

17
Republic of South Africa
Shaheeda Essack and Duncan Hindle

17.1 Introduction

The aim of the chapter is to provide a review and assess how sociologists in South Africa (SA) have studied racial and ethnic inequalities in education from 1980 to 2010. There is at present no documented review on research carried out on race, ethnicity, and educational inequality in South Africa. The socio-political nature of education in the country has generated a plethora of empirical and policy studies on race and educational inequality, although research from a sociological perspective is limited.

Research undertaken indicates that researchers proceed from dissimilar assumptions, depending on the political context. The conclusions all point to education as a tool for either maintaining racial inequality or subverting it. Research in post-apartheid SA goes to great lengths to stress the enduring legacy of educational inequality, especially among the African population.

The use of methods vary from broad descriptions as seen in policy documents to the quantitative as seen in explanatory and predictive studies. The blatant racial inequalities in education have captured the imagination of many a researcher giving rise to the use of innovative methods such us proxies, stochasticism, extrapolation, or narratives in seeking to understand the complexities. Needless to say, specific and distinct research traditions have emerged over time. All have one focus – trying to understand ‘why the racial inequities in education remain’ despite the implementation of progressive policies.

Of significance in the study of de-racialisation is that SA, unlike the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) and Europe, the majority (black population) have been the victims of inferior education while the minority (white population) enjoyed legal advantage. De-racialisation is therefore in part a peripheral issue, the mainstream issue remains the quality of education for the majority who are not part of the integration project. Further, because studies cannot utilize control groups, direct comparative studies between racial
groups on educational performance in a classroom setting are also not part of the research tradition.

The discussion is divided into four parts: the national context, methods, the eight research traditions, and some conclusions.

17.2 National context

This section offers an overview of the main characteristics of the SA educational system, the transition from education under apartheid to education under democracy, and key developments in policy from 1980 to 2010. In this description and analysis, it is necessary to invoke the terminology of apartheid, with four racial categories used, described here as (Black) African, Coloured, Indian and White. Where appropriate elsewhere, the (general) term black is used to include African, Coloured and Indian groups compared to white groups. This is not intended to confirm any sense of racial classification, and the terms are used only for historical or analytical reasons.

17.2.1 The educational system of the country

The following discussion is divided into the apartheid, the resistance and the post-apartheid period.

17.2.1.1 The apartheid period

Prior to the advent of inclusive democracy in 1994, SA had a highly fragmented education system, divided on grounds of race (primarily), language (within racial groups), and region. In all there were 19 education departments: national ones for White, Indians, and Coloureds, as well as a national department for Black Africans ‘residing in South Africa’. In addition there were many Africans living in ‘homelands’ or self-governing territories (including Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu, and Venda), which each had their own Department of Education (DoE).

On top of all this was laid a language determination, with White schools divided on the use of English or Afrikaans (official languages) as the medium of instruction, and African primary schools on the basis of language (hence ethnic identity). Sociologically, the basis for this was to avoid any notion of an ‘African majority’ identity; the apartheid regime hoped that by imposing enough racial, ethnic and linguistic categories in society, SA would be a nation of many minorities. These divisions were not just organizational categories: there were specific layers of material and cultural advantage and disadvantage that went with each.

17.2.1.2 Resistance to apartheid education

Opposition to ‘Bantu Education’ (where Bantu means ‘Black people’, particularly African) was extensive, and a core pillar of the broader anti-apartheid