Social Justice in Primary Education in Kwa Zulu-Natal: Tensions between Ideal and Reality

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to explore the status of social justice in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province reflecting on the ideal versus the reality on the ground.

Methodology: The research adopted a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse the findings. The data were collected through interviews and document review. A sample of 27 purposively selected information rich participants was studied from Tier 1 primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province.

Findings: The study reveals that in primary schools in the province, improvements in school enrolment exist which is a sign of accessible education. However, institutional and systemic barriers to social justice in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province remain prominent and, making realisation of social justice elusive. Efforts to reduce inequality, promote accessible, quality, and relevant education, and ensure equitable distribution of educational resources are still weak. Inadequate curriculum, low funding, weak physical infrastructure and teaching and learning facilities, unaffordable fees in private schools, low-capacity teachers both in quality and quantity, low completion rates and learning outcomes, and quality variations in the type of education persist. Therefore, promotion of social justice in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province remains an unrealised dream. Government of South Africa and the education sector stakeholders are enjoined to allocate adequate funding through educational resources redistribution to favour primary schools that serve the most vulnerable communities to enhance social justice.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: The study locates the debate in a loosely knit set of perspectives some of which are philosophical and conceptual and others are theoretical, practical, and political in an attempt to explain social justice in primary education. The study also proposes a conceptual model of social justice in primary education. It further attempts to point out the institutional and systemic barriers to social justice in KwaZulu-Natal Province in order to promote greater awareness for inclusive and equitable communities, to foster stakeholder engagements, enhance learning outcomes, refocus policy development and advocacy in the country, and ultimately, contribute to building and sustaining an equitable and socially cohesive South African society in its diversity.

Keywords: *Social justice, Equitable Access to Education, Quality and Relevant Education, Institutional and Systemic Barriers, South Africa*

Introduction

South Africa is the country in most need of social justice – dispassionate distribution of opportunities and privileges as they apply to its society. In 2022, it is demonstrated that South Africa was the most unequal country in the world taking the first slot in inequality ranking judged by how well the wealth trickled down and other opportunities were accessed by majority South Africans (World Bank, 2022). The society was covered by scars, if not open wounds of racial segregation and discrimination instituted by the apartheid government between 1948 and 1994. The apartheid policies had devastating effects on social justice and their outcomes remain all pervasive especially, among black communities with constant shockwaves of inequality felt in all spheres of life to date. Social deprivation in the country is manifested in different forms and extends to the economy, healthcare, transport, education, and access to land, among others. Education, which is the key to social inclusion is one area where South Africa faces greater challenges, despite years of educational sector reforms and initiatives to improve equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning for all (Mokhosi, 2023; Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). Through education, open-minded and democratic citizens of the future are shaped and the values of social inclusion inculcated. Moreover, learners build the necessary talent for economic enhancement (Magunda & Asiimwe, 2025) thus breaking the socioeconomic transition barriers. Education is the drawing canvass that determines how the social picture of the society looks and will look like in the future.

Social justice in education comes in three shades including equality of opportunities – fair distribution of educational openings, equality of outcomes – affirmative actions to provide equal access to education for all in need, and equality of conditions – establishing an atmosphere that promotes equal access to quality and relevant education (Rentzi, 2024). These have both distributive and relational outcomes on the educational sector stakeholders, mostly, the learners. As emphasised by UNICEF (2017), contemporary education should underscore human dignity and wellbeing, which values are tied to inclusive educational processes in a society. This accentuates the UN's inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG - 4) in the 17 development goals to ensure a focus on equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning for all. One of the outcomes of this goal is equitable development. Relatedly, Rentzi (2024) asserts that education inculcates inclusive norms, values, and attitudes that create a mind-set characterised by acceptance, respect, and equality. While efforts have been made to address social justice in South Africa including wide ranging constitutional and educational sector reforms in the last three decades, the social justice status in the country still shouts for attention. In the education sector, especially, at primary school level, it is debatable whether the ideal reconciles with reality in a reasonable measure (Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). The purpose of this study is to explore the status of social justice in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province reflecting on the ideal versus the reality on the ground. Studies such as this, therefore, need to be undertaken to point out the remaining institutional and systemic inequalities, promote greater awareness for inclusive and equitable communities, foster stakeholder engagements, enhance learning outcomes, guide policy development and social equality advocacy, and ultimately, contribute to building and sustaining an equitable and cohesive South African society in its diversity.

Harnessing social justice in schools Injustice in education is a decisive feature in society, which can potentially undermine the achievement of all the SDGs. It is imperative to foreground social justice in designing and implementing educational systems and policies right from the early years of education. This embeds it in the rational – logical thinking, decision-making, and critical thinking; cognitive – perception, attention, memory, and language; and affective – emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills development processes of children (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine, 2015). While Michelli and Keiser (2005), Wasley (2006), and Hytten and Bettez (2011) suggest that social justice is amorphously used in educational policy planning and implementation, its presence seems important for creation of a vision of cultural responsiveness. This effectively starts at the foundational level of education and grows through successive years of education into adulthood. The footprints of social justice in education should go beyond the rhetoric of the vision and mission statements, a practice that Michelli and Kaiser (2005) discourage, and be conspicuously evident and effective in the practices of education to have functional meaning and relevance. Therefore, the concept of social justice should guide programme development, curricula – knowledge and pedagogy, inclusive practicum opportunities – equitable access to apprenticeship and skills development, educational philosophy, social vision, and matters related to educational funding, infrastructure, teacher training and deployment, and just and inclusive student enrolment (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). These aspects make access to education more equitable and encourage children to obtain quality and relevant education for better opportunities in adulthood.

Educational philosophy in a society should aim at promoting social justice through education focusing on aspects like adoption of critical pedagogy to develop critical thinking skills, challenge oppression, and empower marginalised voices that are instrumental in sustaining social inclusion in society (Clark, 2006; Cekrezi & Sogutlu, 2022). In addition, encouraging multicultural education promotes diversity, creates multiple narratives, and builds children that are rich in empathy, tolerance, and inclusive knowledge of societies. The educational process at this level must as a matter of importance embrace equity, inclusive practices, and address systemic inequalities that exacerbate injustice in society (Clark, 2006). The practices espoused in the entire educational process should make schools safe places and instruments for harnessing social justice. This includes deliberate efforts to open up schools for children from various backgrounds – multiculturality, make education more accessible and affordable regardless of social class, race or ethnicity, or other socially biasing factors, and harmonising educational standards across board to encourage freedom of choice. Cekrezi and Sogutlu (2022) further point out that to build a culture of social justice in schools, it should not just be expressions of intention in the aims and objectives of education but, rather, an indelible foot print in how children are taught, the inclusivity of schools' formal and informal practices, unbiased learning assessment, inclusive school administration, running a school curriculum that promotes diversity, and ensuring the practices in reality achieve social justice as envisaged. Embracing social justice in schools is essential in building a democratic society where the privileges and opportunities of the citizens are determined fairly and squarely (Miranda & Chapman, 2024). The ecology of equity suggests a crucial interplay between schools, education systems, and the wider society. As noted by Rentzi (2024), inculcating the

values of social justice in schools promotes human rights – limits power asymmetry embedded in injustice, reduces economic inequality – lowers income gap and poverty, enhances social mobility - permits the poor to climb the social ladder, and enhances social harmony – lower instances of conflict arising from unjust practices in society. Cekrezi and Sogutlu (2022) and Rentzi (2024) underscore the linkage between high levels of social justice in schools and better education, academic achievement, and productive adults. It is a cornerstone to social change and improvement. Some studies demonstrate that to promote social justice in schools, the education sector itself should ensure that it is equitable, accessible, and all school going children have an equal opportunity to attain quality and relevant education (Haira & Mills, 2023). However, as asserted by Miranda and Chapman (2024), several obstacles rooted in social injustice hinder access to equitable, quality, and relevant education in many countries. In the African context, these undermine talent development and limit opportunities for development as argued by Magunda and Asiimwe (2025). These hindrances include limited funding, weak curriculum, inadequate infrastructure, social barriers within the school administration, limited scholastic materials, lack of political will, low level of multicultural integration in society and school communities, and other institutional policy matters that do not promote inclusivity and social integration.

Social justice in education: Theoretical and conceptual reflections

Literature points to an existence of both confusion and conceptual looseness about what social justice is and how it may be operationalized in an educational setting (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Social justice seems not to have a single existential meaning but its presence or absence may be described according to how it is felt by the one who has experienced it. Though the concept is applied in a number of policy planning and operational contexts (Moule, 2005), its specific meaning remains a challenge. A few descriptive perspectives, some philosophical and conceptual, others theoretical, practical, and political, exist within the literature across time and space (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). A reflection on these perspectives may enable us develop our contextual meaning of social justice and how it may be applied and observed in educational systems, policies, and the functional structures, and practices of primary schools. (i) From the political perspective, in the lens of democracy, social justice embodies what a person should be in society (Wood, 1992; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). In line with the thoughts of Asiimwe and Magunda (2023), what a person should be in society as the basis of education underscores its primary relevance. It envisages an educational outcome where graduates of the system have the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that the society expects; producing thoughtful citizens capable of making democratic lifestyle possible. Therefore, social justice in education may be perceived as an ecosystem that produces productive citizens able to create a world where all people can achieve their potential.

(ii) Theoretical propositions focus on the 'how' and 'what' of social justice. They examine the processes that exist in the educational systems, policies, and practices that represent and, or promote social justice such as use of critical pedagogy for producing critical thinkers and empowered citizens. These educational processes inspire learners to challenge power relations and promote an atmosphere of fairness and multiculturalism where diversity is not only promoted and tolerated but where it forms part of learning for socially and emotionally

intelligent learners. These perspectives appear to suggest that the educational systems, policies, processes, and practices are not only seen to demonstrate social justice, but are in practice impactful in doing so. The outputs, outcomes, and impact of education theoretically reflect and prove the existence of social justice. (iii) Philosophical and conceptual perspectives provide broad frameworks for thinking about social justice in schools. Razvi (1998) identifies three broad philosophical frames for thinking about social justice. (a) Liberal individualism that considers social justice to embrace fairness, and to exude Rawls (1972) two principles of justice, that is, equal basic rights and freedoms, and protection of individual rights. These principles focus on ensuring that social goods such as education are distributed or redistributed equally and the least privileged benefit through procedural justice. The latter aiming at levelling the ground for all by intentionally providing more to the needy to uplift them from inequity to equal footing with others. In the case of education, the perspective seems to assume that all school going children in a society have access to education of the same quality and relevance in society regardless of their backgrounds. (b) Market individualism advocates for establishing a fair starting condition, after which, people benefit according to their effort – talent developed through education. It seems to suggest that social justice should favour free competition based on merit and be measured from a presence of fair starting conditions – after setting equalising standards for all; like equitable access to quality and relevant education. From the educational stand point, market individualism suggests that schools give all the learners equal opportunities at school and any variations later in life be attributed to individual strengths and weaknesses. While this perspective appears divergent from the first one, foundational equality in education is an important step towards creating a fair society and is in line with SDG-4 on education. (c) Social democratic perspective, which builds on Marx's views of a just society encourage the educational systems and policies to focus on the needs of various individuals and to ensure a collectivist or cooperative vision of society. Ensuring quality and inclusivity, inclusive curriculum, community engagement and partnerships, and addressing systemic inequalities through redistribution of resources in the educational systems and policies is an imperative. This includes schools being open to all qualifying learners regardless of their backgrounds and creation of an educational ecosystem that gives all classes of learners in a society an equal chance to access the same standard of education regardless of their location or social class.

(iv) The practical perspectives engender the contextual realities in a society. Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) in the seven principles of social justice provide insightful values that describe social justice in a school. These include; promotion of inclusion and equity, holding high expectations for all students – recognition justice, developing reciprocal community relationships, adopting a system wide approach for social justice, and ensuring direct social justice education and intervention in the school. The practices in the educational systems and policies to teaching and learning at school level and how the schools themselves are run need to have demonstrable characteristics of social justice as aforementioned. This perspective does not just consider the pronouncements in policy statements that are seldom implemented, but, examines how the traditions, norms, values, and attitudes in the schools reflect social justice. For example, at policy level, government should allocate adequate resources to schools to establish a common standard in all public schools regardless of their location; at school level, admissions should reflect diversity, administration of a uniform curriculum in all schools; use

of appropriate pedagogies that empower all learners; apprenticeship opportunities that are open to all; and the graduates of the system who have relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours that help the communities they come from. The theoretical and conceptual views emphasise distributive justice by underscoring fair allocation of educational resources and opportunities in society; meritocracy as theoretically articulated under market individualism, suggesting that after establishing equal starting point, other benefits accrue from individual merit and achievement; and affirmative action as underpinned by Rawls two principles of social justice with an emphasis on the most marginalised getting more than those who are privileged to equalise their learning conditions. In the context of this study, the perspectives bring out four key features of social justice as applicable in primary school setting: (i) freedom of choice where the systems and policies provide equal opportunities enabling learners to choose schools without socioeconomic limitations. This makes primary education more accessible and equitable. (ii) Fairness where learners are treated equally without bias including the availability of teaching and learning materials in schools. (iii) Equity where the educational systems and processes provide mechanisms that address systemic inequalities and promote inclusion, targeting resources to those areas that are in most need, and ensuring the decisions reflect the realistic needs of the communities that participate in making such decisions – participatory justice. (iv) Relevance to society where educated citizens are able to contribute meaningfully to the development of their communities. In addition, the views support Gerwitz (1998) and Rentzi (2024) assertions on social justice for inclusive environment in education that social justice in education serves three purposes namely, equality of opportunities, equality of outcomes, and equality of conditions, which support realisation of SDG-4 (UNICEF, 2017). These perspectives seen from the vision and mission of contemporary education, would resonate well with the values of equitable access to quality and relevant education in society, that are a cornerstone to promoting social justice from a primary school setting. The meaning of social justice can be inferred from the four key features of social justice gleaned from the theoretical and conceptual reflections. These describe what social justice should be in primary education as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
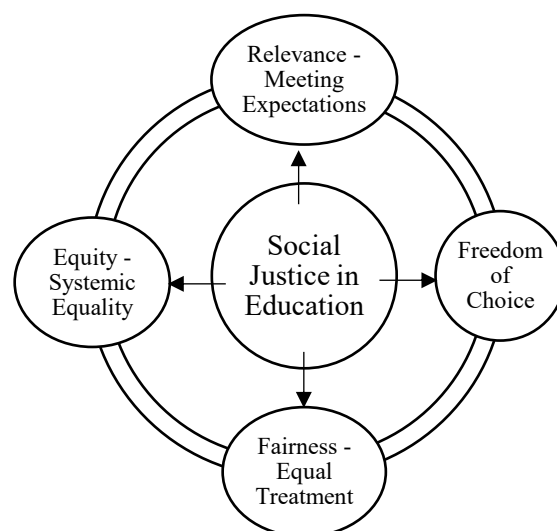

Figure 1. Conceptualisation of Social Justice in Primary Education

As earlier argued, social justice should ensure that programme development, curricula and pedagogy, access to practicum opportunities, educational philosophy, social vision, and policy and administrative practices in the education sector in general and primary schools in particular reflect the above elements. In practice, educational funding, infrastructure, teacher training and deployment, and student enrolment should promote relevance of education, freedom of choice, fairness, and equity. Several studies support the theoretical reflections on social justice in relation to the aforementioned practical realities. Oseni et al. (2020) assert that adequate funding promotes goals of education while (Mawoyo & Vally, 2020) claim that low funding to education denies equitable access to education. Mokhosi and Asiimwe (2025) also demonstrate that money and class determine the quality of education unless there is a deliberate effort to close the resource gaps by allocating more funds to underserved areas of society which are suffering constructive exclusion. Bold et al. (2017), Wehye and Asiimwe (2024), and Mokhosi and Asiimwe (2025) underscore the importance of teacher quality, physical facilities, school infrastructure, effective assessment, and educational resources in promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education, which are imperative to realising social justice. Moreover, inclusivity can readily be achieved when learners have a choice to access quality education (Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025), and where appropriate teaching and learning strategies can accommodate various types of learners using different learning approaches (Asiimwe & Magunda, 2023). As theorised by the UN in the SGD-4 (UNICEF, 2017), where the goal of equitable access to quality and relevant education is fulfilled, social justice is presumably promoted and demonstrated. However, the reverse may also be true that, the existence of barriers to attaining SDG-4 encourages a persistence of social injustice in education in particular and the society in general.

Therefore, the researchers theorise that an educational environment that demonstrates a presence of the aforementioned elements can advance social justice. Social justice in schools promotes equal access to educational opportunities for all, quality of education, adoption of appropriate curriculum, and teaching methods that promote critical thinking. In addition, teacher development and deployment of qualified teachers, parent involvement and partnership, efficient and effective resource allocation, and community engagement are key tenets of promoting social justice in schools. One may hypothesise that a presence of these aspects in the educational systems, policies, and practices deters social injustice from reproducing itself in schools and the wider society. In this regard, our thesis for this paper is that when these social justice aspects are expressed both in the vision and mission statements of educational policies and are demonstrated in the educational practices in schools, there is harmony between the ideal and the reality of social justice in schools. However, tensions exist when gaps between the envisaged social justice as expressed in the policy statements differs from the observable educational practices, outputs, outcomes, and the impact on society.

Methodology

The research utilised a qualitative research approach collecting data through interviews and document review. A pragmatic research paradigm guided the inquiry. The researchers took a relativism ontological position to guide data collection methods, data analysis, and interpretation of the study findings. The central proposition for adopting a relativists' ontology

was the diversity of participants lived experiences that could not scientifically lead to absolute reality, truth, and knowledge since these are relative to individual views, socioeconomic status, and historical contexts of the research phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Therefore, the researchers considered social reality as a constructed result of what respondents go through as they interact with their environment. The pluralistic world views of the participants provided the sifter of what was taken as the common views of the society regarding the status of social justice in the province's primary schools. Participants included members of school management (principals, sub-principals, and heads of department) and grade 1-6 teachers from the government quintile one and non-government primary schools. A sample of 27 purposively selected information rich participants was studied from both school types. These included 2 school management members, 5 grade 1-6 teachers and 10 members of school management committee from the non-government philanthropic primary school, and 10 grade 1-6 teachers from the quintile one government primary schools in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. This guaranteed information rich sources for such kind of study. The data collected were captured using TAGUETTE software for electronic coding and generation of themes that formed the findings of the study.

Findings

The study first explored the existing educational policy documents in South Africa to scout for public focus on social justice especially, in the primary school sector. The review (International Justice Resource Centre, 2017; Samtani, 2020) suggests that South Africa has ratified, is a signatory, and has domesticated a number of international agreements and declarations that promote social justice including universal declaration on Human Rights of 1948–equal treatment, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 1979, Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 – the right to education, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Relevant to this review, SDG-1 on poverty, which aims at reducing poverty and inequality and SDG-10 that focuses on reducing inequalities within the country. Most importantly, SDG-4 aims at reducing inequality in the education sector by promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning for all (UNICEF, 2017; Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). These declarations and agreements are buttressed by the legal framework that underscores social justice such as the South African Constitution in sections 7 and 9 that are unequivocal on promotion and protection of social justice…For example, Section 7 "… affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality, and freedom" (International Justice Resource Centre, 2017). While these pronouncements appear to lay a firm foundation for promotion of social justice in the South African society in general, and primary schools in particular, the reality on the ground paints a mixed picture. It is explicit in the legal and policy frameworks of South Africa such as the National Education Act of 1996; the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996; the National Qualifications Framework Act of 2008; the White Paper on Education 2013; the Action Plan to 2024, that the education systems and practices in the country promote and demonstrate social justice through improving the quality, accessibility, equity, and relevance of education (Republic of South Africa, 2020). The recently concluded Education Sector Plan 2019-2023 that was still in force during the study prioritised

promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools while eradicating barriers to learning and participation. Ideally, realisation of these goals would be ensured, among others, through teacher development and deployment to enhance teaching quality, infrastructure development, provision of appropriate learning facilities, affordable education, and digital transformation (Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). These would guarantee that all learners have access to the same quality and relevance of education across the country. While the country idealistically appears focused on promoting social justice including in primary schools, realising this goal in practice remains a conundrum and a time bomb for social cohesion and equitable socioeconomic development in South Africa. Challenges remain in the implementation of the education policies and having in place educational systems and practices that ensure demonstrable social justice in primary schools. Education, an instrument to promote equality in society is not living to its billing. The situation is summed up by one of the participants interviewed who said that:

"Quality education for all South Africans should be at the centre of promoting social mobility and breaking the cycles of poverty. However, with a high level of unequal access to quality and relevant education, most South Africans remain trapped in poverty and are not able to climb the social ladder. Therefore, the hearts of most low income, underserved, and rural community members including those in KwaZulu– Natal get sicker when they hear all the pleasant words about social justice in the educational policy statements. This is against the back drop of the experience of broken promises they witness every day when they visit schools or interact with school graduates who cannot find reasonable opportunities. The desire of most South Africans including those in KwaZulu–Natal to live in social equality is undermined by the injustice in education right from the primary schools".

Table 1 presents the findings from the interview participants.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes from participants' interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Key Highlights on Social Justice
Reducing inequality	• Inclusivity • Right to education • Education for all	Challenges regarding schools serving poor and rural schools, racial divide in traditional schools serving white vs. other communities, unaffordable school fees, and disproportionate allocation of funds to Tier 1 quintile schools. Private schools and those serving high class societies enjoy better conditions than Tier 1 schools exacerbating inequalities.
Accessibility of education	• Enrolment and completion rates • Opportunity gaps • Academic achievement	Increasing enrolment against inadequate funding, weak educational infrastructure, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, limited school choice, low completion rates, and low academic outcomes as 80 percent of children in grade 4 are not able to understand what they read.
Quality of education	• Student learning outcomes • Teaching practices • Learning environment	Quality variations in education. Schools serving the poor are characterised by inappropriate teaching practices, low quality of learning materials, weak classroom and school environment, inadequate access to basic facilities such as electricity, internet connectivity, and other modern learning facilities.
Relevance of education	• Curriculum alignment • Assessment practices • Subject relevance	Weak curriculum relevance, and inappropriate knowledge, skills, and behavioural development, low relevance of subjects taught, unsuitable learning assessment, and practices that do not appropriately promote critical thinking.
Equitable distribution of resources	• Funding allocation • Access to technology • Teacher quality and distribution	Inadequate funding, facilities, and infrastructure, weak distribution and redistribution of resources to favour schools that serve the most disadvantaged communities, and low teacher professional capacity both in quality and quantity in Tier 1 schools.

Discussion

The findings reveal existence of social injustice in KwaZulu-Natal's primary schools. The existence of variations in curriculum, inequitable distribution of educational resources, less relevant curriculum, unaffordable tuition fees by the majority of the children in private schools and the low funding to Tier 1 quintile primary schools, creates institutional and systematic barriers (Rawls, 1972; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025) to reducing social inequality in primary schools. Though from the legal and policy prescription, South Africa promotes social justice in education at all levels (Government of South Africa, 2024), evidence confirms that class and money determine access to education (Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). In a society where tuition fees in private schools are high and public schools are inadequately funded, majority of the school going children are excluded from receiving quality and relevant education that would prepare them for a better future (Magunda & Asiimwe, 2025). Accessible education that increases school enrolment of school going age children promotes social justice (UNICEF, 2017; Rentzi, 2024). However, this is beyond increased school enrolment and extends to completion rates, existence of quality learning opportunities for all, and academic achievement (Bold et al., 2017; Magunda & Asiimwe, 2025; Mokhosi & Asiimwe, 2025). Though there is increasing primary school enrolment as an indicator of accessible education in KwaZulu-Natal Province, its positive effect on promoting social justice is constrained by inadequate funding, weak educational infrastructure, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, limited school choice, low completion rates, and low academic outcomes. This is at variance with both global standards and country expectations regarding education for social justice. Limited funding of schools limits their capacity to offer children educational facilities that promote social justice (Bold et al., 2017; Mawoyo & Vally, 2020).

The study notes quality variations in education between the primary schools serving the rural, poor and underserved communities and those that serve other communities. Schools serving the poor were characterised by barriers to social justice in primary schools such as inappropriate teaching practices, low quality of learning materials, weak classroom and school environment, inadequate access to basic facilities such as electricity, internet connectivity, and other modern learning facilities, and teaching practices that do not promote critical thinking skills. As noted by Mawoyo and Vally (2020), a presence of these features promotes social injustice not only within the school environment, but even outside educational setting. The revelation that 80 percent of grade 4 children in South Africa could not understand what they read (Government of South Africa, 2024) underscores the inability of the graduates from such schools to access further learning or work-related opportunities. In line with the claims by Bold et al. (2017), Wehye and Asiimwe (2024), Magunda and Asiimwe (2025), and Mokhosi and Asiimwe (2025), an educational system with the aforementioned qualities affects the ability of educational policies and systems from achieving their overarching goals including quality education that is a basic right according to SDG-4. Rawls (1972) asserts the centrality of relevant education in promoting social justice. Rooted in Marx's views of a just society, Rawls encourages educational systems and policies to focus on the needs of various individuals and the collective vision of society. The South African Constitution expects education to ensure equality (International Justice Resource Centre, 2017) at all levels and domestication of the

SDGs, especially, SDG-4 was to specifically promote equitable access to quality and relevant education for all. However, the findings point to challenges in curriculum alignment, assessment practices, and subject relevance, which appear to barricade realisation of meaningful social justice in KwaZulu-Natal primary schools. The weak curriculum relevance, coupled with low relevance of subjects, and exam focused learning assessment produce learners with inappropriate knowledge, skills, and behaviour to meet community needs. This situation undermines the realisation of SDG-4 on equitable access to quality education for all. It also perpetuates social injustice in KwaZulu-Natal primary schools especially, (Cekrezi & Sogutlu, 2022) in accessing opportunities for post-primary education, better livelihoods, and social mobility.

Rawls (1972) and Hytten and Bettez (2011) underscore the importance of equitable distribution of educational resources in promoting social justice in schools. This should ensure adequate allocation of funds favouring those susceptible to injustice, access to teaching and learning facilities including technology, and appropriate teacher quality and distribution of teachers across schools. Studies by Wehye and Asiimwe (2024), Magunda and Asiimwe (2025), and Mokhosi and Asiimwe (2025) assert the importance of the aforesaid in promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education for all, which is associated with advancing social justice in both schools and communities served by these schools. While ensuring social justice is the legal and policy expectation of South Africa's education sector (Government of South Africa, 2024), findings demonstrate that this remains a dream of the future. It was evident in Tier 1 schools that in KwaZulu-Natal province, there was inadequate funding, facilities, and infrastructure, and weak distribution and redistribution of resources. Moreover, the schools had low teacher professional capacity both in quality and quantity. The double rolling effect of these limitations was underperforming primary schools that reproduced social injustice. Unless these issues are addressed, the tensions between ideal and reality in promoting social justice in South Africa's primary schools will remain persistent and prominent.

Conclusions and recommendations

South Africa is considered to have the lowest level of social justice in the world. This situation is both institutional and systemic. Though the general legal and policy framework of the country prioritises promotion of social justice, in practice, there are yawning gaps between legal and policy intentions and the reality on the ground. In primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, especially, the Tier 1 schools that serve the most vulnerable to social injustice, the experience is at stark variance with the dreams expressed in the policy and institutional statements about education being a right, for all, equitable, of quality, and relevant. The reality of primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal seen from the vision and mission of contemporary education fall short of promoting social justice due to inadequate funding that leads to poor teaching and learning facilities, weak infrastructure, and low teacher capacity and learning outcomes, among others. From the theoretical angle, primary schools lack an environment that improves social justice. Therefore, primary schools in the province can be said to be failing on meeting the three purposes of education in promoting social justice such as equality of opportunities, equality of outcomes, and equality of conditions. One can safely assert that despite the institutional and systematic intentions to promote social justice as expressed in the South
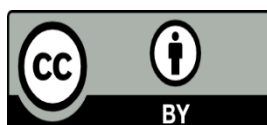
African Constitution and reflected in the country's educational systems and policies, its promotion in the primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province remains an unrealised dream. Moving forward, South African government and the education sector stakeholders should stop the rhetoric and walk the talk of promoting social justice in primary schools. This should include taking the necessary steps to improve the learning environment in primary schools to be inclusive and provide equal opportunities to all children regardless of their socioeconomic status and location. Government should use a redistributive educational resource mechanism that allocates enough funds for the Tier 1 schools to build and sustain a learning environment same as the one serving high income communities. This initiative should ensure that these schools have adequate teaching and learning facilities – classrooms, access to internet, electricity, sanitary facilities, computers, and stocked libraries and laboratories, and enough qualified teachers. In addition, government should train teachers in Tier schools the effective use of critical pedagogy to inculcate critical thinking skills to empower school graduates to advocate for their rights and equal opportunities. Revise the school curriculum to promote relevant skills and behavioural abilities needed in the job market. Government and education sector stakeholders should cultivate a culture of social inclusivity in all schools and should provide facilities such as public transport for academically gifted children in disadvantaged areas to access high achieving schools in communities far away from their locations. The educational ecosystem nurtured in primary schools should build children that are capable of exploiting their potential as responsible and productive members of society in an inclusive environment.

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