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**Which Way Equitable Access to Quality and Relevant Education  
in South Africa? A Comparative Review of NGO versus Quintile  
One Primary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province**



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## Which Way Equitable Access to Quality and Relevant Education in South Africa? A Comparative Review of NGO versus Quintile One Primary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to explore the direction the South African education is taking regarding ensuring equitable access to quality and relevant education focusing on primary education level and by way of comparing an NGO philanthropic primary school and Quintile One primary schools. The setting was the rural, low income and underserved communities of KwaZulu-Natal province.

**Methodology:** The study utilised a qualitative research design. The study population included the school management members and grade 1-6 teachers in both school settings with a sample size of 27 purposively selected participants. In addition, documents were reviewed and observations of the study sites made. Data were analysed using TAGUETTE software. The researchers ensured that all necessary ethical guidelines were followed before, during data collection, analysis, and dissemination through this article.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that the NGO philanthropic primary school was more prepared to provide equitable access to quality and relevant education in KwaZulu-Natal province than the Quintile One primary schools. The NGO School had relatively adequate funds to build the necessary physical infrastructure, facilities, employ quality teachers, and to build and sustain a conducive teaching and learning environment compared to the Quintile One primary schools that lacked the aforementioned features.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:** The study recommends that the government of South Africa at national and provincial levels should allocate adequate resources to facilitate the Quintile One primary schools to ensure equitable access to quality and relevant education. In addition, it is enjoined to review the school curriculum to respond to national and international labour market demands. This study makes a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education as an equalising tool in South Africa and among the nations implementing the SDGs specifically, SDG-4 on education.

**Keywords:** *Equitable Access, Quality and Relevant Education, Quintile One Schools, SDG-4.*



## Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right underscored by various international development agendas including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically, SDG-4 on education. The essence of the SDG-4 is to ensure equitable access to quality and relevant education, and promotion of lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2021). Education as a human right and intended to benefit all is an imperative to equal access to development opportunities. Therefore, is important that educational systems and policies are designed to be responsive to the educational needs of a society in the global perspective. The key foci of SDG-4 include free primary education by 2030; equal access to quality pre-primary education; increase in the number of qualified teachers; educational facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive; elimination of disparities in education; universal youth and adult education; education buildings that are, disability, and gender sensitive; and an increase in the supply of qualified teachers.

It is claimed that realising the SDG-4 goals on education requires an educational ecosystem with systems and policies that promote inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021; Chien & Knoble, 2024). The systems and policies should ensure inclusivity, where all individuals of school going age regardless of their background, have access to quality and relevant education; equity in education with emphasis on elimination of disparities and promotion of equal opportunities for all; and quality education characterised by qualified teachers, curricula relevant to community needs, and effective learning outcomes and impact. Further, there should be promotion of lifelong learning with interested individuals having opportunities for continuous learning, skills development and behaviour change throughout their lives. However, the question that seems to remain unsatisfactorily answered mostly in the developing world is whether and how the educational systems and policies speak to the goal of equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning.

Studies across the globe seem to post mixed results about the alignment of the educational systems and policies to meeting the SDG-4 goal on education (Kawuryan & Sayuti, 2021; Wehye & Asimwe, 2024a; Wehye & Asimwe, 2024b). In addition, it seems that a number of non-state actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are providing enormous support to the educational sectors in the developing world to ensure better quality education though, may not be as equitable as the public education system would be (Brophy, 2020). Inquiries into the directionality of educational sectors regarding equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning are key to better programming of educational activities and resources.

Consistent with the global aspirations on education, the efforts of the basic educational policy in South Africa aim to ensure that all school going citizens of the country have equitable access to quality and relevant education, and lifelong learning. Moreover, the South African educational system has undergone several reforms since 1994 to promote inclusive education after decades of apartheid regime's exclusionist education system that limited certain sections of the country's population from accessing quality and relevant education for decades (van der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018). This attracted initiative to equalize access to educational opportunities, among others, calling for more resources from both government and non-

government actors serving the underserved populations. Consequently, the Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding (ANNSSF) was introduced to promote equitable funding to education. The schools were ranked in five quintiles according to their degree of need for equalisation support. At the bottom of the pyramid of this classification is Quintile One for the poorest schools and quintile five at the top for the wealthy schools (White & Van Dyk, 2019). Importantly to note is that Quintile one schools, which are no fee paying institutions mainly serve the remote and rural, low-income, underserved, and marginalized communities of South Africa. While these initiatives intended to promote equality in access to educational opportunities, massive gaps in providing high-quality primary school education especially in the remote rural, low-income, underserved, and marginalized communities seem to remain persistent.

Studies on the South African educational sector seem to suggest that the direction of the systems and policies that guide education are not moving in tandem with the expectations of the society (van der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018; Mokhosi, 2023). The major issues relate to inequality and access to education as many schools in rural and impoverished areas lack adequate resources and infrastructure; the quality of education remains low with wide variations between public and private, rural and urban schools; many students in public schools failing to demonstrate basic literacy and numeracy skills; and low transition rates due to high dropout rates. Relatedly, Lumadi (2020) asserts that there are several blockages that limit fostering equitable education such as discrimination, gender stereotypes, and racial and social discrimination. Mutekwe (2020) notes the debilitating status of low physical and financial capacity of the educational sector to ensure equity education. Meanwhile, Mensah and Baidoo-Anu (2022) observe that schools with better resources in terms of funding and accommodating students with higher socioeconomic status enjoyed access to better quality education suggesting that students from low social economic backgrounds who happen to be in more need of education as a means of social justice miss out on that opportunity. These and other related issues in the South African educational sector shaped the central question of this paper, “which way accessing equitable, quality, and relevant education in South Africa?”

### **Research problem and justification**

South Africa like other nations signatory to the SDGs established a national framework for achieving the set goals by 2030. This included establishing educational systems and policies aligned to meeting the 17 SDGs including SDG-4 on education, whose main outcome is equitable access to quality and relevant education and lifelong learning. The Education Sector Plan 2019-2023 is the current blue print guiding the education sector. These efforts supplemented the earlier institutional frameworks such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 (Act 84 of 1996) that was enacted to provide a legal and policy framework to ensure all learners have equal access to educational opportunities. Such initiatives came with increased investment in educational facilities, teacher training, and school enrolment overtime. Conversely, as noted by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), Lumadi (2020), and Mutekwe (2020), South Africa faces challenges with delivering accessible, equitable, relevant, and quality public education for all. Amnesty International (2020) notes that 19 percent of rural schools use illegal pit latrines for sanitation, 86 percent of the schools have

no laboratories; 77 percent have no internet access; 42 percent have no sports facilities; while 293 schools do not have electricity. Moreover, 56 percent of the school principals reported a shortage of physical infrastructure; while 70 percent of them reported a shortage of library materials.

Meanwhile, the urban rural gap remains persistent in performance of science subjects with rural schools posting dismal performance in the basics of numeracy and literacy. These results seem to point to the educational system and policy that could have veered off the intended direction of guiding the educational sector to meeting the SDG-4. While these studies appear to suggest that there are challenges in the public education sector in the country, no current study has done an empirical comparison of the contribution of the Quintile One schools and NGO philanthropic school on promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education in the underserved rural communities of South Africa. Moreover, no extant literature has explained this phenomenon from the theoretical lens of educational equity theory which posits that education is a tool that can facilitate or inhibit socioeconomic transition depending on whether it is equitably accessible or not. The paper answers one research question “which way accessing equitable, quality, and relevant education in South Africa? This is realised by comparing the NGO philanthropic primary school and the Quintile One primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal province. This study is expected to provide more nuanced claims about the direction of the education sector regarding meeting the SDG-4 goals and to guide policy research and practice on the barriers to equitable access to quality and relevant education, the contribution of non-state actors such as NGOs, and what steps may possibly be taken to enhance equitable access to quality and relevant education by the underserved communities.

### **Literature review**

The study applied the Educational Equity Theory (EET) or equity in education by Marx (1975) and Brookover and Lezotte (1981) – the Marxists. The framework considers education as a means to legitimise and reproduce class inequalities in a society through creating a submissive class and workforce. The theory posits that education may be used on the one hand, to prepare children of the high class for positions of power and dominance in society, while on the other hand, those of the poor are prepared to provide cheap labour with little opportunities for class transition. The thesis is that education, can be used as a tool to create and sustain class segregation in society. The anti-thesis of this theory would hold that education can be used as a tool to promote equity in society when the same quality of education that is relevant to society’s common needs like meeting SDG-4 targets in the contemporary times is accessible to all regardless of their socioeconomic diversity. As a lens to review the effectiveness of education, Educational Equity Theory focuses on whether there are disparities in the education service delivery system that could lead to building, and sustaining a hierarchical class structure with pronounced divides between the rich, and the poor (Thobejane, 2005).

The theory is alive to the fact that education can create shifts in the socioeconomic status of the population when all members are guaranteed access to quality and relevant education when education becomes a position of struggle for social justice. The reverse is also likely true when such access to quality and relevant education is a reserve for a few members of the society when education reinforces dominant ideologies and ultimately, perpetuates social inequality.

To reproduce class strictures, education facilitates the rich to produce leaders while the poor to produce submissive labour force for the rich. Barth (2016) considers equity in education to mean a situation where governments or the education system itself permits all students the resources they need to receive, an adequate education regardless of their socioeconomic or demographic background. Thus, education addressing both material conditions and ideological challenges. As observed by Jurado De Los Santos et al. (2020), equity in education should ensure that the systems and policies fairly redistribute common goods, and provide additional resources for all eligible students to have access to quality education.

This theory is cognizant of the association between money, class, and the quality of education individuals in society receive. It recognises the reality that children from wealthy families are positioned to receive better education from institutions that have the necessary scholastic materials and supportive educational infrastructure than those from the poor setting who settle for institutions that lack the necessary support facilities. It provides a comparator between the institutions studied in terms of what resources they have, the facilities in place, opportunities for equitable access to education, the quality and relevance of the education provided, and its likely contribution to meeting the educational goals of South Africa. To operationalize the theory, researchers hypothesise that for any educational system or policy that aims at promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education, there must be certain resources, facilities, and conditions to promote learning for all regardless of their socioeconomic status. Therefore, such systems and policies must first address such factors that drive equitable access to and the quality and relevance of education including funding to the schools, availability of qualified teaching staff, physical facilities, and other resources necessary for effective teaching and learning. For the purpose of this paper, the Educational Equity Theory provided an explanatory framework for the direction of equitable access to quality and relevant education comparing the NGO philanthropic primary school and the quintile one primary schools both serving rural, low-income, underserved, and marginalized communities in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa.

Studies on equitable access to quality and relevant education assert that appropriate funding to the education sector ensures a presence of adequate resources to promote the goals of education (Oseni et al., 2020). Allocation of enough financial resources guarantees high school enrolment, availability of physical facilities classrooms, laboratories, libraries, furniture, computers, and others, and scholastic materials to support teaching and learning. However, studies from the developing world report low funding to the education sector (Mawoyo & Vally, 2020). While UNESCO recommends that governments spend at least 26 percent of annual public budget on education for effective implementation of education programmes for realisation of SDG-4 goals, public expenditure analyses over time show that many developing countries spend less than 26 percent. Low spending on education especially primary education comes out as a serious setback to ensuring equitable access to quality and relevant education (Oseni et al., 2020). Inadequate provision of resources, and weak infrastructure including toilets, libraries, and classrooms in primary schools negatively impacted teacher performance, student learning outcomes, educational attainment, primary school attendance rates, and primary school enrolment rates. Meanwhile, evidence shows that developing countries that spent the 26 percent of their yearly budget towards education

achieved high primary school enrolment and student retention rates; consequently, positively impacting secondary school enrolment and the quality of learners that were transitioning up the ladder of education. These arguments tend to accentuate the principle of education equity theory that education should address material conditions, not just ideological ones.

Debates on factors that drive achievement of educational goals especially, in primary schools affirm that teacher quality plays a significant role in the provision of equitable access to quality and relevant primary school education (Bold et al., 2017). It is noted that schools with low quality teachers especially, those with inadequate pedagogical knowledge and skills provided weak academic leadership and produced learners with low academic grades in literacy and numeracy. Low quality teachers have a negative instructional impact, are more likely to widen achievement gaps, negatively affect school culture, and perpetuate social and economic inequalities. Moreover, lack of teacher training denies the education sector adequate human resources to promote equitable access to quality and relevant education. As noted by Wehye and Asiimwe (2024a), inadequacy of teaching staff both in numbers and qualifications and limited opportunities for further education hinders advancement of education as a fundamental right to children. This situation compromises access to quality and relevant education giving an advantage to those that attend schools with better facilities to maintain a dominant position in the society.

Some studies demonstrate that unfavourable work conditions associated with low funding and strenuous working environment characterised by heavy workload, under staffing, and lack of educational resources and infrastructure leads to poor teacher performance, and stress (van Niekerk et al., 2021). These conditions affect the level of school enrolment, staff and students' retention, and academic performance. Moreover, disadvantaged students such as those from the low socioeconomic status, the girl child, those living with disabilities, and minority groups miss the opportunity to obtain an education that would give them the requisite grades to join secondary schools with better academic standards. Working conditions may equally affect the pedagogical choices teachers make. Crowded classrooms may force teachers to apply teaching approaches that are not appropriate to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviour of students. As noted by Asiimwe and Magunda (2023), how and what teachers teach promotes both quality and relevance of education. Poorly taught learners in their future suffer transition failure to join higher socioeconomic status. The graduates of such an education system come with a level of knowledge, skills, and behaviour that limit them to low income jobs perpetuating their despondent position in society.

School choice is considered to be an enabling or limiting factor to equitable access to quality and relevant education. Lee (2016) notes that school choice causes geographic and social segregation in cases where student enrolment is residence-based, and schools with the better facilities are located far from the rural and underserved communities or in the more affluent residential areas where families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds cannot afford to send their children. In addition, schools that sort students by ability and socioeconomic status promote inequitable access to educational opportunities thus perpetuate racial, and geographic segregation (OECD, 2019). For example, high-performing schools are found to be inaccessible to the underprivileged due to high school charges. This situation is exacerbated

by transportation challenges, lengthy enrolment processes and requirements, and counter funding expected from parents which families in poor communities cannot afford. These arguments seem to suggest that school choice to ensure equitable access to quality and relevant education to the poor should ensure inclusivity during enrolment, equitable funding based on student needs other than type or location of school, and accessibility to transport opportunities for the low income class.

Several studies make recommendations on how developing nations can create and sustain conditions that are favourable for the provision of equitable access to quality and relevant primary school education in developing nations (Wehye & Asimwe, 2024a). Initiatives such as partnerships with key educational stakeholders such as NGOs; increasing investing in educational resources, and infrastructure; and shifting away from exam-orientated teaching to competences based approaches were considered to enhance equitable access to quality and relevant education. Further, providing pre-service and in-service teacher training, and developing effectively implementing policies that promote inclusive education for students with special needs were considered to support accessibility to educational opportunities by all. While most of these recommendations are within the allocative purview of the national governments through annual budgets, attraction of NGOs whether local or international is a dimension that requires streamlining.

Extant literature supports the world view that NGOs have a significant contribution to improving the standards of basic education in developing countries including its increased accessibility to underserved communities. Philanthropic NGOs collaborating with governments have demonstrably filled the gaps in the educational systems and policies to provide equitable access to quality and relevant primary school education, especially in the rural, remote, and underserved communities of developing nations (Choudhary, 2017). Moreover, NGOs work with governments to support the development and implementation of educational policies that promote national objectives like achievement of SDG 4 on education. Additionally, they provide education to children during humanitarian emergency events and extend social and educational remedial interventions to disadvantaged communities to alleviate challenges such as high numbers of out of school children. NGOs have also proved handy in effective promotion of community engagements in primary school education (Win & Siritwato, 2020). These interventions by NGOs appear to influence the direction of the country's educational trajectory when it comes to meeting the national objectives on education as a tool for development.

Some studies (Iman & Kurram, 2021) claim that NGOs enhance equitable access to quality and relevant education in various ways. Firstly, they provide pedagogical training to primary school teachers to improve their teaching competences. Secondly, they hire high-quality teachers to teach in their schools making quality education more accessible. Thirdly, NGOs bridge the student gender gap as they usually encourage the marginalised girl child access better educational opportunities. This approach also gives such girls who would have rather dropped out of school a choice from remaining in a marginalized, and underserved low-socioeconomic communities to middle class school environments. However, literature suggests that while the contribution of NGOs to the education sector is plausible, some



governments are hesitant to collaborate with them due to differences in political interests and goals (Okine, 2021). In addition, a number of governments especially, in developing contexts are challenged in monitoring and evaluating the interventions of NGOs to ensure that they are aligned to national social and educational goals.

Existing literature covered the subtopics related to this study across time and context. However, it is apparent that no previous research has conducted a comparative study on the government primary schools versus non-government philanthropic primary schools in rural, and underserved low-income communities in the sub-Saharan African context to document the direction of the education in relation to meeting the expected goals. This creates both contextual and conceptual oversights necessitating an independent study such as this one to proceed, and uncover which way the education sector is taking in the specified context. The consideration of education as a means to promoting equity in the South African society that had suffered decades of racial segregation and unequal access to opportunities for equitable development, justifiably created the space for adoption of the 'Educational Equity Theory' as a theoretical framework to investigate and explain the findings and to peg them to the existing body of knowledge about the study experience. Ultimately, a comparative study examining the educational conditions of Quintile One government primary schools and the NGO philanthropic primary school, which is limited in the available scientific literature so far was done.

### **Materials and methods**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. The selection of the research design was guided by the pragmatic research paradigm, which permitted the researchers to take the relativism ontological position when collecting the data, analysing them, and interpreting the findings. The researchers postulated that there was a likelihood of diversity of participants' experiences, would be difficult to pinpoint to absolute reality, truth, and knowledge as these elements are considered relative to individual perspectives and socioeconomic and historical contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers viewed reality as a constructed outcome of the social interaction between the participants and their environment. Therefore, understanding of the research problem and information arising therefrom were considered to be filtered through individual perspectives shaped by their pluralistic world views. The study population comprised of school management members – principals, sub-principals, and heads of department and grade 1-6 teachers from the government quintile one and non-government primary schools. A total of 27 participants was drawn from both school types and this number was determined after the data collection reached a saturation point. The study sample included purposively selected 2 school management members, 5 Grade 1-6 teachers at the non-government philanthropic primary school; and 10 school management members and 10 Grade 1-6 teachers at the quintile one government primary schools serving low income, rural, underserved, and marginalized communities in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. This guaranteed information rich sources for such kind of study. One on one interviews using an interview guide were conducted at the respondents' workstations. Other methods used were observation and document review. The qualitative data corpus from the interviews, document

review and observation was uploaded onto TAGUETTE software for electronic coding and ultimate generation of themes.

### **Findings**

The investigation first explored the planned direction of the education sector in South Africa especially, at the primary school level. The country has a comprehensive education sector institutional framework. This includes 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 National Development Plan 2012; the Education Sector Plan 2019-2023, and a number of government agencies responsible for making systems and policies not only functional but also effective. The fundamental principles in these various documents, that underscore the mandates of education sector agencies such as department of basic education, provincial departments of education, provincial education departments, district education office, and school governing bodies, National Students Financial Scheme, South African Council of Educators (SACE), and the National Policy Unit are equity and redress, social justice, quality education for all, inclusivity and diversity, relevant and responsive curriculum, effective governance and leadership, and partnership and collaboration (Republic of South Africa, Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). In particular, the foci of the Education Sector Plan 2019-2023 were early grade reading – reading for meaning and comprehension; mathematics strategy – enhancing numeracy skills through improved teacher training, availability of teaching and learning resources, and effective assessment; inclusive education – one that promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools while eradicating barriers to learning and participation; teacher development – through upgrading teacher skills, knowledge, and professionalism to enhance teaching quality and perhaps quantity; infrastructure development – addressing school infrastructure backlogs, and ensuring safe and conducive learning environments including adequate classrooms, libraries, and laboratories; and digital transformation – through leveraging technology to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment, bridging the digital divide including availability of and accessibility to ICT facilities such as computers and internet.

These initiatives in the education sector at the primary education level were touted to take the sector in the direction of improving the quality of education, and increasing access and reducing inequalities. Specifically, in relation to SDG-4 on education, the republic aimed at guaranteeing free and equitable primary education ensuring that boys and girls complete primary education by 2030; and quality early childhood development through ensuring that all boys and girls of school going age have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030. For example, while the Provincial Departments of Education (PDEs) implement national education policies at provincial level, Provincial Education Departments are responsible for school infrastructure, teacher employment, and provincial education budgets. A presence of this institutional framework and agencies ideally should ensure existence of enough qualified teachers to facilitate teaching and learning, and financial resources to fund the planned needs of the sector, ensure adequate facilities to support teaching and learning, and a conducive learning environment that is inclusive and supportive. The institutional framework appears to provide a clear direction for the education sector. However,

this planned direction seems to be both complemented and contradicted by the education sector reports and the views from the participant interviews.

### The Themes and Subthemes from the Participants' Interviews

Theme	Sub-Theme(s)
Theme One: Status of the School Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Safety of infrastructure</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Adequacy of classrooms, libraries, and laboratories</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Accessibility of facilities to students with disabilities</li> <li>• Sub-theme 4: ICT and internet access</li> <li>• Sub-theme 5: Clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities</li> </ul>
Theme Two: Quality and quantity of Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Teacher quality</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Teacher quantity</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Pedagogical strategies</li> </ul>
Theme Three: Status of Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Source of funding</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Adequacy of funding</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Funded Priorities</li> </ul>
Theme Four: School Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Effectiveness</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Leadership and management capacity</li> </ul>
Theme Five: School Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Equitable access to funding</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Availability and Affordability of Transport</li> </ul>
Theme Six: Socioeconomic Status of Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Parents' level of income</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: parents' level of education</li> </ul>
Theme Seven: Status of Equitable Access to education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Enrolment and completion rates</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Student: teacher ratio</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Access to qualified teachers</li> <li>• Sub-theme 4: Quality of facilities</li> <li>• Sub-theme 5: Financial resources</li> <li>• Sub-theme 6: Equity index – disparity between groups</li> </ul>
Theme Eight: Status of Quality of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Teacher qualifications and training</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Student: teacher ratio</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Curriculum relevance and alignment</li> <li>• Sub-theme 4: Infrastructure and resources</li> <li>• Sub-theme 5: Funding and budget allocation</li> <li>• Sub-theme 6: Academic achievement</li> <li>• Sub-theme 7: Classroom environment</li> </ul>
Theme Nine: Status of Relevance of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-theme 1: Students' achievement in core subjects – literacy and numeracy</li> <li>• Sub-theme 2: Language proficiency-reading, writing, speaking</li> <li>• Sub-theme 3: Curriculum alignment with national standards</li> </ul>

The Quintile One primary schools and the NGO philanthropic schools varied in terms of school physical infrastructure. While the NGO School reported safer school environment, adequate classrooms, provisions for students with disabilities such as ramps, running clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and adequate ICT facilities and access to internet and connection to electricity, these remain limited in Quintile One schools. Some of the rural Quintile One schools studied in the KwaZulu-Natal province still use the illegal pit latrines, and do not have a hygienic environment with clean running water especially, for the girl child who may need such facilities during their periods. In addition, some schools were not connected to the power grid and did not have other power sources to support adoption of ICT facilities for teaching and learning. The findings suggest that the NGO philanthropic primary school studied had better school physical environment compared to the Quintile One schools in the province. In addition, participants reported adequate teachers both in terms of numbers and quality at the NGO School. All the teachers were qualified and it was noted that the student to teacher ratio was within the acceptable range of 40 learners per teacher and 40 learners per class.

However, in the Quintile One schools, cases of overcrowded classes were noted. Moreover, teachers reported a higher learner to teacher ratio and heavy workload due to teacher shortages. The existence of qualified staff with appropriate pedagogical strategy was a noted issue. The schools faced different challenges with funding. The NGO philanthropic school secured funds from a number of partners based on its budgeted needs. However, sometimes, the funds fall short of the planned amount. Quintile One schools receive funds from the provincial government which were reportedly inadequate to meet the resource needs of these schools. The noted example of the underfunded priorities included physical infrastructure to ensure adequate classrooms, laboratories, libraries, ICT and internet connectivity, and training of teachers. As Quintile One schools do not charge any other fees to supplement the allocated resources, they operate on the mercy of inadequate resources to run their school operations. The findings imply that the NGO philanthropic primary school had financial resources and physical infrastructural advantage over the Quintile One Primary schools in the province and perhaps would be more positioned to extend quality and relevant education to the students in the area. In addition, though government promised adequate funds to support the needs of the Quintile One primary schools to ensure access to quality and relevant education for all, the plethora of challenges noted does not seem to permit the schools meet their obligations as expected under SDG-4 and given the historical and contextual background of the province in which the schools are located which have been known for weak school infrastructure.

NGO philanthropic school indicated that their school management committees were more effective and played a crucial role in improving education quality and accountability. They closely monitored school performance, ensured better resource allocation and greater transparency in utilising school resources. In addition, they support teachers by way of providing guidance. The committee was credited for its leadership and management capacity that ensure enhanced performance at school. Quintiles One primary reported mixed results about the effectiveness of their school management committees. On one hand, there were schools with more effective management committees that ensure that the little resources that the schools got were put to better use. Such committees exhibited better leadership and

management capacity. However, there were some committees that reported lower levels of leadership capacity and overall effectiveness. They highlighted that they lacked the capacity to provide the necessary guidance. Less effective committees were characterised by lack of training and expertise in school management, lack of adequate resources to support the staff and for the school to implement the planned programmes, and power dynamics at schools where the school leaders and the teaching staff influenced decisions about what the schools should do that, on many occasions contradicted what the school management committees recommended. On the side of school choice, both NGO philanthropic primary school and the Quintile One primary schools reported related issues. Primary school students were confined to schools in their geographic areas due to proximal location which is exacerbated by unaffordable transport system to permit students to travel long distances to schools of their choice. In addition, there remains a lack of equitable access to funding. There is no provision for subsidies to students that would like to join the fee paying schools to pursue better quality and relevant education.

The challenge of choice seems to crosscutting across both the NGO primary school and the Quintile One primary schools in the province. In addition, similarities were noted regarding the socioeconomic status of the parents in the region. The two types of schools managed students from low socioeconomic backgrounds that limit them from joining fee paying schools or pay tuition to supplement government funding for the case of the Quintile One primary schools and the funds derived from the well-wishers and donors for the NGO School. Moreover, the parents majorly have low levels of education. The findings imply that NGO philanthropic school has better school management committee compared to Quintile One primary schools though, both school types provide services to students that have limited school choice and also affected by low socioeconomic backgrounds that do not allow them to cost-share access to quality and relevant education.

The status of equitable access to education in the studied schools depicts acknowledged increase in enrolment due to educational opportunities provided by the NGO philanthropic school and the non-fee paying Quintile One primary schools. While the NGO philanthropic primary school reports a student to teacher ratio that is within the acceptable standards of 40 students per 1 teacher and 40 students per class, qualified teachers of high quality with the necessary pedagogical skills, the Quintile One primary schools remain challenged by high student to teacher ratios and overcrowded classrooms. In addition, the quality of teachers is considered to be low to meet the teaching standards. Further, the schools lack adequate funds to provide the all educational services needed by the student. It is also noted that the disparity index between schools in the rural areas and urban areas remains pronounced as these schools perform poorly in exams compared to urban public schools or the NGO philanthropic primary school. This status is against the government's commitment under the SDG-4 to provide enough and qualified teachers, classrooms, and financial resources to support access to quality and relevant education as highlighted in the various official reports like the Education Sector Plan 2019-2023. Compared to Quintile One primary schools studied, the NGO philanthropic primary school appears to be promoting more equitable access to the students in the area. The Quintile One primary schools have challenges that limit their ability to ensure equitable access to education.

The findings reveal that the quality of education also differed between the two school types in terms of teacher qualifications and training, student to teacher ratio, infrastructure and resources, funding and budget allocation, academic achievement and classroom environment. The NGO philanthropic primary school recruits well qualified teachers and encourages the teachers to upgrade their skills. In addition, it could allocate adequate resources to support recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and provide adequate physical infrastructure as it has different sources of funds compared to the Quintile One primary schools. The resource environment equally enabled the NGO School to offer better classroom environment in relation to what was available at the Quintile One primary schools. Further, the academic achievement in literacy, numeracy and English language skills was reportedly better in the NGO philanthropic school as opposed to the Quintile primary schools.

However, both school types offered the same curriculum that was considered relevant and aligned to the national curriculum for primary schools. The status of relevance of education offered by the two school types had some interesting corresponding and contrasting features. The students' achievement in core subjects, that is, literacy and numeracy was considered better in the NGO philanthropic school than it was in the Quintile One primary schools studied. The same was the case with language proficiency including reading, writing, and speaking the language of instruction especially, English. The two school types reported implementation of a curriculum aligned to national standards. It is noted that despite using the same curriculum, there were general concerns from the teachers that the type of curriculum does not give students an advantage to master knowledge and skills that would build them into more practical graduates at higher levels or impart life skills that could improve their livelihoods in case students do not proceed with post primary education. It may be observed that what is most important in relation to relevance of education is academic achievement, skills acquisition such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. These seem not to be well developed due to the nature of the curriculum implemented in such schools.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the South African government in adopting the SDGs in general and the SDG-4 on education in particular was to promote sustainable development in tandem with other countries that are signatory to this agenda. In the case of the education sector, it is logical to expect that to meet the SDG-4 targets, the systems and policies and all related initiatives undertaken by government and its partners promote equitable access to quality and relevant education. This would include adequate funding and physical facilities, utilities, the right quality and quantity of teachers, having the right national school curriculum, and ensuring that children of school going age are enrolled and attend school (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). In this regard, the education sector in South Africa provides a unique context to use education as an equalising intervention given its history of apartheid that promoted segregated access to education. Therefore, promoting equitable access to quality and relevant education serves as opportunity especially, for the rural, low income, and the underserved communities to catch up with the rest of the South African communities.

The study paints a picture of Quintile One primary schools as poorly resourced and underperforming compared to the NGO philanthropic primary school. The weak physical

environment, low quantity and quality of teachers, high student to teacher and student per class ratios, low funding, limited school choice and schools serving students from low socioeconomic status project a declining opportunity to provide equitable access to quality and relevant education (UNESCO, 2021; Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024a; Chien & Knoble, 2024). In addition, the condition of primary education in the Quintile One primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal depicts a failure of the government of South Africa to genuinely align the education systems and policies to meet SDG-4 targets in a community characterised by low income and underserved population (Kawuryan & Sayuti, 2021). This failure denies the affected community the opportunity to leverage the benefits of education as it is construed to favour a persistence of inequalities in education with no chance for plausible equitable access to quality and relevant education (Wehye & Asiimwe, 2024b).

The revelation by Amnesty International (2020) that up to 19 percent of rural schools in South Africa still used illegal pit latrines for sanitation and 86 percent lacked laboratories while 77 percent lacked internet access and 42 percent did not have sports facilities is instructive that the education sector is missing its target of ensuring equitable access to quality and relevant education by 2030. Leveraging ICT as a key target is also being missed as many schools lacked connection to electricity which is essential to the functionality of the ICT infrastructure (Mokhosi, 2023). Shortages in physical infrastructure, qualified teachers, and library materials point to inadequate funding to the education sector to cater for the facilities. The country's spending by provincial governments on primary education is criticized for not meeting national and international benchmarks and does not seem to prioritise areas that need funding most. The reduction in spending on school infrastructure especially in rural areas has left schools without enough teachers, limited textbooks, crammed classrooms, unmaintained structures, and a stressful work environment. Basic education for the most vulnerable in the country appears to be backsliding to high levels of inequitable access to quality and relevant education.

The most hurt schools are Quintile One primary schools which are non-fee paying schools serving communities with parents who are not able to top up tuition to cover public expenditure gaps on essential scholastic requirements. Thus, as noted by Amnesty International (2020), explains the persistent urban-rural gap in performance of science subjects with rural schools posting dismal performance in the basics of numeracy, literacy, and language proficiency. While South Africa may boast of increasing school enrolment at primary level in line with SDG-4 targets, the quality and relevance of education seem to be on a southward trend. This comes in to reinforce the theoretical postulations of the Marxist Education Equity Theory that education can be a tool for promoting inequalities in society. This happens when different groups of the population based on their socioeconomic status access education of different quality levels. While such education may create opportunities for some, it equally denies the same to others creating perpetual inequalities in society. South Africa having suffered socioeconomic inequalities perpetuated by apartheid and the victims being majorly from marginalised, low income, and rural communities, education would be the potent tool to forestall the stubbornness of these inequalities. However, the current direction the education sector is taking at primary school level is not to promote equity but to sustain inequalities as it is ineffectively equitable, accessible, and not of the right quality and relevance across sections of the society to solve contemporary and future challenges of the community.

### **Conclusions and future directions**

South Africa continues to be greatly affected by the historical inequalities and disparities that hinder effective social integration. Rural, low income, underserved, and marginalised communities like the KwaZulu-Natal province remain the most affected. Equitable access to quality and relevant education both theoretically and practically appears to be the single most important tool with the opportunity to address these inequalities. Consistent allocation of resources to the education sector to realise SDG-4 on education is expected to promote more equitable access to quality and relevant education in the country. This would alleviate the current challenges like low teacher quality and quantity, unequal resource distribution to the Quintile One primary schools, weak physical environment and facilities, school choice, weak school management, and inequalities in education quality. The status of the NGO philanthropic primary school has demonstrated that even in the rural, low income, underserved, and marginalised communities, solving those hindrances improves educational outcomes at primary school level.

Moving forward, the South African government at central and provincial levels should: (i) increase funding to the education sector in the rural, low income, underserved, and marginalised communities. This should not just be an equal amount to the schools as it has been the case but should be a budget allocation that puts these schools at the same footing in all respects with the other high quality schools in the country. (ii) Be more deliberate on improving teacher training and capacity for teachers serving the underserved communities by investing in teacher education and remuneration to attract quality teachers in hard to reach schools like those in Kwazulu-Natal province. (iii) Revamp structures and facilities in Quintile One primary schools to the quantity and quality required to provide quality and relevant education. (iv) Encourage greater community participation in the development of the school infrastructure and facilities. This may include encouraging the country's large corporates to enhance physical infrastructure and provide the necessary facilities like ICT and access to internet, libraries, laboratories, and other infrastructural needs. (v) Subsidise and or provide free transport to students from rural communities to access quality schools located far away from their locations but whose academic standards they can meet. (vi) Ensure a more inclusive school environment by breaking down the few remaining barriers to equal access to schools that have been traditionally exclusive. (vii) Review the curriculum to be more responsive to community and global labour market needs. For example, one that focuses on enhancing core skills for primary school level that will enable students to transit seamlessly into the competence-based training at higher levels to produce graduates with practical knowledge and skills including critical thinking, problem-solving, and right attitudes, among others. The hope is that these strategies will ensure a more equitable access to high quality and relevant education for all.

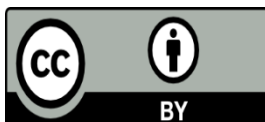


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