome (2016) and Nwauche (2017) reveal, the focus on cultural preservation also presents certain challenges. In some cases, the commodification of culture—especially in urban areas—can lead to superficial representations that cater more to tourist attraction than authentic community engagement (Hayward, 2007). Moreover, cultural expression alone is not sufficient to address the deeper structural challenges that undermine social cohesion, such as poverty, unemployment, and systemic racism. While cultural events can build a sense of community, they must be part of a broader strategy that tackles the fundamental problems.

### *Mutual aid and economic resilience*

Mutual aid networks and economic initiatives are another crucial expression of agency within Black communities. Chetty and Bhoola (2011) revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, grassroots responses, such as food parcels and community kitchens in townships, demonstrated the power of collective action. These efforts provided essential support to vulnerable families, showcasing the ability of communities to mobilise resources and care for one another in times of crisis (Jamieson & Van Blerk, 2022). Similarly, Matuku and Kaseke (2014) and Tengeh and Mukwarami (2017) argued that the explosion of spaza shops and stokvels reflects the economic ingenuity of Black South Africans. These enterprises not only provide livelihoods, but they also strengthen local economies and foster community solidarity. However, Enaifoghe and Vezi-Magigaba (2022) recognised that these initiatives often operated in the margins of the formal economy, constrained by limited access to capital, infrastructure, and broader markets. The state's failure to adequately support these informal economic activities raises critical questions about the limits of community agency in the face of structural economic barriers.

*Youth empowerment: Shaping the future*

Youth empowerment programmes are vital for fostering social cohesion and ensuring the future resilience of Black communities. According to Obioha and van Zyl (2022), organisations such as Afrika Tikkun, based in Johannesburg's townships, focus on equipping young people with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world. These initiatives encourage civic participation, leadership, and social action, enabling young people to become active contributors to their communities. Unfortunately, the impact of these programmes is often limited by broader societal problems (Kang'ethe, 2014). The challenges of high youth unemployment, inadequate access to quality education, and persistent inequality undermine the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives in the Global South (Udeh et al., 2024). While these programmes play an essential role in the efforts to shape the future, they cannot fully compensate for the structural disadvantages faced by many young Black South Africans.

## Social cohesion and education in South Africa

The quality of education in South Africa is significantly influenced by the degree of social cohesion within communities and schools. Social cohesion, which encompasses shared values, trust, and cooperation among individuals and groups, is a critical determinant of the effectiveness and inclusivity of educational environments. When social cohesion is strong, schools are more likely to foster supportive, collaborative, and inclusive atmospheres that enhance learning outcomes. Conversely, a lack of social cohesion can exacerbate divisions, tensions, and inequalities, undermining the educational experience for both learners and educators.

Schools benefit from healthy support networks in socially cohesive communities contributing to a positive educational environment. These networks facilitate cooperation between parents, teachers, and local organisations, creating a sense of collective responsibility for the education and well-being of all learners (Sayed et al., 2016). This was supported by Myende and Nhlumayo (2022) and Prew (2009), who contended that when parents and community members were engaged and invested in the school, they were more likely to participate in school activities, volunteer, and support educational initiatives. Seminal texts,

such as Bender and Heystek (2003) and Van Wyk (2001) revealed that this engagement not only enhances the resources available to schools, but it also fosters a sense of belonging and stability for learners, which is crucial for their academic and social development. In essence, solid social cohesion within the school community can lead to higher levels of trust and mutual respect among learners and staff, promoting a culture of collaboration and mutual support.

Social cohesion also plays a vital role in mitigating the effects of socio-economic disparities on education. Vally and Spreen (2010) argued that in South Africa, historical inequalities rooted in apartheid have left a legacy of economic and social divisions that continue to affect educational opportunities and outcomes. Schools in less cohesive communities often struggle with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of qualified teachers, which can significantly hinder the quality of education (Moloi, 2018). However, in cohesive communities, the pooling of resources and collective action can help bridge these gaps. According to Mestry and Verster (2014) and Pitt et al. (2013), community-driven initiatives, such as fundraising, mentoring programmes, and partnerships with local businesses, can support under-resourced schools, and thus, enhance educational opportunities for all learners. Social cohesion can help counteract the detrimental effects of economic inequality on education by fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose.

Additionally, social cohesion within the school environment is crucial for fostering a safe and inclusive space for learning. In schools where social cohesion is lacking, problems such as bullying, discrimination, and social exclusion are more prevalent (Mncube et al., 2022). These negative attitudes and behaviours create a hostile and stressful environment that impedes learning and can negatively affect learners' academic performance and mental health (Plüddemann et al., 2010). Conversely, cohesive school communities promote inclusivity and respect for diversity, ensuring all learners feel valued and supported. Anti-bullying programmes, peer support groups, and inclusive policies are more likely to be effective in cohesive schools that have a solid commitment to the well-being of every learner (Eke & Singh, 2018). Thus, Chidakwa et al. (2023) and Hendricks and Mutongoza (2024) reminded us that an inclusive schooling atmosphere improves educational outcomes and contributes to the overall development of learners as empathetic and responsible members of society.

Social cohesion also enhances the effectiveness of educational policies and reforms. Seminal texts, such as Psacharopoulos (1989), remind us that implementing educational policies to improve quality and equity often face challenges related to social divisions and lack of community buy-in. We are reminded by studies such as Mahlangu (2014) that when communities are cohesive, there is a greater likelihood of successful policy implementation, as stakeholders are more willing to collaborate and support new initiatives. According to Bhengu (2007) and Malatji et al. (2018), this cooperation is essential for ensuring that educational reforms are adopted and sustained over time. Thus, strategies such as implementing programmes aimed at improving literacy and numeracy rates can benefit from community involvement in tutoring and extracurricular activities, which reinforce the efforts of teachers and enhance learners' learning.

On the other hand, the lack of social cohesion can lead to fragmented educational environments, where mistrust and conflict undermine the efforts of educators and policymakers. Le Mottee and Kelly (2017) demonstrated that in divided communities, schools might become battlegrounds for broader social and political tensions, with learners and teachers bearing the brunt of such conflicts. The lack of unity can result in inconsistent support for educational initiatives, resistance to change, and difficulties in fostering a positive school culture. Additionally, without social cohesion, schools might struggle to address problems, such as absenteeism, drop-out rates, and low academic performance, as the broader community is not engaged in finding and implementing solutions.

## Reflection questions

1. How does the concept of agency intersect with social cohesion in the context of education?
2. What roles can the curriculum play in developing learners' sense of agency and social responsibility?
3. Can you think of any barriers to learner and teacher agency in schools, and how do these barriers affect social cohesion?
4. How do power dynamics within educational institutions affect learners' ability to act as agents of change in their communities?

# Identities and Social Cohesion in South African Schools

## Introduction

In the vibrant but divided city of Melokuhle, South Africa, a group of teenagers gathered at the local youth centre after school, each carrying the complexities of their identities. There was Sipho, the eldest son of a Zulu family, who struggled with the pressure of living up to traditional expectations while navigating the rapid changes of urban life. Next to him was Ayesha, a Muslim girl, whose love for basketball often clashed with cultural norms regarding gender roles. Nearby, Lindiwe, a young Xhosa woman, often felt torn between her religious upbringing and her growing interest in social justice movements. Meanwhile, Thabo, a mixed-race teen from a low-income household, frequently grappled with questions of race, class, and belonging in a society still haunted by the scars of apartheid. Standing at the crossroads of adolescence, these young people were each in the process of shaping their identities. Their daily lives reflected the intersection of culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, and socio-economic background. Despite these differences, they had found common ground at the youth centre, where they often engaged in lively debates and collaborative projects, seeking ways to bridge their divides and strengthen social cohesion in their community. However, they faced many challenges. Societal pressures, racial tension, gender inequality, and the ever-present problems of class and poverty all played a role in shaping how they viewed themselves and others.

Although hypothetical, the city of Melokuhle is a microcosm of South Africa's diverse and complex society—a place where identities often collided; yet, they had the potential to weave together a stronger sense of unity. Social cohesion was fragile in this space, deeply affected by how these young people formed their identities and navigated the intersecting forces of culture, race, gender, religion, and class. In South Africa, evidence suggests that these problems remain protuberant. Consider UNICEF's (2022) report that revealed that approximately 68 percent of South African youth regularly experience discrimination as part of their lives in school and in their community – typically based on age, gender, level of education, income and skin colour. UNICEF further revealed that as much as 80 percent felt that discrimination had affected their lives or that of someone they knew.

This chapter delves into how identities shape and are shaped by social cohesion in South Africa. It explores the process of identity formation during adolescence and how factors such as gender, culture, ethnicity, race, class, religion, and national identity interact to either promote or hinder social cohesion. Through the lens of these intersectional identities, the chapter highlights the challenges and possibilities of building cohesive communities in a country marked by diversity and division.

## Identity formation in adolescence

Adolescent identity formation is the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, during which an adolescent's sense of self evolves within various dynamics (van Doeselaar et al., 2020). This process involves physical transformations, especially those associated with puberty, societal expectations, and cognitive growth. As adolescents undergo numerous changes during this period, their identity is shaped by their self-perception, interactions with others, and understanding of the world around them (Renner et al., 2023). During this period, learners move beyond the concrete descriptions of childhood into a more abstract self-perception, encompassing values, beliefs, and personal goals (Blyth & Traeger, 1983). Cognitive development significantly influences this shift, as adolescents' ability to think critically and reflect on their experiences sharpens. The work by Blackmore (2017) revealed that cognitive advances, especially in reasoning and problem-solving, allow adolescents to engage in introspection and self-analysis. This

newfound capacity for abstract thinking facilitates the integration of multiple aspects of their lives—family, friends, culture—into a coherent identity. However, Blyth and Traeger (1983) revealed that this process can be fraught with internal conflict and self-doubt, as adolescents grapple with inconsistencies between their evolving self-concept and societal expectations. If navigated successfully, this critical period leads to a clearer sense of self; yet, failures in this process might contribute to identity confusion, or fragmentation.

Social relationships, especially peer interactions, become paramount in shaping adolescents' identity. According to Crocetti (2017), adolescents often turn to peers for validation and guidance as they navigate this period of self-discovery, resulting in heightened sensitivity to social acceptance and group norms. Thus, peer influence can reinforce or challenge emerging identities, making adolescence a time of conformity, as well as of rebellion. McCoy et al. (2019) revealed that while friendships offer a sense of belonging and support, they might also pressure adolescents into adopting behaviours and values misaligned with their personal beliefs. This creates a dynamic tension between the need for acceptance and the quest for individuality. Nonetheless, Branje (2022) reasoned that exploring different social roles within peer groups can be seen as essential for identity formation, providing adolescents with the opportunity to experiment with different aspects of themselves. The implications of these social interactions are far-reaching, as they shape not only these individuals' immediate identity development, but also long-term social functioning and interpersonal relationships.

Despite adolescents' increasing reliance on peer relationships, the family remains a cornerstone in identity formation, offering a foundation of values, cultural traditions, and emotional security. According to Zhang and Qin (2023), the involvement of a parental figure provides critical guidance, though the adolescent's desire for autonomy might lead to conflict. Adolescents often oscillate between seeking independence and relying on familial support, which can complicate the process of identity formation. Consistent with Potapov (2021), this period of role experimentation is a defining characteristic of adolescence, as individuals explore various identities in career, religion, politics, and sexuality. Adolescents might temporarily adopt different roles or ideologies to test their fit within their developing sense of self. However, Branje (2022) cautioned that the balance between experimentation and commitment

is delicate. Thus, if adolescents become overwhelmed by the pressure to define themselves, or if they receive little support during their exploration, they might struggle to form a stable identity, leading to role confusion or prolonged experimentation well into adulthood.

Cultural and societal influences are pivotal in shaping adolescent identity, as these external factors provide the framework within which adolescents negotiate their personal and social identities. Norms related to race, ethnicity, gender, and class deeply affect the way adolescents see themselves and are seen by others (Anyiwo et al., 2018). Vranken et al. (2024) considered how gender roles, reinforced through the media, family expectations, and peer interactions, often dictate the behaviours deemed acceptable for young people. Similarly, cultural narratives around ethnicity and race might either empower or constrain identity development, especially for adolescents from minority backgrounds (Dominic & Michelle, 2011). Societal pressures can lead to coerced conformity, where adolescents suppress their true selves to fit into dominant cultural paradigms, while an inclusive and diverse environment might foster a genuine identity (Austin, 2016). The interplay between personal identity and these cultural and societal norms is complex, often resulting in internalised conflicts that stimulate critical reflection and growth, or they perpetuate feelings of alienation and exclusion.

Erik Erikson's concept of the psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion highlights the central challenge of adolescence: resolving the conflict between personal identity and societal roles (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents must navigate this crisis by reconciling their inner sense of self with the roles and expectations imposed on them by family, peers, and society (Crocetti, 2017). Failure to resolve this crisis might result in role confusion, where adolescents struggle to define themselves, potentially leading to challenges that include low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Blyth & Traeger, 1983). However, successfully navigating this stage results in a firm commitment to an authentic and socially viable identity. This identity commitment is essential for fostering a sense of continuity and purpose, and for providing a stable foundation for future personal and social development (Branje, 2022). The process is inherently dynamic, with one's identity being continuously re-evaluated and reshaped by new experiences; however, adolescence remains the critical juncture, where these commitments begin to take root, influencing both immediate and long-term psychosocial well-being.

# Gender and identity negotiation

Gender identity is a fundamental part of an adolescent's self-concept and often intersects with cultural expectations, social norms, and personal experiences. Brinkman et al. (2014) revealed that for adolescents conflicted between their pursuing passion and subscribing to cultural expectations around gender roles, the negotiation of gender identity is a complex process. As with other developing contexts, Graham and Mphaphuli (2018) argued that gender identity in South Africa is shaped by various factors, including traditional gender roles, religious values, and societal expectations, which can either support, or constrain adolescents in their exploration of gender. The work by Palmeroni et al. (2021) revealed that for many adolescents, gender identity formation involves the internalisation of societal expectations about masculinity and femininity, which are often placed on them by family members, community leaders, teachers, and peers. Traditional African cultures, for instance, might have strict gender roles that define the expected behaviours, duties, and responsibilities of men and women. However, as South Africa becomes increasingly urbanised and influenced by global trends, many adolescents negotiate between traditional values and modern, more fluid conceptions of gender (Bhana & Shefer, 2019). For some, this creates tension, as they might feel pressured to conform to traditional roles, even when these roles conflict with their own interests or aspirations.

Adolescents who do not conform to traditional gender expectations—such as girls who engage in sports typically dominated by boys, or boys who express an interest in non-conventional activities—might face social sanctions, bullying, ostracisation and exclusion (Francis, 2021). These experiences can significantly affect their self-esteem and overall sense of identity. Graham and Mphaphuli (2018) revealed that non-conforming adolescents thus challenge community and societal norms and select a unique platform to express their individuality and develop their confidence. However, the foundational work by Duncan-Ricks (1992) reminded us that the societal pressure to conform to gender expectations can create internal conflicts that complicate a person's identity development. Francis (2021) revealed that in rural and urban settings alike, South African adolescents must navigate a landscape, where patriarchal structures often dominate. These structures not only limit opportunities for girls, but they also enforce rigid ideas of

masculinity on boys, often promoting aggression, dominance, and emotional restraint (Hendricks, 2022; Mncube et al., 2022). Such limitations can stifle the identity formation of young men who do not align with these ideals, leading to confusion or rebellion.

At the same time, gender identity is increasingly influenced by global media, social movements, and changing societal attitudes toward gender equality. The rise of gender inclusivity, feminist movements, and LGBTQ+ advocacy in South Africa has created more space for adolescents to explore and express non-conforming gender identities. However, this exploration is often resisted and condemned in conservative communities, where religious and cultural beliefs hold significant sway. Especially schools become critical spaces, where gender identities are both negotiated and contested, as they reflect the broader societal norms and conflicts present in the country.

## Cultural and ethnic identity in post-apartheid South Africa

The question of cultural and ethnic identity is deeply intertwined with South Africa's history of apartheid, which enforced racial segregation and promoted divisive ideologies that continue to affect the identities of today's youth. Adolescents grow up in a society, where their cultural and ethnic backgrounds are central to their sense of self and shaped by the ongoing process of nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa (Gradin, 2013). Ethnic and cultural identity formation during adolescence involves navigating a complex web of traditions, values, and expectations (Arndt & Naudé, 2016). For many South African adolescents, their cultural identity is tied to specific ethnic groups and these identities come with their own specific norms and expectations (Schroeder et al., 2022). Studies such as Mkhwananzi (2018) revealed that adolescents are often expected to adhere to cultural traditions and practices, which can sometimes conflict with their own interests, or the modern, more globalised identity they are developing. They might feel pressure from their family and community to uphold cultures and traditions, while they are grappling with the influences of urban life and Western values.

At the same time, the notion of a "South African" national identity emerged in the post-apartheid era, with the country's motto being "Unity in Diversity." According to Norris et al. (2008), adolescents are

frequently encouraged to embrace this national identity, which seeks to transcend the divisions of the past. However, this ideal often conflicts with the realities of cultural and racial tensions that persist in many communities. In schools, where adolescents from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds come together, these tensions can play out in ways that either foster social cohesion, or they exacerbate divisions (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2024). This might manifest as learners from one ethnic group forming cliques based on their cultural affiliations, thereby hindering cross-cultural interaction and the development of a cohesive school environment. Adolescents from coloured (mixed-race ancestry) backgrounds often find themselves caught between multiple racial categories, struggling to find a sense of belonging in a society that still grapples with its racial past (Botha et al., 2012). The study by Sibanda (2024) revealed that for many coloured adolescents, racial identity remains a source of both pride and conflict as they navigate a landscape where racial categorisation and stereotypes still hold power. Thus, while the ideals of a "rainbow nation" are celebrated, the practical realities of racial and ethnic divides still pose significant challenges to national unity (David et al., 2018). Adolescents are often left to reconcile their cultural heritage with the broader narrative of post-apartheid unity, which can lead to internal and external conflicts.

## Race and class in identity development

Race and class are two deeply intertwined factors that significantly influence identity formation in adolescence, especially in South Africa. Adolescents from low-income, mixed-race households face unique challenges in navigating these intersecting aspects of their identities (Teeger, 2015). In a society, where racial and economic inequalities remain pervasive, the process of identity formation is complicated by the realities of systemic discrimination, poverty, and unequal access to resources. According to Chetty (2014), in South African schools, race still plays an influential role in shaping how adolescents perceive themselves and how others perceive them. South Africa's apartheid system institutionalised racial hierarchies, and although the country has made strides toward dismantling these structures, racial identities continue to be a source of division and conflict (Mpisi & Alexander, 2024). For adolescents, the experience of growing up in a racially stratified society is highly formative – it can lead to increased awareness of racial differences and

the privileges or disadvantages that come with them. Thus, adolescents from historically marginalised racial groups struggle with feelings of injustice and exclusion. In contrast, white adolescents might grapple with their position of privilege and the guilt or defensiveness that can come with it (Adonis, 2018).

Class further complicates racial identity, as socio-economic status often determines access to quality education, healthcare, and other resources. Spaull (2015) argued that learners from lower-income households might experience feelings of alienation or inadequacy, especially in schools where wealthier peers have greater access to opportunities. The intersection of race and class can create a sense of double disadvantage for adolescents who come from both marginalised racial groups and impoverished backgrounds (Bayat et al., 2014). These adolescents might feel that their potential is limited by factors beyond their control, leading to frustration, resentment, and a sense of hopelessness. At the same time, class privilege can mitigate the effects of racial disadvantage for some adolescents (Soudien, 2010; Spaull, 2013). It follows that those from wealthier backgrounds might have access to better schools, extracurricular activities, and social networks that allow them to transcend some of the limitations imposed by race. Exposure to media, social movements, and political discourse shapes learners' understanding of racial and class dynamics (van der Merwe, 2017). Adolescents in South Africa are growing up in a time when conversations about race and economic inequality are prominent, with movements advocating for free education and land redistribution reflecting the broader social struggles. These narratives can empower adolescents to challenge the status quo, or it can leave them overwhelmed by the weight of history and systemic injustice.

## Religion and spirituality in identity formation

Religion and spirituality are vital dimensions of identity that often shape adolescents' values, beliefs, and sense of purpose. In South Africa, where a wide range of religious traditions coexist—including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and traditional African religions—adolescents find themselves navigating the complex landscape of religious identity in a multicultural society (Ntshangase & Mdikana, 2013). As De Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2019) revealed, religion can, therefore, be a source of comfort,

guidance, and community, but it can also lead to conflict and tension when adolescents' personal beliefs diverge from the expectations of their families or communities. For many adolescents, religious identity is closely tied to family upbringing. Brittan et al. (2013) argued that parents and caregivers often play a significant role in shaping young people's religious beliefs and practices, passing down traditions and moral values central to their own cultural identity. According to Golo et al. (2019) and Hill (2019), children are typically introduced to religion at an early age, and by the time they reach adolescence, they begin to question, affirm, or reject the religious teachings they have inherited. This process of questioning is a normal part of identity formation, as adolescents seek to develop a personal belief system that resonates with their experiences and worldviews.

In South Africa, Brittan et al. (2013) contended that the intersection of religion and culture is especially salient, as religious practices are often intertwined with ethnic and cultural identities. Examples can be drawn from learners from indigenous cultural backgrounds, including traditional religious practices, whose potential exposure to non-indigenous faiths, such as Islam and Christianity or other faiths, introduces new belief systems that challenge or complement their cultural identity. The work by Naudé and Capitano (2021) revealed that adolescents might thus feel torn between maintaining their cultural heritage and exploring new spiritual paths, which can lead to an internal conflict common in multicultural societies. This tension is further compounded by the fact that some religious traditions might impose strict gender roles or expectations that conflict with other aspects of identity, such as gender or sexual orientation. Religious communities can provide a strong sense of belonging and identity for and among adolescents who share a common faith, offering moral guidance and support during the turbulent adolescent years (Nthontho, 2018). Hemming (2011) stated that religious sites, such as churches, mosques, and temples, often play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion by promoting shared values and a sense of community. However, adolescents who belong to minority religious groups might face discrimination or exclusion, which can have an impact on their self-esteem and sense of identity.

# Intersectionality and identity

Intersectionality, a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989), offers a solid framework for understanding the complexities of identity formation during adolescence. It highlights how multiple, overlapping social identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—interact to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 2010). In the South African context, where historical, cultural, and social inequalities are deeply embedded, Gouws (2017) and Moolman (2013) contended that intersectionality becomes essential in comprehending how adolescents navigate their multifaceted identities in a rapidly changing society. Rather than viewing identity categories such as race or gender in isolation, intersectionality underscores how these identities are interconnected (Crenshaw, 1989). This appears to be central to adolescents' self-self-perception—their cultural background might shape the young person's gender identity, while their socio-economic status influences how they experience gender and race (Moagi, 2016). Thus, identity formation is not a singular, straightforward process, but it is influenced by the dynamic interplay of different identity layers—each of which can exacerbate or mitigate the challenges adolescents face in their social environments.

One significant feature of intersectionality is that it shows how adolescents belonging to multiple marginalised groups might encounter compounded disadvantages. Drawing from the work of Groenmeyer (2011), working-class girls in South Africa might experience gender-based discrimination and face obstacles because of their class status, which limits their access to resources and opportunities. Their racial or ethnic identity might further intensify these barriers as they face societal expectations and prejudices specific to their community. As Meer and Müller (2017) argued, these overlapping identities create a complex set of challenges for people as they navigate the expectations placed on them by their families, communities, and broader society. However, intersectionality also highlights the potential for resilience among adolescents who navigate multiple intersecting identities. While these young people might face distinct challenges, they also develop unique adaptive strategies that help them thrive in their social contexts (Theron & van Rensburg, 2020). For example, adolescents who come from culturally diverse backgrounds might develop the ability to navigate different social spaces with ease, using their understanding of various cultural norms to foster connections across social boundaries. This adaptability

is essential in a multicultural society such as South Africa, where social cohesion often hinges on the ability to bridge cultural divides.

Moreover, intersectionality reveals that systems of power—such as racism, patriarchy, and economic inequality—are deeply interconnected (Crenshaw, 1989). Adolescents' experiences of identity are influenced by these broader social structures, which shape their access to education, healthcare, and economic mobility (Hiss & Peck, 2020). For instance, a student's racial or gender identity might expose them to discrimination in one context but provide them with opportunities in another. Intersectionality thus helps us explain these fluid and sometimes contradictory experiences, offering a more comprehensive understanding of identity formation during adolescence (Crenshaw, 2010). Importantly, intersectionality also challenges educators, policymakers, and community leaders to consider the multiple dimensions of identity when addressing the needs of adolescents. Solutions promoting social cohesion must account for the varied and intersecting identities that shape adolescents' experiences (Chidakwa et al., 2023). Because a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective in a society as diverse as South Africa, and therefore, efforts to build social cohesion must be sensitive to the unique challenges faced by individuals whose identities sit at the intersection of multiple marginalised groups.

## Reflection questions

1. In what ways do schools reinforce or challenge existing identity-based inequalities?
2. What strategies can schools implement to bridge identity-based divides and promote more inclusive learning spaces?
3. What role does peer influence play in shaping learners' attitudes toward identity and social cohesion in schools?

# Strategies for Improving Social Cohesion in Schools

## Introduction

In the township of New Dawn, South Africa, Ikusasa Secondary School had been struggling with deepening divides among its learners. Incidents of bullying, racial tension, and conflicts between learners from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds were rampant. These challenges mirrored the broader inequalities and fractured relationships in the community. Morale was low, with many learners disengaged, parents feeling excluded, and teachers overwhelmed. When Mrs Dlamini was appointed the new principal, she knew that repairing the school's social fabric would require more than academic reforms. She believed that the key to improving social cohesion lay in building strong partnerships between the school, the parents, and the broader community. Her first step was to invite parents, local businesses, and community leaders to regular meetings, where they discussed the challenges facing the school and how they could collectively address them. This marked the beginning of a new culture of collaboration. Parents who had once felt distant from the school began participating more actively, contributing ideas, time, and resources to support their children's education. The introduction of mentorship and peer support programmes was at the heart of the transformation. Older learners were paired with younger ones, offering guidance and fostering relationships across different social and ethnic lines. These programmes helped learners form deeper connections and reduced bullying and conflict, as learners began to see each other as part of the same community, rather than as rivals.

Extracurricular activities also played a pivotal role. Sports teams and cultural clubs became spaces, where learners could bond over shared interests, breaking down race and class barriers. The school introduced conflict resolution programmes to help learners and teachers address the problems of discrimination and tension directly, further cultivating a culture of respect and understanding. Simultaneously, Mrs. Dlamini prioritised teacher support and development. She organised regular workshops on inclusive teaching methods and classroom management strategies, helping teachers create environments, where all learners felt valued and heard. This improved the relationship between teachers and learners and made classrooms more conducive to learning and growth. By focusing on community engagement, peer mentorship, and fostering a respectful, inclusive school environment, Ikusasa Secondary School became a beacon of hope for the township of New Dawn. The strengthened bonds between learners, teachers, and the community created a sense of unity and shared purpose. Through these efforts, social cohesion improved, and the school became a model of what was possible when a community came together to support its young people and their education.

Although hypothetical, the anecdote about Mrs Dlamini reveals a reality that confronts South African schools. These realities are best articulated by Monama (2022) who reported that 80 percent of schools in South Africa (mostly serving Black and coloured learners), are dysfunctional. Thus, it is not surprising that only 51.6 percent and 52.5 percent of Black and coloured youths in South Africa complete schooling, with Indian and white learners' completion rates a staggering 81.9 percent and 81.1 percent, respectively (Monama, 2022). Against this background, the present chapter explores some strategies that can be utilised to foster social cohesion and combat dysfunction in South African schools.

## Community engagement and participation

According to Nakpodia (2013), encouraging active involvement from parents, guardians, and community members in school activities is crucial for fostering a sense of collective responsibility and support for education. Schools can organise regular meetings, workshops, and collaborative projects that bring together the community to discuss educational goals and challenges. Malatji et al. (2018) revealed that such

engagement creates a support network around the school, enhancing available resources and fostering a shared commitment to learners' success. Proponents of community involvement, such as Aryeh-Adjei (2021), argued that when community members feel invested in their local schools, they are more likely to volunteer, participate in school events, and support educational initiatives, creating a cohesive environment that benefits everyone involved.

## Improved implementation of inclusive education policies

Implementing inclusive education policies is essential for creating an environment, where all learners feel valued and supported. While the number of schools in South Africa has significantly increased—thus improving chances of access to education for all, there are still problems when it comes to the implementation of inclusive education. Engelbrecht (2020) argued that owing to incoherent conceptions and understanding of their strategic intent, the policy documents and guidelines for inclusive education in South Africa have impeded the quality and relevance of the education received by learners. It is imperative that inclusive education policies foster the celebration of difference—this could mean addressing antidiscrimination measures, support for learners with disabilities, and programmes that celebrate cultural diversity (Kanyopa, 2023; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). By promoting inclusivity, schools can ensure that learners from diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed. Andrews et al. (2021) argued that promoting inclusivity enhances educational outcomes and fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect among learners. Inclusive policies help break down barriers and create a more cohesive and harmonious school environment, where every learner can thrive.

## School–community partnerships

Establishing partnerships between schools and local businesses, non-profits, and government agencies can provide additional resources and support for educational initiatives. The study by Bwana and Orodho (2014) revealed that the reluctance by the community to partner with schools stems from the way in which education systems are geared to

systematically discriminate community members based on education level. According to Limbong (2017), school-community partnerships can offer mentorship programmes, internships, and financial assistance, which can be especially beneficial for under-resourced schools. By leveraging the strengths and resources of the community, schools can enhance their educational offerings and provide learners with real-world learning experiences (Burgos & Carnero, 2020). Such collaborations also strengthen the bond between the school and the broader community, fostering a shared commitment to the success and well-being of learners.

## Extracurricular activities and programmes

Brooks et al. (2015) and Ruvalcaba et al. (2017) claimed that offering a variety of extracurricular activities that cater to different interests and abilities will help learners build their social skills, foster teamwork, and develop a sense of belonging. Activities, such as sports, arts, and cultural clubs, allow learners to connect with their peers, explore their passions, and gain confidence. Oberle et al. (2019) argued for the removal of barriers to learners' involvement in extracurricular activities. These programmes are instrumental in creating a positive and inclusive school culture, where learners feel valued and engaged. Brooks et al. (2015) revealed that extracurricular activities also enhance the overall educational experience and contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals, who are more likely to contribute positively to their communities.

## Peer support and mentorship programmes

Creating peer support networks and mentorship programmes enhances social cohesion by providing learners with role models and support systems. Older learners or community members can mentor younger learners, offering guidance and fostering positive relationships. Mentorship programmes also promote intergenerational understanding and collaboration, strengthening the social fabric of the school community and contributing to a supportive and inclusive educational environment (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Whitlock, 2024). Chinyama et al. (2020) argued that schools can adopt peer-led programmes because of the shortages in learner wellness services. These programmes can help learners navigate academic and personal challenges, build confidence,

and develop a sense of belonging. Evidence from Carter et al. (2014) and Visser (2004) revealed that peer support programmes foster strong interpersonal connections by encouraging collaboration, empathy, and shared learning experiences among participants. These programmes create inclusive environments, where individuals feel valued and supported, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting mutual respect. Such initiatives contribute significantly to enhancing social cohesion within communities by building trust and understanding across diverse groups.

## Conflict resolution and anti-bullying programmes

Implementing conflict resolution strategies and anti-bullying programmes is vital for creating a safe, inclusive school environment that enhances social cohesion. Msila (2012) emphasised that when schools equip teachers and learners with conflict resolution skills, they empower individuals to address disputes constructively and prevent conflicts from escalating, fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding. Effective anti-bullying initiatives that prioritise empathy, inclusivity, and positive behaviour significantly reduce incidents of bullying and discrimination, and they help to establish a shared sense of belonging among learners. As Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019) pointed out, social bonds within the school community are strengthened when learners feel safe and respected, which leads to greater unity, improved well-being, and better academic outcomes. However, the success of these programmes hinges on their consistent and thoughtful implementation, as well as ongoing support from the entire school community.

## Cultural competence training for educators

Cultural competence training for teachers and school staff is vital for improving their ability to meet the learners' diverse needs and foster a more inclusive educational environment. While such training can enhance communication, reduce biases, and promote inclusivity, Smith et al. (2023) reminded us that its effectiveness often depends on the depth of the training and the commitment of trainees to continuous learning. The work by Salinas and Guerrero (2018) warned us that superficial programmes risk tokenising diversity, rather than fostering true understanding. Moreover,

without institutional support and ongoing professional development, cultural competence training might fail to bring about lasting change in classroom practices (Sibanda & Majola, 2023). To cultivate respect and celebrate diversity, these programmes must be comprehensive, regularly evaluated, and integrated into the broader school culture, requiring sustained effort from educators and administrators. Educators and school principals must become role models, reflecting their engagement with lifelong learning and skills enhancement, and their entrenched belief in gender, racial and socio-economic equality of everyone at school.

## Parent-teacher collaboration

Effective parent–teacher collaboration is also essential for fostering social cohesion within schools, as it strengthens communication, encourages joint problem-solving, and nurtures a shared commitment to learner success. However, Myende and Nhlumayo (2022) contended that the inclusivity of these collaborations is often challenged by disparities in socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, leading to uneven levels of parent engagement. In some cases, more affluent and vocal parents dominate interactions, while the perspectives of underrepresented groups are overlooked, perpetuating existing inequities and weakening the overall sense of community (Bang, 2018). Rusnak (2018) recommended that to truly foster social cohesion, schools must actively create spaces where all parents, especially those from marginalised communities, feel welcomed and empowered to participate. This can be achieved by offering flexible meeting times, providing translation services, and proactively reaching out to underrepresented families (Sianturi et al., 2023). When parent–teacher collaborations are inclusive and representative, they create a collective sense of responsibility for learners' outcomes and strengthen the bonds between families, educators, and the broader school community, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and cohesive educational environment.

## Safe and inclusive school environments

Creating safe and inclusive school environments is critical for promoting social cohesion; yet, achieving this is often more challenging than it appears (Stevens et al., 2001). While maintaining clean, well-equipped

facilities and enforcing policies that promote safety and inclusivity are essential, Mabasa (2014) reported that these measures alone do not guarantee a positive school culture. Deep-rooted problems, such as systemic discrimination, implicit bias, and exclusionary practices can undermine efforts to create a cohesive environment (Sayed & Motala, 2012). Scholars such as Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2017) argued that schools must go beyond surface-level solutions, addressing these underlying problems through sustained, comprehensive reforms by prioritising learners' well-being, fostering meaningful inclusivity, and creating a culture of respect and belonging. Without addressing these deeper-seated problems, efforts to build social cohesion risk become merely cosmetic.

## Promotion of civic and ethical education

Incorporating civic and ethical education into the curriculum is vital for fostering learners' understanding of social cohesion and their roles as active, responsible citizens. However, as Youniss (2011) and Campbell (2019) revealed, these programmes often face challenges of an inadequate curriculum design, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of real-world relevance. If not delivered effectively, civic and ethical education might be reduced to rote learning of abstract concepts, rather than engaging learners in meaningful discussions and actions that promote social cohesion (Beutal, 2012; Murphy, 2007). Schools must invest in well-developed curricula, continuous teacher training, and experiential learning opportunities to ensure that civic education goes beyond theory by equipping learners with all the necessary skills and support to navigate and contribute to an increasingly diverse and complex society.

## Addressing socio-economic inequities

Addressing socio-economic inequities within education is essential for creating a more equitable environment that fosters social cohesion, but it requires a comprehensive and sustained approach (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). Granted, providing financial support and resources to disadvantaged learners is a critical first step; yet, Gerdin et al. (2020) contended that such efforts often fall short if they fail to address the broader systemic problems, such as poverty, unequal access to quality education, and structural barriers within the educational system. Francis

and Webster (2019) and Khumalo (2013) warned that many initiatives risk being reactive rather than proactive, as they were offering temporary solutions, rather than addressing the root causes of inequality. Education advocates must thus lobby for comprehensive policies that target both in-school disparities and external factors that include housing, healthcare, and social services if they wish to create meaningful, long-lasting change that fosters true social cohesion.

## Teacher support and professional development

Supporting teachers through professional development opportunities is key to creating cohesive classroom environments, but Omodan and Tsotetsi (2020) reminded us that the impact of such initiatives is often limited by time constraints, insufficient resources, and a lack of institutional support, or the teacher's lack of interest to spend their private time on training. Olawale (2024) highlighted that professional development in inclusive teaching practices, classroom management, and cultural competence must go beyond short-term workshops, embedding these principles into everyday practice through sustained learning and mentorship. From the work of Adu (2015) and Nkambule (2020), it becomes clear that schools must ensure that all teachers receive adequate resources and support to implement what they learn, as under-resourced educators might struggle to maintain inclusive, effective classrooms. Xaso et al. (2017) warned that without these systemic changes, professional development alone might fall short of fostering the social cohesion needed within schools and classrooms.

## Reflection questions

1. What specific strategies have proven effective in fostering social cohesion within diverse school environments?
2. How can schools actively promote inclusivity and tolerance among learners from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds?
3. How can school leadership and governance contribute to creating a culture of unity and inclusion?

# Learning Challenges in South Africa

## Introduction

In the rural village of Ndlovu, South Africa, education was a daily struggle for learners and teachers alike. The local school, Emthonjeni Primary, sat on the edge of a dusty road, its crumbling walls and broken windows bearing the marks of years of neglect. Inside, overcrowded classrooms buzzed with the voices of eager learners, but the challenges they faced were overwhelming. For 12-year-old Thandi, the journey to school alone was an ordeal. She walked nearly six kilometres daily, crossing dangerous fields and rivers to make it to class. When she arrived, often exhausted, she had to squeeze behind a small desk together with two other children. Her teacher, Mrs Mkhize, did her best to manage the classroom of over 60 learners, but with limited resources, outdated textbooks, and no access to technology, effective learning was difficult to achieve. The language barrier made things even more difficult; Thandi spoke isiZulu at home, but the lessons were taught in English, a language she had only begun to grasp. Many of the other learners, like Thandi, faced similar hurdles. Some had to deal with hunger, as their families could not afford regular meals, making it challenging for them to concentrate during lessons. Others struggled with poor sanitation facilities and the long distances they travelled, which sometimes caused them to miss school altogether. In winter, the cold classrooms became nearly unbearable, while the stifling heat made it difficult to focus in summer.

Even when learners made it to the school, the teacher shortages often meant lessons were rushed, with little individual attention for those who needed extra help. Mrs Mkhize was burdened with heavy

workloads, leaving her little time to offer the support learners such as Thandi desperately needed. The lack of support did not only affect the learners—it also took a toll on the teachers, leading to burnout and frustration. Despite their enthusiasm, learners also grappled with outdated teaching methods and a shortage of textbooks. Mrs. Mkhize was dedicated, but she had not received any professional development in years. She knew her learners needed more modern, interactive lessons to help them engage with the material, but she was limited in what she could provide without having received further training and resources. As Thandi sat in class one day, staring out the window, she dreamed of a future, where learning would not feel like an uphill battle. She longed for a school with better facilities, more teachers, and resources that made learning come alive. Though shared by many, her dreams were often overshadowed by the harsh reality that education in South Africa still faced immense obstacles.

The anecdotal story above reveals some harsh realities of learning challenges confronting the education project in South Africa. According to Hall (2024), in 2022, of the 9.9 million young people aged 15–24 in South Africa, 34 percent (3.4 million) were neither working nor enrolled in any education institution, such as a school, university or college. These obscenely high numbers reveal concerns about the perpetuation of poverty and inequality, and the possible implications of a large "idle" youth population being drawn toward risky behaviour, as well as the lack of social cohesion, or the safety of communities (Hall, 2024). Thus, this chapter explores the learning challenges in South Africa, delving into the problems of language barriers, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and the impact of poverty on education. It highlights the daily struggles of learners and educators alike, painting a picture of the systemic difficulties that make accessing quality education a significant challenge for many in the country.

## Medium of instruction problems

South Africa's history of segregation and the privileging of English and Afrikaans as the only languages of teaching and learning beyond primary schooling make the post-apartheid period a complex one, especially in light of the commitment to multilingualism in the 12 official languages (Vaccaro, 2022; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). While tremendous

strides have been made in expressing the constitutional right of every learner to receive primary education in a language of their choice, at the university level, the development and implementation of inclusive language policies have been dismal at best (Magocha et al., 2019; Mutongoza et al., 2023).

It has been argued that using home languages to explain concepts helps learners better understand vexing concepts. According to Bhatti, Shamsudin and Said (2018), educators who utilise home languages to supplement explanations of concepts have been known to be more efficient than those who do not. A case can be made for the context of South Africa, where results have amply demonstrated that it is Black learners who mostly struggle to succeed at the university level because of their failure to understand concepts when they are explained in English or Afrikaans (Magocha et al., 2019). Learners have been known to praise the use of home languages in learning contexts because this gives them a chance to succeed and does away with the unfair advantage wielded by native speakers of English or Afrikaans (Alang & Idris, 2018; Bhatti et al., 2018). In other words, using home languages provides learners equal chances and makes assessment more objective (Maluleke, 2019; Manel et al., 2019). Sadly, while it is beneficial to learners to be taught in their home languages, the world of work  dictates what languages learners will have to be fluent in to acquire jobs and become proficient in.

## Dangerous schools: Precarious classrooms

The Bill of Rights and the Constitution of South Africa sets out fundamental human rights, which include the right to basic education. This right must not only be guaranteed, but it has to be realised holistically to satisfy the educational requirements of all learners. This occurs when the following are addressed in a comprehensive and equal manner: access, quality, and safety (Muthige, 2023). Van Jaarsveld (2008) revealed that South African schools are degenerating into arenas for violence, where learners and teachers alike feel unsafe, regardless of the security measures that have been implemented to enhance safety, for example, security guards, perimeter fencing, and surveillance, among others. The configurations of such violence have shown a wide range of occurrence and impact on learners, educators, and support staff. They have also included vandalism (infrastructure destruction, theft, and

so forth), and violence against self (Botha & Zwane, 2021; Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2024).

The results of the study by Masitsa (2011) revealed that teachers and learners are not safe in their schools, whether before, during or after school hours. The causes of a lack of safety in these schools resides within and beyond the schools, implying that learners and educators are sometimes also the culprits (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014; Nako & Muthukrishna, 2018). Among the most dominant problems educators face is that they are not adequately equipped to counter violent incidents; thus, they have reacted similarly violently and obnoxiously (Davids & Waghid, 2016). The aftermaths of violence against educators are severe and have a negative bearing not only on educators, but also on learners, taxpayers and school systems alike (Baruth & Mokoena, 2016). Many educators have reverted to corporal punishment, while many learners bully, tease, and inappropriately treat other learners, while some even assault, rape and murder other learners.

## Unacceptable schools: Poor sanitation and nutrition

The study by Hlahla et al. (2023) highlighted a significantly high prevalence of stunting, underweight and thinness among rural school children compared to their urban counterparts. School meal programmes are implemented to fill gaps in macronutrient and micronutrient deficiencies for learners (Jomaa et al., 2011), and they have been praised for improving learners' concentration, attendance, and enrolment (Kristjansson et al., 2016). However, a study by Mafugu (2021) revealed that chronic late payment of food suppliers and inadequate food-handler training affect the quality and quantity of the meals. In some instances, learners are reported to get sick after eating these meals, and sometimes religious/cultural factors are also generally overlooked in the programmes (Chelule & Ranwedzi, 2022; Mtimkulu & Kwatubana, 2023). The study revealed that 75.7 percent of the schools prepare food in structures that do not comply with the prescribed health regulations. The study on personal hygiene revealed that 61.4 percent of the schools do not provide protective clothing to the food handlers who prepare food for learners. The study on food transportation revealed that 100 percent of the vehicles used to deliver food in schools do not comply with the standards and the hygiene requirements prescribed by the health regulations.

The study on environmental hygiene revealed that 95.7 percent of the schools do not provide toiletries in their latrines, most of which are not waterborne. The study further revealed that 87 percent of the schools do not provide soap for hand washing in their latrines.

## Multi-grading, teacher shortages and workloads

Multi-grade teaching is seen as a means to stem the effects of teacher shortages and contribute toward achieving inclusive education. However, the nature of the interface between multi-grade pedagogy and sustainable development is largely unexplored, and the school factors that constitute potential threats to achieving sustainable development remain unidentified (Brown, 2008; Taole, 2014). Some of the challenges associated with multi-grading in South Africa include the perceived uncaring attitude of the DBE, the unpreparedness and lack of resources, the lack of support from parents, and poor curriculum socialisation for multi-grading (du Plessis & Subramanien, 2014; Mthethwa et al., 2023). It is, therefore, unsurprising that teachers often report feelings of uncertainty and isolation in their teaching of multi-grade classrooms (Taole, 2014).

Another serious problem is one of teachers being hired but not actually teaching because of government action or inaction in South Africa. Hosking (2000) described the problem and explored two aspects: (1) non-enforcement of employment contracts with teachers and (2) shortages of certain subject teachers caused by inflexibility in the remuneration structure of teachers. According to Mlambo and Adetiba (2020), because of many educators either leaving their profession or South Africa, the country has suffered a reduction in skilled and experienced teachers, and this has resulted in poor education quality, which is most pronounced in rural–urban differences and poor curriculum coverage. Matthew (2017) reported that thousands of teachers in South African schools are either underqualified or unqualified. In fact, Le Roux (2023) concluded that because of a lack of qualified teachers, only 20 percent of children in South Africa receive education that meets the local and international standards. While there has been an upsurge in the recruitment of migrant teachers, the reality is that their tenure is not stable.

# Inaccessible schools: Punishing distances to schools

Assuming that schools primarily serve the children living in communities around them, the ideal indicator to measure physical access to a school would be the distance from the child's household to the nearest school. The study by Muthige (2023) reported that some learners walk for more than 30 kilometres to and from school, which takes about 3-4 hours daily. In post-apartheid South Africa, the interface between the geographical legacy of apartheid and post-apartheid educational policies has strongly shaped the geography of education. Apartheid policy reserved central and suburban areas for white residents only and provided these areas with well-resourced and generally well-performing public schools (de Kadt et al., 2019).

By contrast, the Black population was forced into densely populated outlying areas, termed townships, served primarily by poorly resourced schools offering an intentionally lower quality of education (Southall, 2016). Notwithstanding enormous governmental efforts toward educational equity in the post-apartheid era, the differentiation of public education in suburban and township areas persists. Overall, children attending suburban schools continue to outperform their peers at township schools (Msila, 2009; Hill, 2016), despite the challenges faced by Black children in often culturally unwelcoming and sometimes overtly hostile environments in suburban schools (Ndimande, 2016). The public narrative that former white schools provide higher quality education and more opportunities to children than those based in the townships has been solid and persistent throughout the post-apartheid era and continues to date (Msila, 2009; Ndimande, 2016).

# Resource scarcity crises

Another critical challenge that continues to impede learning in many South African schools is the acute shortage of educational resources. Mkhize and Davids (2023) revealed that this scarcity encompasses essential materials that include textbooks, writing tools, and digital resources, foundational for effective learning. Regrettably, many schools, especially those in rural and underfunded areas, operate with limited or outdated resources, forcing educators to devise makeshift solutions to deliver lessons (Munje & Maarman, 2017). As argued by Netshidzivhani

and Molaudzi (2024), a prominent issue is that learners are often required to share textbooks, leading to restricted access to information and difficulties in completing assignments independently.

Studies by Kafu-Quvane (2021) and Munje and Jita (2020) revealed that a chronic lack of access to technology further deepens the divide between learners from wealthier schools and those from poorer communities, with the latter in most cases unable to access the internet or digital tools necessary for modern learning. This resource disparity reinforces cycles of underachievement and limits the learners' ability to engage with current educational methods (Chere & Hlalele, 2014), including the introduction of e-learning and multimedia content, which are increasingly becoming central to the global educational landscape. Most of these rural or underfunded schools do not yet have access to electricity; they do not have smartboards, internet access or funded data bundles. Consequently, as Howie, Scherman and Venter (2008) demonstrated, resource scarcity results in learners from disadvantaged schools being inordinately denied equitable opportunities to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills vital for success in contemporary society.

## Teaching on empty tanks: Teacher quality and training

The disparity in teacher training and professional development significantly affects the quality of education in South Africa. According to Nkambule (2020) and van Aswegen, Elmore and Youngs (2023), many teachers, especially those teaching in rural and low-income areas, receive inadequate training, leaving them ill-equipped to handle the diverse challenges that arise in their classrooms. In some cases, teachers might lack sufficient subject knowledge, especially in Mathematics and Science, leading to poor educational outcomes for learners, as argued by Mutseekwa et al. (2024) and Olawale (2024). According to Xaso, Galloway and Adu (2017), the absence of continuous professional development opportunities exacerbates this problem, as teachers cannot stay abreast of new pedagogical techniques, curriculum changes, or technological advancements in education without lifelong learning.

Teachers in rural areas are especially disadvantaged, as they often lack access to professional development programmes, mentorship, or peer collaboration (Govender et al., 2023; Mpahla & Okeke, 2015). This gap in training creates a downward cycle, where learners, already struggling with

language barriers and poverty, are further disadvantaged by the poor quality of instructions they receive (Okeke & Mphahla, 2016). This calls for more robust teacher training programmes that are comprehensive and ongoing, highlighting to teachers the necessity to be trained and offering them the opportunity to update their skills regularly and thereby improve the quality of education for their learners (Mdodana-Zide & Mokhele-Makgwala, 2021).

## The void of parental involvement

The lack of parents in learners' education is also an undeniable challenge in South African education. In many South African schools, especially those in impoverished communities, parental involvement is severely limited, thus significantly diminishing the learners' prospects of success (Sedibe, 2012; Segoe & Bischoff, 2019). Studies conducted by Munje and Mncube (2018), Sianturi, Lee and Cumming (2023), and Sibanda (2021) revealed that several factors contribute to this lack of engagement, including economic hardships, low levels of parental education, and cultural factors. Many parents work long hours in low-paying jobs or must seek employment far from home, leaving little time or energy for them to become engaged in their children's schooling (Adelabu & Mncube, 2023).

Some parents also lack the educational background to support their children academically, creating an environment, where children must navigate the complexities of their schooling with little to no guidance at home (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Segoe and Bisschoff (2019) also stated that this absence of involvement often leads to a disconnection between school and home life, where learners might struggle with homework, lack motivation, or even skip school altogether. However, the level of parental involvement has been shown to correlate with learners' success, meaning that in communities, where such engagement is low, learners often suffer academically and socially (Manilal & Jairam, 2023). Therefore, schools and government initiatives must strive to bridge this gap by creating programmes that encourage and facilitate greater parental involvement, which can significantly enhance learner outcomes. Such initiatives should be flexible regarding the place and time they are offered to accommodate parents and teachers.

# Socio-economic barriers to learning

Socio-economic status plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes in South Africa. Socio-economic factors include poverty, unemployment, and household instability, which create significant barriers to learning for many learners (Mazzoli Smith & Todd, 2019). According to Spaull (2013), children from low-income households often come to school hungry, lacking basic necessities such as uniforms, stationery, or even shoes, and this makes it difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. For some, the instability of their home environment, exacerbated by unemployment, substance abuse, or violence, further detracts from their ability to succeed in school. Chikoko and Mthembu (2021) contended that the financial strain on families also means that some learners are pressurised to take care of all household chores, or contribute to household income through part-time work, leaving them with little time or energy for their studies.

   Spaull (2015) stated that socio-economic challenges are especially pronounced in rural and township schools, where learners often face many additional hurdles. These include poor infrastructure, long distances to school, and overcrowded classrooms. The cumulative effect of these socio-economic pressures has a significant impact on their academic performance and the learners' ability to remain in school, resulting in high drop-out rates (Gradin, 2013). This is exasperated by rural communities, where harvesting seasons often mean that children are kept out of school. As advised by Nortje (2017), addressing poverty-related challenges requires an inclusive approach involving government intervention, community support, and initiatives to alleviate poverty and promote educational equity.

# Silent struggles: Mental health in education

In the context of South African schools, mental health remains an often overlooked challenge that significantly affects learners' success. According to Mfidi (2017), many adolescent learners face psychological distress caused by a range of factors, including exposure to violence, physical and substance abuse, and trauma, both at home and within their communities. Hendricks (2019) contended that these experiences can lead to a range of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic

stress disorder, all of which impede a learner's ability to focus, engage with schoolwork, and succeed academically. In many communities, rape by family members or even by peers, and teenage pregnancies add to the physical and emotional trauma of many learners and significantly impede their potential success, thereby continuing the downward spiral of poverty. As Woolf, Bantjes and Kagee (2015) demonstrated, the stigma around mental health further complicates the situation, as learners might be reluctant to seek help or even acknowledge their struggles.

Pillay, Patel and Setlhare-Kajee (2023) argued that compounding this challenge is the limited access to mental health services within the school system. Mahwai (2020) revealed that while some urban schools might have access to counsellors and psychologists, most rural and under-resourced schools do not, leaving learners with improvised support to manage their mental health. Osuafor (2021) and Plüddemann et al. (2014) reported that many learners disengage from school, revert to frequent absenteeism, or drop out of school altogether. Against this background, Mahwai (2020) recommended that it is essential that the education system in South Africa integrates mental health support into its framework, providing not only direct support services, but also training teachers to be able to recognise and address mental health problems in their learners.

## Reflection questions

1. How do systemic factors such as poverty, inequality, and infrastructure deficits contribute to persistent learning challenges in South African schools?
2. What are the impacts of language barriers, teacher shortages, and unsafe school environments on learners' academic performance and overall well-being?
3. How can educational policies and interventions be reimagined to address these learning challenges and promote equitable access to quality education for all learners in South Africa?

# Toward Sustainable Learner Success in South Africa

## Introduction

Improving the performance of education in South Africa and achieve an enhanced success level among all learners, irrespective of the race, gender or socio-economic background, requires a multipronged approach that addresses a range of socio-economic, educational, and community-based factors. This chapter explores strategies that can be implemented to enhance the learners' success levels, focusing on the roles of government policy, educational practices, community engagement, teacher development, and socio-economic support. Through addressing these areas in a thorough and comprehensive manner, South Africa can create an educational environment that fosters the success and well-being of all learners.

## Government policy and support

We argue that effective government policy and support are foundational to improving learners' levels of success in South Africa. Government must prioritise education funding, ensuring that all schools are functional, and have the adequate resources to provide quality education. This includes investing in infrastructure, learning materials, and technology to create conducive learning environments. South Africa should be able to pride herself that no children have to be deprived of proper classrooms, safe sanitation, electricity and at least solar-powered internet access.

All teachers should ensure that they are properly trained to cope with modern education demands. The authors recommend developing equitable funding models to ensure that schools in disadvantaged areas receive the necessary support to address historical disparities. Policies that promote inclusivity and equity are also crucial. The authors align this proposition with Hendricks and Thengela (2020), who believed that government should implement and enforce policies that eliminate discrimination based on race, gender, disability, and socio-economic status. According to Brooks et al. (2015) inclusive education policies that support learners with disabilities and special needs must be strengthened, ensuring that all learners have access to quality education. Policies encouraging community participation and accountability in education can enhance transparency and responsiveness, leading to better educational outcomes. However, even the best policies and strategies will come to naught if the infrastructures of schools and the training of teachers are not improved urgently.

## Enhancing educational practices

We contend that improving educational practices is essential for fostering learners' level of success. Curriculum development should focus on creating relevant and engaging content that meets the needs of diverse learners. In line with Kafu-Quvane (2021), we recommend incorporating practical and experiential learning opportunities to make education more meaningful and help learners apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. One can also consider Hendricks and Mutongoza (2023) who argued that integrating technology into the curriculum must enhance learning experiences and prepare learners for the digital economy. As Olawale (2023) argued, assessment practices should be reformed to emphasise formative assessments that provide ongoing feedback and support for learners' learning. We advise that summative assessments, while important, should not be the sole measure of learners' success. Teachers should be trained in differentiated instruction techniques to cater to learners' diverse learning styles and abilities (Maphumulo & Biccard, 2024; Zerai et al., 2023). This approach would aid towards ensuring that all learners were to receive the support they need to succeed, regardless of their background.

# Community engagement and participation

We are convinced that active community engagement and participation are vital for creating a supportive educational environment. According to Aryeh-Adjei (2021), schools should establish strong partnerships with parents, local businesses, non-profit organisations, and government agencies to create a support network for learners. This is because such collaborations can facilitate communication and collaboration between parents and schools, which would also help address a range of the problems affecting learners' success (Kelley et al., 2020). As demonstrated, community-based programmes providing mentorship, tutoring, and extracurricular activities can enhance learners' engagement and motivation. We believe that these programmes can offer additional academic support and opportunities for personal and social development (Olawale et al., 2022). Engaging community members in school governance and decision-making processes can also foster a sense of ownership and accountability, leading to more effective and responsive educational practices.

# Teacher development and support

We believe that investing in teachers' ongoing development and support is critical for improving learners' success. Teachers are the primary drivers of educational quality, and their skills and well-being directly affect learners' outcomes. In alignment with studies like Okeke and Mphahla (2016) and Wabule (2016), we recommend professional development programmes that provide ongoing training in effective teaching practices, classroom management, and inclusive education strategies. Teachers should be equipped with the tools and skills to address the diverse needs of their learners and create positive learning environments. However, providing the necessary support and resources for teachers is equally important. For some time now, studies have demonstrated that for learners to access quality education, stakeholders must ensure manageable class sizes, access to teaching materials, and collaboration and peer support opportunities (Lee & Zuze, 2011; Wadesango et al., 2016). The support offered to teachers must also address teachers' workload and stress; this should be achieved through supportive policies and practices to improve teacher retention and effectiveness (Vazi et al., 2013). Recognising and rewarding outstanding teaching performance

and outcomes can also motivate educators and promote a culture of excellence.

## Addressing socio-economic inequities

In alignment with Spaull (2013), we are convinced that socio-economic factors play a significant role in learners' success, and addressing these inequities is essential for creating a level playing field. According to Faber et al. (2014) and Motala and Carel (2019), government should implement policies and programmes that support disadvantaged learners financially through scholarships, bursaries, and free school meals. Ismail et al. (2022) revealed that ensuring that all learners have access to basic necessities, including nutrition, healthcare, and safe housing, can improve their ability to succeed academically. From the conclusions drawn by Hawkins and Kim (2012), one can deduce that schools should offer support services that address the broader needs of learners, including counselling, health services, and social services. We believe these services can help learners overcome personal and family challenges that might affect their education. Additionally, Steyn and Vlachos (2011) advised that community-based initiatives that provide vocational training and employment opportunities for parents can enhance the economic stability of families, indirectly supporting learners' success.

## Fostering a positive school culture

We believe that creating a positive school culture is fundamental to improving learners' success. As such, schools should promote values of respect, inclusivity, and collaboration, ensuring that all learners feel valued and supported, as argued by Moolman et al. (2020). Teachers and principals will have to serve as role models for learners, exhibiting respect and tolerance of diverse colleagues and learners. Anti-bullying programmes, conflict resolution training, and initiatives celebrating diversity can contribute to a safe and welcoming school environment. According to Hunt (2014) and Grant (2015), learner voice and agency should be encouraged, allowing learners to participate in decision-making processes and take ownership of their learning. In line with Shikalepo and Kandjengo (2021), we recommend promoting learner leadership development programmes and healthy platforms for learners' feedback

to foster a sense of empowerment and responsibility. Finally, celebrating learners' achievements, both academic and non-academic, can boost motivation and self-esteem, contributing to a positive school culture.

## Leveraging technology and innovation

We are convinced that incorporating technology and innovation into education can significantly enhance learners' success. A study conducted by Meladi and Awolusi (2019) demonstrated that digital tools and resources can provide personalised learning experiences, support differentiated instruction, and facilitate access to information and knowledge. Thus, schools and relevant education stakeholders should invest in the technology infrastructure, which is rapidly being updated, to ensure all learners can access digital devices and the internet (Kafu-Quvane, 2021). In this post-Covid-19 pandemic era, blended learning models that combine in-person and online instruction can offer flexibility and cater to diverse learning preferences (Graham et al., 2024), as long as the schools have the necessary access to electricity and the internet, as well as the ability to assist poorer learners with data bundles. García-Martínez et al. (2022) revealed that technology can similarly support teachers' professional development through online training programmes and collaborative platforms. We believe that innovative approaches to education, such as project-based learning and gamification, can make learning more engaging and relevant for learners.

## Monitoring and evaluation

We recommend that the Department of Education needs to regularly monitor and evaluate the country's educational practices and policies to ensure continuous improvement. Brinkhuis and Maris (2019) encouraged schools to implement systems for tracking learners' progress and identifying areas for intervention and support. Data-driven decision-making can help educators and policymakers identify effective strategies and address any identified problem areas promptly. Loima (2019) and Mandouit (2018) stated that feedback from learners, parents, teachers, and community members should be incorporated into the evaluation process, ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered. Additionally, independent evaluations by external agencies can provide objective

assessments of the quality and effectiveness of the delivered education. We believe that schools can create a dynamic and responsive educational environment, enabling, furthering and supporting learners' success by continuously assessing and refining their practices.

## Reflection questions

1. What key interventions and support systems are most effective in enhancing learners' success across diverse educational contexts in South Africa?
2. How can schools, educators, and communities collaborate to overcome the barriers hindering learners' success, especially in disadvantaged communities?
3. What roles do curriculum reform, teacher development, and learner-centred pedagogies play in fostering sustained academic achievement and holistic learner success?

# 8

# Conclusion: The Road Ahead

A s we bring this book to its close, we find ourselves at the threshold of challenge and opportunity. The exploration of social cohesion and learners' success in South Africa reveals a complex landscape, where the legacies of apartheid and systemic inequality continue to shape the educational experiences of millions of young people. However, despite these persistent obstacles— disparities in educational outcomes across race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—we continue to nurture a dream: a dream of equal access to education and equal prospects of success for all learners, irrespective of their background.

This dream, while aspirational, is not without foundation. It is rooted in the belief that education has the power to transform not only individuals but entire societies. It is grounded in the knowledge that with the appropriate policies, practices, and commitment by all stakeholders, the education system can be a powerful tool for social justice, offering every child the chance to fulfil their potential. For South Africa, a country still healing from the wounds of its past, this vision of educational equity and social cohesion must be more than merely a goal—it is a moral imperative.

The future we envision is one, where classrooms become spaces of possibility, where diversity is acknowledged and celebrated. In these classrooms, learners from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds sit side by side, engaging in a curriculum that reflects both their own experiences and the wider world. In this ideal, education becomes the great equaliser, providing each learner with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to succeed, irrespective of their background. All children should be able to reach their optimal potential.

However, pursuing this dream requires more than rhetoric—it demands action. Teachers, as the frontline workers in education, must be equipped with the technical skills to deliver effective instruction and the cultural competence to navigate the diverse realities of their learners' lives. Continuous professional development should be centred on inclusivity, fostering in educators a deep understanding of the histories, identities, and needs of the learners they serve. Teachers must be supported in their efforts to create nurturing environments where every learner feels seen, valued, and capable of success. Their own attitudes must embrace such positive change for themselves and all learners.

Moreover, the curriculum itself must be re-imagined to reflect the plurality of South Africa's society. It should be expansive and inclusive, offering learners the opportunity to critically engage with the complexities of their country's past, while it must also prepare them for the future. This requires not only a shift in content but also in pedagogy. Learners must be encouraged to think critically, to ask questions, and to see themselves as active participants in shaping the world around them.

At the same time, we must address the structural inequalities that continue to plague the education system. The legacy of apartheid remains evident in the vast disparities between schools, with wealthier, better-resourced schools continuing to offer superior educational outcomes compared to their underfunded counterparts. Closing this gap is essential to achieve genuine equity in education. This will require significant investment in infrastructure and social support systems that ensure learners can attend school and succeed, regardless of their home circumstances. Where private schools and better-resourced schools (partially funded by parents) will not need additional funding to carry on providing superior education, the rural and underfunded schools will need to be resourced to first of all reach the basic requirements of physical classrooms, sanitation and electricity, and the teachers will need to be trained to be able to offer quality education.

Social cohesion must be the foundation upon which this educational transformation is built. True social cohesion means more than just the absence of conflict; it requires active efforts to build trust, collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose across all levels of society. In schools, this means fostering a culture of inclusion, where every learner, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background, feels a sense of belonging. It means recognising and addressing how violence, crime,

and lawlessness disrupt the learning environment and that it is vital to replace these forces with systems of clear rules, discipline, support, justice, and care.

The dream of a unified, equitable education system is not only about ensuring that all learners have access to the same opportunities, but it also means that all learners must have an equal chance of reaching their own optimal success. This means addressing the broader societal factors—such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment—that create barriers to learning. It means understanding that a learner's success is not only about their performance in the classroom, but also about the support they receive outside of it. Communities must come together to provide learners with the resources and care to thrive, from adequate nutrition and healthcare to emotional and psychological support.

As we envision this future, we are reminded that the road ahead is long and fraught with difficulty. However, we are also reminded of the power of hope and determination. The dream of an equitable and cohesive education system is not an unattainable ideal; it is a goal that can be realised through sustained effort, collective action, and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of education.

In this closing reflection, let us reaffirm our commitment to this vision. Let us resolve to continue working toward a South Africa, where the barriers of race, class, and privilege no longer determine a child's future. Let us remember that every step we take toward equity in education brings us closer to a society, where every learner has the opportunity to succeed and where each individual's potential contributes to the nation's collective strength and unity.

The dream of equal access and equal success for all learners is not only a vision for the future, but it is a blueprint for a more just and cohesive society. As we move forward, let us hold fast to this dream, knowing that it can become a reality with the right commitment and action. The future of South Africa—and of the generations to come—depends on it.

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# Index

Education and Social Cohesion Towards Sustainable Learner Success in South Africa offers a thought-provoking and deeply researched exploration of the critical intersection between education and social cohesion in one of the world's most historically complex societies. South Africa's education system continues to grapple with the legacies of apartheid, socioeconomic inequality, and systemic barriers that hinder learner success. This book provides an insightful and compelling analysis of these challenges while offering actionable strategies to foster inclusive, resilient, and thriving educational environments.

Drawing from extensive research, case studies, and real-world narratives, the book examines key themes such as the lingering effects of racial and economic disparities in education, the role of identity in shaping learners' experiences, and the urgent need for equitable policies. It delves into pressing issues such as gender inequality, youth empowerment, poverty, violence, and access to quality education—factors that profoundly impact social cohesion and sustainable development.

With a balanced blend of academic rigor and practical relevance, this book serves as an essential resource for educators, policymakers, researchers, and all stakeholders invested in transforming education in South Africa. It challenges readers to critically engage with the realities of the education system while envisioning pathways toward a more just and cohesive society where every learner has the opportunity to succeed.

For those seeking to understand and contribute to the future of education in South Africa—and beyond—this book is an indispensable guide to building a more unified and equitable world through the power of learning.