Did Black Literacy Rise After Soweto?

Public Problems and Ethnic Archipelagos in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

How political theorists think about State “strength” and central policy making is hampered in two ways. Analytic work in the West highlights how actors in or outside Government attempt to shape policy action, rather than assessing its local effects. And policy effects at the grassroots often are assumed to be uniform, rather than variable across distinct ethnic or gender groups. Within caste-like societies, such as South Africa, local ethnic and gender affiliations have historically shaped access to and quality of local institutions, particularly township schools. This paper examines the cross-generational effects of Pretoria’s post-Soweto attempt to expand educational opportunities, aimed at boosting enrollment rates for young blacks and raising their literacy (1976-1993). We find that the central State was highly successful in encouraging more young Africans to attend school, but literacy rates increased just slightly, presumably due to low quality and high levels of political contention within schools. Importantly, literacy rose more for members of certain black ethnic groups and this effect interacted with gender. While illiteracy remains a deep public problem in South Africa, the constraints and social resources for addressing the problem appear to vary across ethnic groups and between young women and men.

Overview

DEBATE CONTINUES OVER the State’s strength relative to political organizations and activists dispersed throughout civil society. This balance of power, of course, varies across different societies and upon the institutional conditions found in particular sectors. These spheres range from the State’s attempts at economic regulation to civil contestation over the availability and quality of local institutions, such as schools. Political analysts and social theorists still err in putting forward grand claims about Government’s “strength” or—to the point of this paper—in assuming that the State’s local effects will be uniformly felt across diverse groups at the grassroots.

Competing theoretical explanations for why mass schooling spreads, especially its quickening expansion under post-colonial nation building, are certainly informative. The State’s strength varies across national settings and historical

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periods, whether energized by technical-functionalist demands, the mediation of class conflict, or to enable the State to look modern, signalling its world-class institutional status (for review, Fuller and Rubinson, 1992). But once the dull force of policy emerges from the State, it may be thoroughly mediated by local politics, institutions, and cultural patterns (Bradshaw, Kaiser, and Ndegwa, 1995).

This paper focuses on the case of post-1976 South Africa, the period following the Soweto uprising when the apartheid regime moved decisively to expand access to local schools within black and coloured communities. The pragmatic question we ask: Was this concerted State action felt differently by different local groups, bounded by their ethnic or gender membership? Pretoria poured substantial new resources into poor townships, building more classrooms and hiring more teachers. But which particular local groups benefitted in terms of rising enrollments and gains in literacy?

The paper is organized in three major parts. First, we briefly review how macro theories have attempted to define the State's strength or weakness. Second, we describe how the apartheid regime attempted to gain legitimacy and strength by, at least symbolically, pushing to expand educational opportunity during the 1976-1994 period. Third, we model the effects of ethnic and gender membership on actual literacy levels—the locally felt outcome of central State policy—taking into account individual social-class differences and gains in school attainment.

We see household and individual-level changes in literacy as one indicator of whether the South African regime, under apartheid, was truly strong and effective in delivering on its promise to expand basic education after Soweto. The earlier paper in this volume by York Bradshaw and Bruce Fuller ("Policy Action and School Demand in Kenya") focuses on a related indicator of Government effectiveness or fragility: the ups and downs of family demand for modern schooling. The present paper extends this line of work by asking whether ethnic and gender memberships serve to locally condition the central State's capacity to raise literacy.

Within caste-like societies the boundaries and internal logic of "ethnicity" and gender roles are institutionally set—stemming from earlier "indigenous" cultural scripts and historical action by the State. For example, the migratory labor structure, driven by South African mining and manufacturing interests literally constructed black townships to house cheap labor pools, eroding the traditional village household and sharpening gender roles. The apartheid regime's artificial creation of black "homelands" or bantustans inadvertently stratified these puppet states' commitment to education and the relative quality of their schools. Thus the persisting ethnic and gender differences that mark South Africa have been historically created by traditional cultural patterns and lasting manipulations of race and ethnicity to ensure disunity. Few dispute that these cultural and regional pockets will continue to limit the central State's capacity to equalize school attainment and literacy. The purpose of this paper is to detail the extent to which ethnicity and gender locally conditioned the effects of central policy.