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Huge investments, poor outcomes: The impact of violence and trauma on learning

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Background: South Africa's primary school education system receives significant funding annually from public and private sources. Despite this, learners still grossly underperform. This means that learning interventions aimed at improving learning outcomes have been relatively unimpactful in primary schools. As such, it is crucial that we investigate why academic interventions have been relatively unable to turn the tide on poor academic performance.

Aim: Although there are many reasons that limit the successful realisation of academic interventions in primary schools, this article argues that the problem is partly because of violence and trauma that result from the polyvictimisation of children. Children are exposed to and deal with historical, epistemic and interpersonal violence, making it difficult to learn.

Setting: The article focusses on teaching and learning experiences in South African public primary schools.

Methods: This critical analysis uses various sources, including programme evaluations and academic literature, to demonstrate how centring the psychosocial well-being of children in teaching and learning interventions is foundational to their efficacy and ultimate success.

Results: By centring the learners' psychological position, academic interventions would be more efficient in realising their objectives. It may also curtail financial wastage.

Conclusion: The psychosocial well-being of learners cannot be disregarded in learning interventions. Children who are traumatised are not capable of reaching their full academic potential.

Contribution: This article contributes to the debates that advocate for the psychosocial support of primary school learners in South Africa as a conduit for improving learner outcomes.

Keywords: trauma; violence; academic interventions; psychosocial wellbeing; primary school; coloniality.

Introduction

In South Africa, many children are born into spaces where insurmountable challenges are already waiting to be bestowed upon them. Historical legacies, coupled with prevailing social, political and economic instability, have resulted in the polyvictimisation of children. As such, engaging with the effects of violence on teaching and learning processes remains topical and important to realise policy imperatives, but more importantly, as a right to ensure the economic prosperity of children in the future.

The violence inflicted on children results in compounded traumas that put the most vulnerable in society in a state of constant stress and anxiety. Polyvictimisation in children, which is caused by exposure to various forms of violence, is common in South Africa because, as the recent crime statistics and reports on violence relating to children suggest, children are not safe at home, at school, in their communities or with their peers (Mathews 2019; South African Police Services 2023). Understanding and addressing the effects of trauma in young children, particularly as it relates to learning, is important because those:

> [*E*]xposed to adverse childhood experiences and pervasive interpersonal traumas may go on to develop PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and, in most cases, will further undergo a significant shift in their developmental trajectory. (Cruz et al. 2022:1)

Note: Special Collection: Interrogating Coloniality in South African Primary Schools.

In addition, compounded trauma prevents learners from reaching their full academic potential.

Using a critical analysis (Strunk & Betties 2019), this article discusses the efficacy of teaching and learning interventions in South African primary schools within the context of the prevailing polyvictimisation of children. The article highlights the importance of focussing on learners' psychosocial well-being in teaching and learning interventions, particularly at the primary school level. Doing so may not only improve learner performance and increase life chances, but it will also curtail the perpetuation of generational trauma and mental challenges during adolescence. The article suggests that teaching and learning interventions cannot fully realise their objectives, with the evidence reflecting in academic performance and disposition to learn, if more attention is not given to the psychosocial state of learners. Traumatised learners struggle to learn (Miller & Howard 2023). As such, regardless of how progressive a teaching and learning intervention may be when learners are consistently dealing with various forms of violence, the resultant traumas limit their ability to engage and live out their academic potential fully.

This article is divided into six sections. After the 'Introduction', the article contextualises the challenges of poor academic performance in South African public primary schools. This is followed by a discussion related to the financial input from the public and private sectors, a systematic review of the effects of learning interventions in primary schools and factors that curtail optimal learning in primary schools. The article then discusses violence, coloniality and trauma and concludes by highlighting the limitations and suggesting recommendations for improving education programme development for polyvictimised children. This critical analysis is an essential contribution to improving teaching and learning in South African primary schools because it highlights 'educational disparities and injustice as functions of power, domination, and exploitation' (Strunk & Betties 2019:17).

Contextualising the challenge of poor academic performance in South African primary schools

The problem of poor academic performance among primary school learners in South Africa has been consistently well-documented (Mlachila & Moeletsi 2019; Zenex Foundation 2022). This is part of a continental concern where children in Africa are in school but not learning (Newman 2017). The South African government fully acknowledges that, despite efforts, learners in basic education are 'severely underperforming' (UNICEF 2022:18). Local and global systemic tests demonstrate that South African primary school learners, particularly those in public schools, grossly underperform to the degree that they may never catch up by the time they write the school exiting exams. This sentiment is echoed by Van der Berg and Hofmeyr (2017:2), who highlight that the situation is so grave 'that by Grade 4 it is already relatively clear which children have fallen so far behind that they would probably not be able to reach and pass matric with good enough marks to go on to university studies'. The reason for this catastrophe is not singular but results from a myriad of challenges that have resulted in an education system that is *broken* and *unequal*, including historical legacies, inadequate and insufficient teacher professional development, crumbling and unsafe school infrastructure, community violence, poverty, unemployment, disengaged parents and overcrowding (Amnesty International 2020). Similarly, Christie (2020) observes that, as a response, over the last almost 30 years, there have been numerous interventions, often quite costly, initiated by the government as well as the private sector that sought to improve learner performance and throughput rates of primary school goers. Substantial improvements, however, remain to be seen as quality education and safe living and learning environments remain elusive for many poor learners in the country.

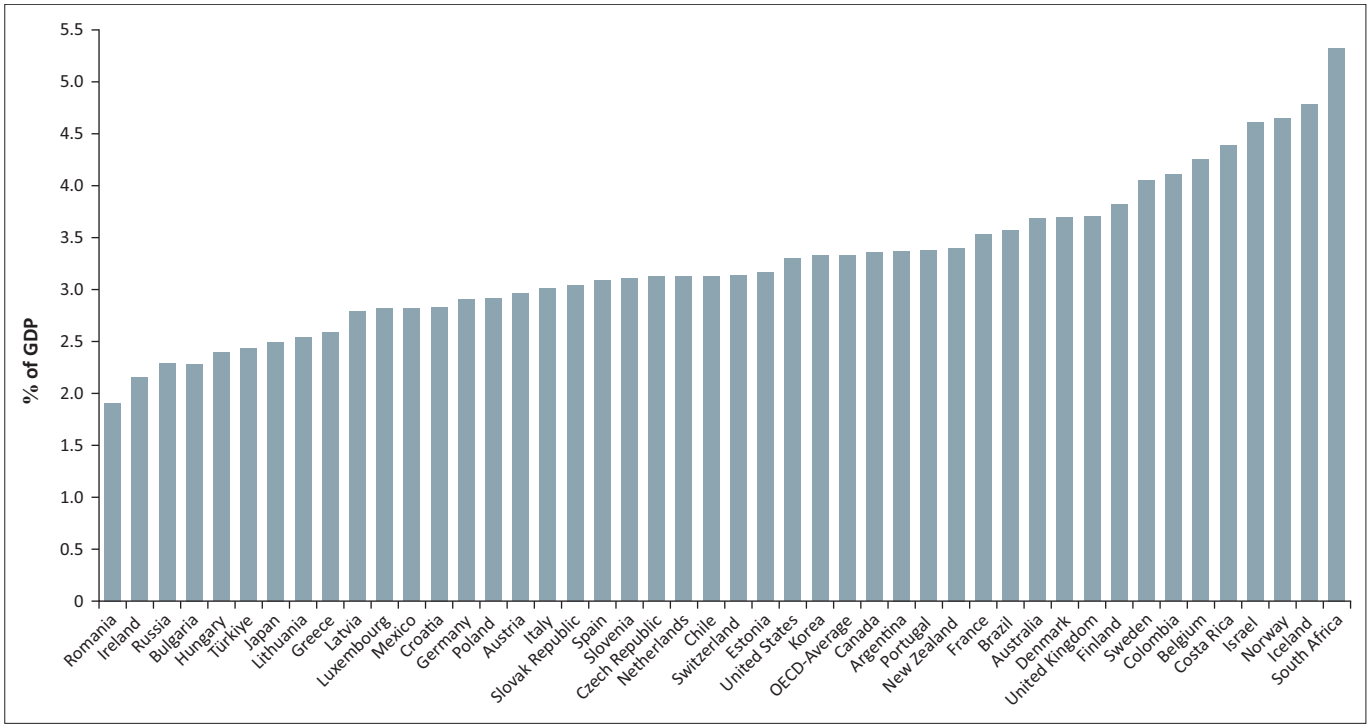
This section discusses three aspects related to learner interventions in primary schools in South Africa. Firstly, it discusses fiscal matters by highlighting the financial input (government and private sector) to basic education and basic education interventions. It demonstrates that substantial funding from the public and private sectors is directed towards education and interventions in basic education; however, the vast financial input is not reflected in learner performance. Secondly, it discusses the focus and effects of selected primary school interventions by synthesising recent literature and programme evaluations reports. Lastly, the section highlights some of the contributing factors that result in the perpetuation of poor academic performance in primary schools in South Africa.

Funding basic education in South Africa: Public and private expenditure

According to the Treasury documents, the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) spending is expected to rise from R39.4 billion in the coming financial year 2023/24, to R316.5 billion in 2024/25 and reach some R331.2 billion in 2025/26. An additional R20 billion is allocated via the provincial equitable share to cover any financial shortfall and early childhood development (ECD), which has now been integrated into the DBE, will receive an additional R1.6 billion over the medium term for support to early learning centres. An extra R30 million is allocated towards capacity and oversight in the ECD sector (South African Government News Agency 2023). The DBE has also allocated a portion of the annual budget to repair damaged infrastructure, an amount of R283.3 million to address the damage caused by the floods in the eastern parts of the country and R1.5 billion to the Gauteng school infrastructure (South African Government News Agency 2023). In 2022, 4.63% of GDP, amounting to R298.1 billion, was allocated to basic education, which translates into R22 213.16 for each of the 13 419 971 learners in the public school system, but the

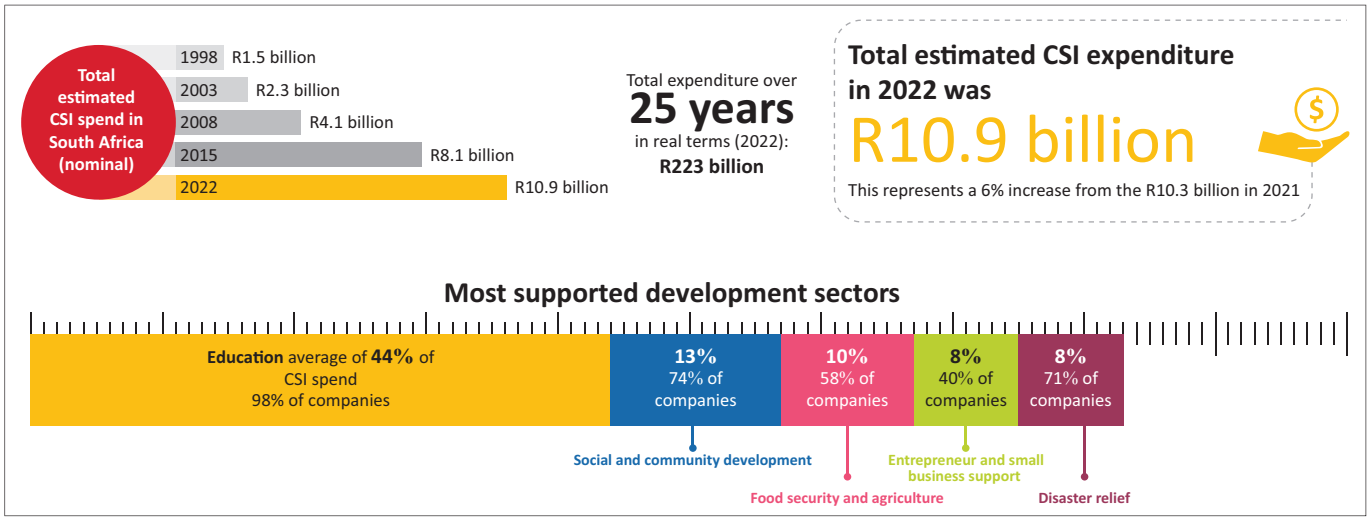
impressive financial support has not reflected in learner outcomes or in a better standard of education (Somer 2023). Echoing this sentiment, a recent report published by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) highlighted that the South African government spends roughly 13% of its revenue on basic education and, to justify this kind of spending in the context of escalating fiscal pressures, 'we should expect globally competitive learning levels, a reduction in learning inequality, new opportunities for children from poor households, and a large, trainable workforce' (CDE 2023:1). However, this is not the case. In comparison to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, South Africa's public spending on education in general is almost unrivalled, as indicated in recent OECD (2023) data and highlighted in Figure 1.

In addition to the financial support from its government, South Africa's corporate sector also invests a considerable sum into the country's education through Corporate Social Investments (CSIs). Over the last 25 years, South Africa's combined CSI initiatives amounted to R225 billion (Trialogue 2022). Furthermore, Figure 2 highlights that the estimated CSI expenditure in 2022 amounted to R10.9 billion of which 44% was dedicated to the education sector (Trialogue 2022).



Source: OECD, 2023, *Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris

FIGURE 1: Public spending on education in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.



Source: Trialogue, 2022, *The Trialogue business in society handbook 2022*, 25th edn., viewed from https://trialogue.co.za/businessinsocietyhandbook/trialogue-business-in-society-handbook-2022/

CSI, corporate social investment.

FIGURE 2: An overview of corporate social investment contribution in South Africa.

Of the companies and organisations that invest in the education sector in South Africa, Anglo American, Arcelor Mittal and the Standard Bank Group are among the highest investors with Anglo American doubling its investment in 2022 (Mining Review Africa 2022).

The companies listed in Table 1 invest in various sectors, education being one of them. This means the CSI budget indicated here is not solely dedicated to funding (basic) education. A full list of contributors to education is available in the Trialogue Business Report (Trialogue 2023).

The Trialogue Business Report of 2022 (Trialogue 2022) surveyed 65 companies in South Africa and highlighted that education is the most supported sector, with 98% of companies devoting some or all their investments to various education initiatives ranging from literacy programmes to the provision of Wi-Fi in schools as depicted in Figure 3. The vast number of interventions and support suggests that there is an acknowledgement that teaching and learning in South Africa's primary schools, including ECD centres, are in crisis.

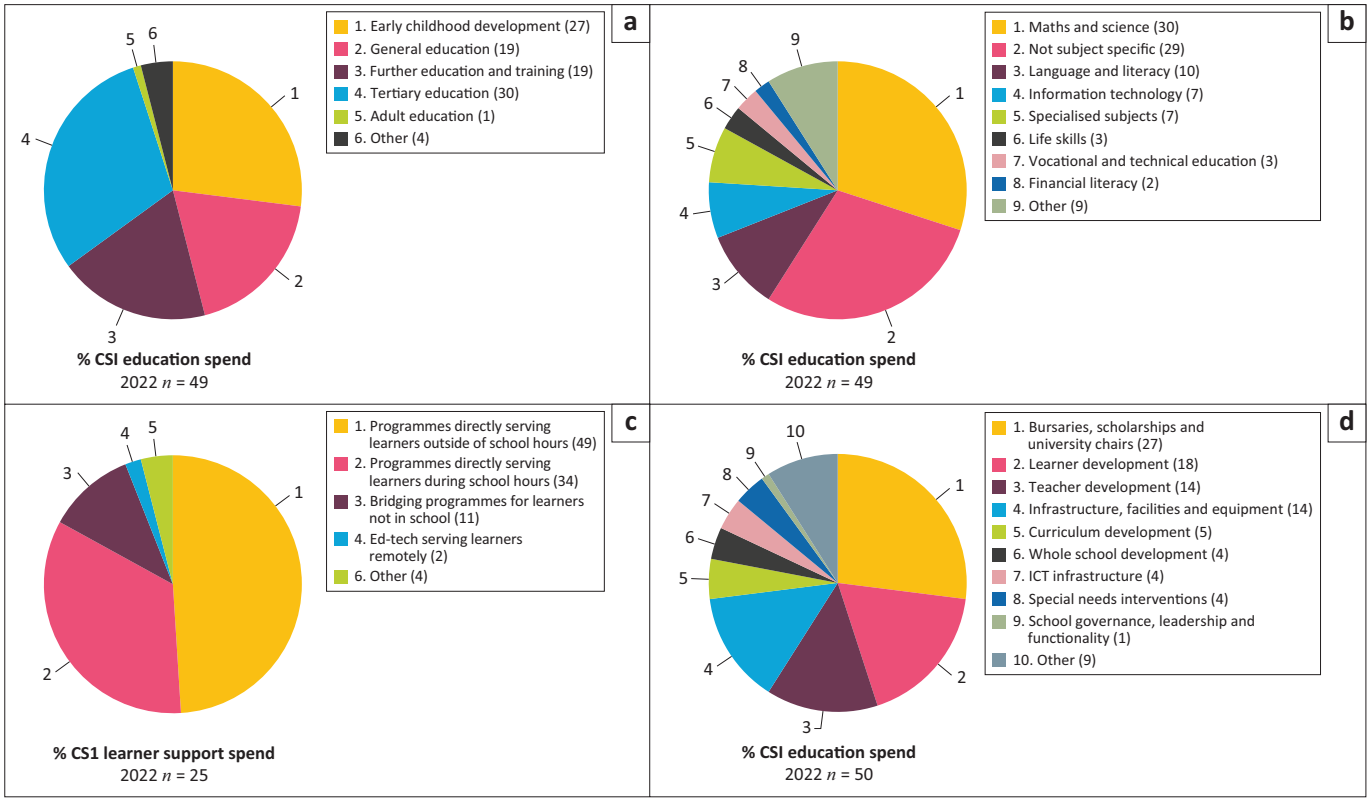
TABLE 1: Top investors in South Africa's education sector 2022–2023.

Company	Estimated expenditure (R mil/annum)
AngloGold Ashanti	261.7
Cashbuild	182.5
Curro Holdings	137.0
Glencore	1472.0
Impala Platinum Holdings	207.0
Investec	218.9
Kumba Iron Ore	399.5
MultiChoice SA	284.0
Sasol	857.3
Shoprite Holdings	409.0
Sibanya-Stillwater	362.4
Woolworths Holdings	1031.0

Source: Trialogue Business in Society Handbook (Trialogue, 2022, *The Trialogue business in society handbook 2022*, 25th edn., pp. 73–77, viewed from https://trialogue.co.za/businessinsocietyhandbook/trialogue-business-in-society-handbook-2022/.)

Funding into the education sector has also resulted in various funding models, for example, public–private partnerships, where government and companies work together to reach a common goal. In the context of education, well-known partnerships include the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), the Joint Education Trust (JET) and the National Business Initiative (NBI).

The current and forecasted basic education budget, the financial injection from CSI initiatives from the private sector, as well as private–public partnerships suggests that basic education in South Africa is substantially funded, but that there remains a disconnectedness between the financial inputs and the learner performance outputs. This suggests that funding is not the main reason for poor learner performance and that other factors are at play. This article posits the idea that while there are several features that impede the successful realisation of academic interventions in South African primary schools, violence and the resultant trauma are key factors.



Source: Trialogue, 2022, *The Trialogue business in society handbook 2022*, 25th edn., viewed from https://trialogue.co.za/businessinsocietyhandbook/trialogue-business-in-society-handbook-2022/

FIGURE 3: Focus of corporate social investment education interventions and initiatives in South Africa. (a), Level of education; (b), Subject area; (c), Type of learner support interventions; (d), Type of intervention.

Synthesising the focus and effects of selected primary school learning interventions in South Africa

It is out of the scope of this article to list and evaluate all the academic interventions provided by the government or the private sector that seek to improve learner performance in primary schools. Instead, to highlight the prevailing impact of these interventions, this section uses the findings of systematic reviews and meta-analyses of the existing evaluations to illustrate the argument that underscores this article. This means that unless interventions that seek to improve learner performance centre the psychosocial well-being of learners and have a deeper understanding of how trauma affects learning, the substantial impact will be unobtainable.

The systematic review conducted by Meiklejohn et al. (2021) found that between 2005 and 2020, 230 articles emerged after a search for literacy or reading interventions in South African primary schools. After applying the criteria, which required studies to have undergone a peer review, 21 articles were analysed, with interventions being categorised as small-scale, large-scale and longitudinal.

The main findings from this review suggest that the interventions were located in the Western Cape, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, with no coverage in the Northern Cape. This is interesting given that Western Cape and Gauteng have better functioning academic administrations, and Eastern Cape is among the provinces with the poorest academic output. The phase coverage of the interventions ranges from ECD to the intermediate phase, with most of the interventions focussed on the intermediate phase, which includes catch-up interventions for the language transition that occurs in Grade 4. The authors highlight that learning interventions focussing on literacy in South African primary schools have been uncoordinated and ad hoc and 'have not wrought systemic change' (Meiklejohn et al. 2021:1).

A meta-analysis that analysed evaluations of interventions that improve learner performance in South Africa was conducted by Besharati, Fleisch and Tsotsotso (2021). The meta-analysis highlighted mostly locally produced studies not captured in international journals. The objective of this meta-analysis was to focus on studies that aim to improve learner outcomes and achievement. The meta-analysis was divided into eight categories: learner-targeted support, teacher development initiatives, learning and teaching study materials, management and governance, infrastructure and facilities, structural reforms (including policy), community and family involvement, and integrated school development. After the review criteria were applied, the researchers were left with 35 studies, 37 interventions and 135 effect sizes.

The study found several important insights into the evaluation of education interventions that focus on learner performance and improvement. The study found that literacy interventions are more impactful when implemented in earlier grades in primary schools; learning interventions that focus on sciences and other learning areas taught at higher stages of schooling result in a much lower impact than learning occurring in literacy and numeracy in lower grades; additional staff, including teachers and support staff, have a significant impact on learner performance in the higher grades; and the provision of effective teaching and learning material can be as effective as large scale academic interventions on learner performance. Coupled with this, the study highlighted that the interventions conducted by academic researchers yielded a larger effect size than 'ongoing education policies and programmes run in large-scale policy environments by government or major private-public partnerships' (Besharati et al. 2021:52). In conclusion, this meta-analysis concurred with the findings of Meiklejohn et al. (2021) that the impact of these interventions was not significant. These researchers found that (Besharati et al. 2021):

> [*N*]otwithstanding the financial, technical and political resources invested in the education sector, this study has confirmed that very few interventions have had a substantial impact on learning outcomes in South Africa's public school system. (p. 54)

The findings of Besharati et al's study (2021) concurs with earlier studies (see Bloch, 2009; Fleisch, 2008).

In October 2021, Van der Berg published a report that analysed the impact of five ECD programmes using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) that benchmarks ECD learners' performance at the age of four to five (Van der Berg 2021). The evaluations that took place in 2018 used the ELOM total score, which is the sum of scores based on 23 direct assessment items. The items are clustered into five domains and include: Fine and Gross Motor Development; Visual Motor Integration; Cognition and Executive Functioning; Emergent Literacy and Language; and Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics. The evaluation found 'relatively large benefits for children in poorer contexts, who would otherwise start Grade R with considerable deficits' (Van der Berg 2021:12). This means that the effects in all five programmes observed were substantial and thus the programmes remain promising. However, it must be noticed that the evaluations took place in ECDs that were considered high functioning, and the results would probably not be replicated in a low functioning or dysfunctional learning context.

The Zenex Foundation, a grant maker established in the mid-nineties, has invested about R1 billion into the South African education system to date. It has commissioned several key pieces of research that explain the dynamics of teaching and learning, including evaluations that illuminate the efficacy of various teaching and learning interventions in the country. One such report, published in 2016, was a meta-analysis that explored:

> [*T*]he various contextual factors and design features that influence the magnitude of the effects reported in education impact studies … [*to*] inform new programming, and improve efforts to address education challenges. (Zenex Foundation 2022:1)

The meta-analysis compared a common control group – South African schools with no interventions and schools that participated in selected education interventions. These interventions included: Child-friendly Schools; Dinaledi Schools Project; Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy; Anglo American Projects; District Development Support Programme; IMBEWU; Quality Learning Project; Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships; and Khanyisa. The meta-analysis found that few education interventions had a substantial impact on learning outcomes, simple interventions are often more effective, interventions implemented among younger learners had a larger effect size and it is difficult to do a cost-effectiveness analysis because budgets do not reflect all incomes or services (Zenex Foundation 2022:4). Lastly, like the findings of Besharati et al. (2021), academic experiments or interventions yielded the largest effect size, although these effect sizes may not be reproduced if they were implemented in a different policy space.

This section demonstrated that, apart from the ECD interventions, academic interventions in South African primary schools lack the ability to achieve substantial systemic changes despite the considerable financial investment. The last part of this section investigates the possible reasons for the poor academic performance of primary school learners despite substantial financial support.

Reasons for poor academic performance in South African primary schools

Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) believe that money is not the key reason for the underperformance of South Africa's learners. South Africa's education budget is comparable to OECD countries and exceeds many of its peers in sub-Saharan Africa. Based on existing literature, the challenges that impact learner performance can be categorised into four dimensions, as shown in Figure 4 and include macro- or country-level factors; school or institutional-level factors; teacher-related factors and learner-related factors. This section will briefly discuss each of these separately, with the acknowledgement that they are interrelated.

Macro and/or country level factors affecting academic performance in primary schools

South Africa's history of segregation and separate development included vast variations in the provision of basic education. Funding, resources and infrastructure were allocated based on racial grounds, which is foundational to the high level of inequalities experienced by learners in schools today. Schools that were previously marginalised remain so, despite policy changes, particularly in rural settings (Singh 2022). High levels of unemployment in the country, currently at 33% (61% of 15–24-year-olds), outranking Gaza and the West Bank, Djibouti and Kosovo (Magome 2023), heavily impact family units and communities as basic needs overshadow the need for schooling. In cases such as these, learners, if they can attend school, often go to school hungry, tired and disengaged because of their poverty-stricken realities.

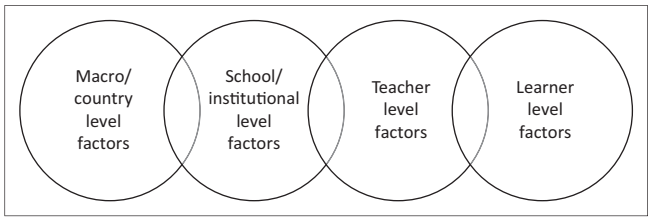


FIGURE 4: Factors that impact academic performance in South African primary schools.

School and/or institutional factors affecting learning academic performance in primary schools

The report published by Amnesty International (2020) titled 'Broken and Unequal' highlights that crumbling infrastructure, poor sanitation, no or non-working toilets, the use of pit latrines, little to no reading material (resulting in deviated outcomes between schools) and basic educational resources, no access to technology or even adequate seating in classrooms severely impact children's ability to learn. As such, the school context becomes a source of anxiety, compounding existing anxieties from challenges learners face in their homes and communities. Another school-related factor that impacts learner performance negatively is the inefficiency of School Management Teams (SMTs) who are unable to articulate and support the needs of learners and teachers, despite having the institutional autonomy to do so (Mlachila & Moeletsi 2019).

Teacher level factors affecting learner academic performance in primary schools

The recent CDE (2023:6) report noticed that teacher subject content knowledge in South Africa is 'extremely low'. If we agree with the adage that the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, then it is no surprise that learners are underperforming. Although South African teachers are well-compensated by international standards, their subject content knowledge is less than that of their peers in the sub-Saharan Africa region and, in certain instances, it is so bad that they are outperformed by the learners they are supposed to be teaching (Mlachila & Moeletsi 2019).

Coupled with this, learning is disrupted because of the high teacher absenteeism rate. In 2010, Reddy et al. found that teachers in South Africa missed about 11% of teaching time. More recently, South Africa has been listed as the country with the highest rates of teacher absenteeism in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. The average in the SADC region is 9 days a year, but in South Africa, the average is 19 days (Msosa 2020; News24 2013). Msosa (2020) found that between 10% and 12% of teachers do not come to work, amounting to 39 000 teachers daily, and, in 77% of these instances, teachers were absent on a Monday and/or on a Friday. Other teacher-related factors that affect learners' academic performance include teacher burnout, particularly among young teachers, resulting in poor

teaching and learning engagements (Kapp et al. 2023). The root cause is often attributed to having to deal with overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources, limited time to institute interventions, the prescriptiveness of the curriculum and learners' behavioural issues. Lastly, one of the greatest challenges related to teachers in South Africa is the low accountability and effort, which has devastating effects on learners' academic performance (Van der Berg et al. 2011). However, this issue is common in developing countries (Mbiti 2016).

Learner-level factors affecting learning academic performance in primary schools

Learners enter the classroom with a wealth of experience and knowledge of their own context. They bring with them the knowledge and experiences of their families, their communities and their peers, and these experiences can be either healthy, dysfunctional or somewhere in between. Healthy relationships and living environments have a positive impact on learner performance (Yu et al. 2023). Conversely, unhealthy environments and relationships have adverse effects on learner performance. Romano et al. (2015) observe that there is a strong correlation between child maltreatment and academic performance despite their intellectual abilities or developmental delays. The underperformance of South African learners can be attributed to several things. Firstly, children who experience abuse in their homes are unlikely to perform well in school. Johnson et al. (2021), in their analysis of a national survey on child well-being in America, found that children who were placed in child protective services were shown to have lower academic achievement. This was echoed by McGaha-Garnett (2013), adding to the work of Iarskaia-Smir nova, Romanov and Antonova (2008:2), who found that 'children from dysfunctional families are less likely to function successfully at school'. Secondly, poverty, defined as a lack of basic needs, is also considered as a factor that negatively impacts learner performance. Newman (2017:10) argues that 'there is a correlation between the wealth of the population and the education levels of its children'. Learners who hail from poor families often face insurmountable challenges that negatively impact their ability to learn, for example, walking long distances or commuting for more than an hour to get to school and insufficient nutritional intake. Thirdly, poor relationships also negatively impact learner performance, including learner–teacher relationships and learner–learner relationships. Yu et al. (2023) notice that the quality of personal relationships is significantly and positively correlated with academic performance. Fourthly, children who grow up in violent communities where gross violence is normalised struggle to concentrate in class and perform academically. The study by Kalam et al. (2016) came to similar conclusions when it found that:

> [*F*]actors such as limited resources within the community, high rates of unemployment, high prevalence of gangsterism and use of drugs by community members, high rates of teenage pregnancies and violence were identified as factors that affected the learners negatively. (p. 62)

The factors listed here suggest that when children are exposed to violence when they live in unsafe spaces, and when their learning, physical and emotional needs are not sufficiently met, it is unlikely that they will excel in school. As such, this article posits that, of all the challenges primary school learners face, the prevalence of violence (in all its manifestations) and the resultant trauma is the biggest hindrance to learners realising their full academic potential. This sentiment has been echoed by Chávez and Aguilar (2021), who argue that violence is the greatest threat to children's educational outcomes. As such, learning interventions that seek to improve learner performance need to consider the psychosocial context of learners in their programme development. The section 'Understanding the complexity of violence in South Africa' discusses the varied ways in which violence can manifest itself in a South African context and how these acts of violence and resultant traumas impact children's learning and limit learning interventions from sufficiently realising their objectives.

Understanding the complexity of violence in South Africa

This section theorises violence and how it impacts teaching and learning in primary schools.

Violence is one of the most defining factors of South Africa's political history. Heinecken (2020) observes that, with such a long history of violence, it becomes difficult to curtail, especially because its use was legitimised politically. The Global Peace Index lists South Africa as one of the most violent countries in the world, with very little improvement in sight (Institute for Economics and Peace 2023). Johan Galtung (1969:168), in his seminal work on violence, writes that violence 'is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations'. Galtung's (1969) conception of violence is useful because his delineation of violence helps us understand the complexity of how violence is embedded in the lived realities of primary school children. He differentiates between three forms of violence: direct, structural (indirect) and cultural (which emerged in his later work), all of which are indicative of learners' experiences (Galtung 1969).

Direct violence

Direct violence refers to violence that is physical or psychological that threatens the existence of life such as killing, sexual assault and bullying. Galtung (1969) says:

> We shall refer to the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as personal or direct … where the consequences can be traced back to concrete persons as actors. (p. 170)

This is also referred to as interpersonal violence, which, as recent police statistics in South Africa suggest, is the most common violence experienced by learners in schools.

A recent crime quarterly released by the South African Police Services emphasised the scale of gross violence against children in schools, including its consistency over the last several years (South African Police Services 2023). Of the approximately 28 children who are violently attacked daily, three do not survive (UNICEF 2021). Rape, murder, attempted murder, robbery and assault have become commonplace in our primary schools, with learners and teachers being both victims and perpetrators. The crime statistics for the second quarter of 2022–2023 revealed the horrifying reality of 83 rapes and 19 murders committed on the premises of educational facilities, including primary, secondary and high schools, day care facilities, special schools and tertiary institutions. There were six rapes at day care centres, five at special needs schools and tertiary institutions, and 67 at schools (Van Zyl 2023).

Structural violence (or indirect)

Structural violence is embedded within societies and social systems that use power dynamics that result in discrimination and (human) rights abuses. These forms of violence are often referred to as social injustice or epistemic violence. Galtung (1969) argues:

> The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances … [*the*] resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education are unevenly distributed, medical services exist in some districts and for some groups only … [*furthermore*] the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed … (p. 171)

As one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution, inequality permeates every aspect of South African social life, which includes the way children learn. A recent report published by the CDE highlights that '[t]he failure to meaningfully transform South Africa's dysfunctional schooling system, *despite significant public expenditure*, is the quiet crisis and disaster of the democratic era' (CDE 2023:1). The CDE (2023) report further proclaims:

> South Africa remains at the bottom of all international tables on learning outcomes: reading, maths, science. As a result, the majority of poor, mainly black, children in South Africa still do not receive the education they need to escape poverty. This is a national emergency that must be addressed. (p. 4)

To support this notion of education in crisis, the report indicates that recent research into learner performance at primary school levels demonstrates that more than three-quarters of learners in Grade 4 cannot read for meaning and nearly half of *all* schools are *cognitive wastelands* because, although learners are attending school, not much learning occurs. In addition, while it has been widely observed that socio economically poor areas contain bad schools and the opposite is true in affluent areas, in South Africa, these disparities are blatant and glaring (Ferreira & Gignoux 2014). In addition to suboptimal teaching and learning, the lack of resources required to support good quality teaching, remains problematic (Amnesty International, 2020).

Cultural violence

Cultural violence is dominant belief patterns that are used to reinforce discriminative thinking and actions, such as racism, discrimination (gender, religion, et cetera) and cultural value (e.g. Western morality as a globally accepted standard of morality delegitimising other ways of being). Galtung (1990) argues that cultural violence is:

> [*T*]hose aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science [*logic, mathematics*] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. (p. 291)

Schools are peculiar institutions in that they are, on the one hand, an extension of the political economy reflecting the values and laws of the state visible in its policies, but, on the other hand, they are also microcosms of society in that they reflect the dominant social norms that prevail in society through the social exchanges and interactions of teachers and learners. As such, in South Africa, while schools find themselves in a democratic political context, the social norms that persist within schools militate against this political paradigm as racism, sexism and discrimination remain commonplace.

There have been numerous reports of discrimination at schools. An example of the kinds of discrimination experienced by learners in South African schools is highlighted through the experiences of black learners who were told 'to chemically straighten their hair and not have afros that were deemed untidy' (Agence France-Presse 2016). There is no lack of similar incidences occurring, even within the past 5 years. These include incidents relating to racism (Head 2021; Mahlokwane 2021) as well as homophobia (McCain 2021; Somduth 2021).

In addition to the violence directly perpetrated at young children in South Africa, is the stress and trepidation that accompanies witnessing violence within their communities. Children's exposure to violence in various aspects of their lives (home life and school) is highly prevalent in South Africa, and their access to safe spaces is limited (Chauke 2023; Kaminer et al. 2013). Donenberg et al. (2020) argue that community violence in South Africa remains widespread with 70% of children either being victims of or witnessing violence. Exposure to violence has long-term implications for children's mental health including their inability to regulate their emotions and navigate complex social scenarios as well as adverse effects on learning (Donenberg et al. 2020). It is very difficult to measure the effects of experiencing or witnessing violence as the human cost of grief cannot be calculated, but its effects can be inferred from how children learn.

Coloniality and the legacy of violence in South Africa

Although the phenomenon of violence in Africa 'has pervaded African people's lives across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial historical epochs' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:379), it was the invasion and colonisation of South Africa by the British and the Dutch that shaped the psychology of violence in the country (Pillay 2022). Governance through violence

became indicative of South Africa from colonial times to apartheid, where the use of militaristic force and physical aggression to enforce the status quo was explicit and common. As such, the high levels of violence currently experienced in South Africa reflect the complexity of the country's past and present. Many South Africans still need to fight for survival, but also peace, freedom and prosperity that should have accompanied the the ushering in of democracy. The structural and spatial inequalities found in many parts of the country provide fertile ground for the proliferation of violence.

The relationship between coloniality and violence in Africa and South Africa is contentious. Although the postcolonial and post-apartheid state was able to make the shift politically, the powerful force of coloniality was able to embed and reproduce itself within African nationalism. Coloniality, as Maldonado-Torres (2007 cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:423) argues, has survived colonialism and 'persists in present day and old books, the criteria for academic performance, cultural patterns, "common sense," the image of peoples, and in aspirations and perceptions of self'. According to him, human beings, 'as modern subjects, live and breathe coloniality all the time and every day'.

What coloniality in this context helps us understand is that violence in South Africa is a historical legacy, which is closely linked to feelings of frustration, disillusionment, anger and the realisation that the social contract is broken. Unfortunately, this legacy is having damning effects on the future of children in South Africa, particularly the poor.

Incidences of violence against primary school learners and teachers are often reported in the media, as noted earlier (also see Cebo 2023; Van Zyl 2023), but what these reports often fail to highlight is the pervasiveness of trauma that lingers long after wounds have healed. The section 'Learning with trauma' highlights the effects on children living and learning with trauma.

Learning with trauma

The argument underscoring this article, as reiterated earlier, is that, in the context of persistent polyvictimisation, children in primary schools develop substantial learning challenges. As such, learning interventions that seek to improve learner outcomes in South Africa should highlight learners' well-being and take cognisance of learners' psychological states when developing learning support programmes. Without this, interventions are unlikely to fully realise their objectives.

The literature on the effect of trauma on children's ability to learn is substantial, and the theories are well supported. For example, Cruz et al. (2022) highlight that children experiencing trauma will undergo a significant shift in their developmental trajectory, including the way in which they learn. Swingler (2019) is of the opinion that trauma is linked to a range of outcomes, including addiction, self-harm, psychiatric disorders, depression and chronic physical conditions that militate against effective learning. MacKillop Family Services (2023) perspicaciously notes that, even when the violent incidents have ended, the resultant trauma remains stressful for children, leaving very little room for learning. They further note that children's '… constant state of tension and arousal can leave them unable to concentrate, pay attention, retain and recall new information. Their behaviour is often challenging in the school environment' (MacKillop Family Services 2023:Para 5). Koposov et al. (2021) echo all of these and, as a result of their empirical study across Belgium, Russia and the United States, conclude that exposure to violence is negatively associated with academic performance. Cook et al. (2005) summarise the effects of trauma on children's ability to learn. They postulate that traumatised children display several negative learning behaviours, including difficulty in maintaining sustained attention, challenges relating to processing information and completing tasks, challenges with language development, and challenges related to space and time orientation (Cook et al. 2005).

In the South African context, Kaminer (2020) notes that exposure to violence is commonplace for South African children, both inside and outside the home. She argues further that not only are children experiencing the violence themselves, but they are also witnessing gross violence and just because they are commonplace does not mean children are desensitised or that the impact of violence and trauma is benign (Kaminer 2020). She highlights several effects of trauma on teaching and learning, which support other global and local literature on the topic by saying (Kaminer 2020):

> Children with PTS [*post-traumatic stress*] are constantly attuned to signs of possible threat and danger, and focused on how to keep themselves safe, even if there are no objective threats in the classroom or school environment. As a result, their brain is not able to concentrate on learning, remembering and thinking about school tasks. Marked changes in a child's school performance in the aftermath of a traumatic event can, therefore, be a signal of distress of a brain that has shifted into survival mode rather than learning mode. (p. 2)

Given these effects of trauma and violence on children's ability to learn, instituting psychological strategies into educational programmes to support learning becomes imperative.

Conclusion

At the end of April 2023, a Grade R and a Grade 1 learner from Riebeckstraat Primary School became victims of gang violence and were rushed to hospital for sustaining injuries caused by stray bullets (Cebo 2023). Not long after, a teacher was raped and robbed at an Educare Centre in Phillipi, a township situated in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. These are only two of the many incidents primary school children in South Africa encounter daily. Schools' ought to be safe spaces where learners develop socially and intellectually. However, recent crime statistics suggest that schools are not safe and not capable of protecting the most vulnerable cohort of our population.

In this context, this article argues that learning interventions in South African public primary schools will be more

impactful, as reflected in learner outcomes and disposition to learn, if learners' psychological dispositions are understood, acknowledged and centred. The article commenced by mapping the status of primary education in South Africa. This was followed by a discussion of the financial input from the government and the private sector into basic education, a systematic review of the effects of prevailing learning interventions in the country, and the various factors that prevent learners from reaching their full academic potential. The article then highlighted violence in the context of South Africa, philosophically and empirically, through the work of Galtung (1969, 1990) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012). The last section discussed the impact of trauma on teaching and learning and advocated for ensuring learning interventions in primary school foreground learners' psychological dispositions when they are being developed.

Violence and trauma are etched into the fabric of South African culture as remnants of eras gone by, and the effects are like a noose tightly wrapped. Not acknowledging children's psychological state is being dismissive of their lived realities. This dismissiveness is a key mechanism of coloniality. In the context of coloniality, as a persistence of the colonial project, Tlostanova (2014:64) argues that 'victims are forced to forgive and forget' by creating a 'convenient version of the past', which paves the way for a more stable and sanitised future. This, she argues, is the 'colonization of memory'. The effects of generations of trauma and violence, including clear and present violence, cannot be wished away. It requires coordinated, intentional approaches to transformation.

The most glaring limitation of considering learners' psychological states when teaching them is that we expect more of our teachers. We expect them to do a lot with few resources or little professional development. We expect teachers to be the saviours of education while we also often vilify them. We expect teachers to fix a problem in school that has its root cause in ineffective governance and historical legacies. Further to this, private businesses are limited in the time and finances they can spend on interventions. Often, interventions are short-lived, a key factor disallowing their efficacy. While any help is better than no help at all, there is a need for a more coordinated approach to learning interventions in public primary schools. We need trauma-informed schools supported by trauma-informed learning programmes. Schools should be spaces where the dignity of children is protected and preserved, and this is reflected in the context in which we allow children to learn. Well-resourced schools with the necessary teaching and learning infrastructures are not optional. They are a fundamental right and a policy imperative.

South Africa has an impressive enrolment of learners in basic education, almost at 98%, which shows that there have been worthwhile gains in education in a post-apartheid context. However, we know that being in a classroom does not mean a child is learning. This article highlights the crises of poor academic performance in South African primary schools and posits the idea that, if learning interventions are to be successful, the psychosocial context and well-being of learners need to be centred.

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