



Children of the State but Not of the System: The Funding Exclusion of Public Servants' Children in South Africa's Higher Education Policy

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ABSTRACT

The structural exclusion of children of public servants, especially those from middle-class families, from South Africa's tertiary education funding frameworks is examined critically in this article. Financial aid programs like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which exclusively target low-income households, routinely ignore these families despite the fact that they make a substantial tax contribution to the state. The "missing middle", households that make more than the financial aid threshold but less than what is needed to cover the rising costs of higher education, often includes the children of civil servants, particularly those in middle management. Apart from NSFAS, national and provincial departments' departmental bursaries and funding programs run by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) routinely neglect to prioritize or include their own employees' children. Although these funding opportunities are purportedly intended to foster equity and develop sectoral skills, internal dependents are frequently left out due to stringent eligibility requirements or a lack of policy alignment. Public employees who administer or carry out these programs in addition to receiving tax funding are further irritated by this disconnect. Using secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and current scholarly literature, this study employs a qualitative policy analysis methodology. It looks at how state funding policies, despite being intended to promote inclusion, actually reinforce inequality and exclusion. It is based on the capability approach and policy gap theory. The results show that children of public servants suffer in ways that are not visible in official narratives due to strict thresholds, a disregard for economic realities, and disjointed interdepartmental priorities. The analysis draws attention to more general conflicts in the public sector regarding morale, justice, and the social contract. In order to address the complex needs of the missing middle, the paper makes the case for a unique and inclusive funding model. Without needing ethical approval, the study adds to discussions on human capital development, fiscal justice, and educational equity.

Keywords: Missing middle, Public servants, Higher education policy, Tertiary funding, Social justice

1. Introduction and Background

In South Africa, higher education is still a potent instrument for both national development and upward mobility. However, notable disparities in who receives funding for tertiary education still exist despite the state's significant efforts to increase access. The children of public employees who are in the so-called "missing middle" are among the most ignored groups in this matrix. These are households that make more than the R350,000 annual financial aid threshold established by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), but not enough to cover the actual cost of a university education. As a result, children of many government employees, particularly those in middle management roles, are unable to access any form of tertiary education funding despite their parents' contribution to the same public purse from which such funds are drawn.

The burden is disproportionately placed on public employees, particularly those on Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) up to equivalent of salary level 11 and in salary levels 7 to 11. They are not wealthy enough to cover tuition, housing, and other expenses without incurring debt, nor are they impoverished enough to be eligible for full state assistance. These people frequently make significant contributions to the tax base and the public sector. The majority of state-sponsored support systems, such as departmental bursary programs, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and NSFAS, are, ironically, not available to their children. Funding plans do not prioritize or even take into account the children of their own employees, even in departments like Health, Agriculture, and Education (Department of Public Service and Administration [DPSA], 2023). This structural oversight reinforces a sense of disillusionment among middle-income public servants and raises questions about the fairness and coherence of the current funding policy landscape.

The complicated cost of living in South Africa exacerbates the issue. Over the last five years, university and college fees have increased at an average annual rate of 8 to 12 percent, outpacing general inflation, according to the Bureau for Economic Research (2024). Concurrently, the South African Reserve Bank (2024) notes that household debt-to-income ratios have risen sharply, further restricting middle-class families' financial options. Their disposable income is frequently severely limited after debt servicing, housing, transportation, and other living expenses, even though their gross income may put them above the NSFAS threshold. As a result, the state's affordability assumption is not accurate in light of current economic conditions.

Public discussions about expanding access for the "missing middle" have taken place, but actual policy changes have not kept pace. To close this gap, the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) was introduced as a pilot project; however, its reach and scope are still restricted (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2023). The majority of SETAs and departmental bursaries, meanwhile, still operate with strict eligibility requirements and no official policy requirement to take public sector employees' dependents into account. Despite internal demand and capacity, fewer than 10% of departmental bursaries in the provinces of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo went to the children of government employees, according to a study by Sibeko and Mlambo (2023).

Beyond the individual, this exclusion has wider ramifications for public sector morale, retention, and social cohesion. Despite their dedication and contributions, public employees experience feelings of betrayal and marginalization when they are unable to provide their children with access to basic educational opportunities (Mouton & Nel, 2023). As middle-tier professionals leave the industry or become disengaged from their positions, this dynamic runs the risk of eroding the foundation of the state workforce.

This study aims to investigate the structural and policy-related reasons why children of public servants are not eligible for tertiary education funding in light of these conflicts. The central objectives are threefold: (1) to identify the institutional and fiscal mechanisms that produce this exclusion; (2) to explore the socio-economic implications of the exclusion on affected households; and (3) to recommend reforms that could make funding frameworks more inclusive and equitable. The guiding research question is: *How does South Africa's higher education funding policy exclude the children of middle-income public servants, and what are the implications of this exclusion for equity and public sector stability?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

South Africa's constitutional and developmental agenda, which prioritizes redress, equity, and transformation, frames access to higher education. Even though funding programs like NSFAS have significantly improved access for historically underprivileged students, new research shows that there is growing concern about the so-called "missing middle," or the group of people who make more than the NSFAS threshold but still cannot afford postsecondary education. Children of public employees, especially those in lower to middle management, constitute a structurally disadvantaged group within this group. Systemic exclusion, the workings of SETAs and departmental bursaries, and the consequences for public service households are the main topics of this literature review, which examines current academic and policy-based perspectives on higher education funding in South Africa.

2.2 The Historical Evolution of Higher Education Funding in South Africa

The South African government has made reforming the higher education system a top priority since the country's democratic transition in 1994 in order to advance social justice, equity, and economic growth. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020, education has been firmly established as a constitutional right (Section 29 of the South African Constitution) and as a vital means of resolving the profound disparities brought about by apartheid. The government's policy framework emphasizes how education promotes both national development and individual socioeconomic mobility. In line with these goals, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was introduced in 1996 as a loan-based financial assistance programme aimed at expanding access to higher education for historically disadvantaged students from low-income backgrounds (Badat, 2020). Initially, NSFAS provided loans that students were expected to repay after completing their studies. This model was a pragmatic approach given budgetary constraints and the large unmet demand for tertiary education. However, over time, it became clear that the loan repayment system placed a significant financial burden on graduates, many of whom struggled with unemployment or underemployment in a challenging economic context.

A turning point in South Africa's higher education funding history was the #FeesMustFall movement, which gathered steam in 2015 and culminated in large-scale demonstrations in 2016 and 2017. Due to rising tuition costs and a lack of adequate financial aid, the movement brought attention to how many young South Africans could not afford higher education (Soudien & Wilson-Strydom, 2020). The government declared in late 2017 that NSFAS would switch from a loan-based system to a fully subsidized bursary model for students from households making up to R350,000 annually in response to political mobilization and public pressure (Badat, 2020). This policy shift represented a significant advance in widening access to higher education for low-income students, as it removed the burden of debt repayment and aligned financial aid more closely with social justice objectives. The fully subsidized bursary model has enabled tens of thousands of students to enrol in universities and colleges who might otherwise have been excluded (DHET, 2023). Despite this progress, the implementation of this policy revealed new challenges and gaps, particularly for students who do not fall into the low-income category but nonetheless face substantial financial barriers to tertiary education.

The introduction of the R350,000 income threshold as a cutoff for NSFAS eligibility effectively created a new category of students who fall into a so-called "missing middle." These students' families earn above the NSFAS income cap, rendering them ineligible for financial aid, yet their income is insufficient to cover full university costs without incurring considerable debt or financial hardship (Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2020). For many households, particularly those with multiple dependents or significant living expenses, the official threshold does not reflect their real economic capacity. Around 2015, the missing middle phenomenon became well-known in academic and policy circles, and it has since emerged as a major topic of discussion in discussions regarding reforming the way that education is financed (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2023). Comprehensive policy responses have remained limited, fragmented, or experimental in nature, despite growing awareness of this group's vulnerability. For instance, compared to the size of the missing middle population, the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP), which was launched in 2018 to assist students from households making between R350,000 and R600,000, has had a limited scope and impact (CHE, 2023).

Support for students in the missing middle has been uneven due in part to the fragmented nature of funding interventions, which are split among NSFAS, SETAs, departmental bursaries, and private scholarships. Many eligible students fall through the cracks as a result of this fragmentation, especially those from families of public servants who contribute to the tax base that funds these programs but are frequently left out (Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022). Furthermore, the financial burden on middle-income households has increased due to inflationary pressures on living expenses, tuition fees, and housing costs, which has made it harder for middle-class students to be included (Bureau for Economic Research, 2024). The need for more responsive and nuanced policy tools that incorporate multifaceted affordability assessments and transcend strict income cutoffs is highlighted by these growing costs. Even though loan-based support for higher education in South Africa has given way to more inclusive bursary models since 1994, structural and policy constraints continue to plague the missing middle. Addressing these calls for a concerted and comprehensive strategy that strikes a balance between the need for equitable access and fiscal sustainability, especially for vulnerable populations like the children of public employees who hold a precarious financial position in the middle class.

2.3 Defining and Contextualising the “Missing Middle”

A significant and frequently disregarded group of students who fall between the conventional definitions of poverty and wealth are referred to as the “missing middle” in South African education policy discourse. In particular, students who face significant financial obstacles to enrolling in and finishing postsecondary education but whose family income surpasses the eligibility threshold for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) are referred to as the “missing middle” (Mohamedbhai, 2021). These students lack the funds to pay for textbooks, tuition, housing, and other necessities without suffering significant hardship, but they are also ineligible for state-funded bursaries and loans. A critical challenge in conceptualizing the missing middle arises from the widespread reliance on gross household income as a proxy for affordability in policy frameworks. This approach simplifies eligibility criteria but obscures the complex financial realities of many middle-income families. As Mlambo and Sibeko (2023) argue, gross income fails to capture critical factors such as outstanding debt, number of dependents, medical expenses, and regional variations in living costs. Consequently, many families that appear financially stable on paper are, in reality, burdened by economic constraints that severely limit their discretionary income.

Credit card debt, auto loans, home mortgages, and even unofficial loans are among the many debts that middle-class households frequently carry, which lowers their effective income and limits their ability to pay for their children's tertiary education (South African Reserve Bank, 2024). Due to these financial commitments and the expense of caring for several dependents, particularly in multigenerational households, there is a delicate balance that makes the cost of education unaffordable without outside assistance. Children of public servants frequently exemplify this missing middle demographic. Public sector employees in salary bands 6 to 10 are typically categorized as middle managers or skilled professionals, earning salaries that place them above the NSFAS income ceiling but often insufficient to cover rising living and education costs without financial strain (Public Service Commission, 2022). A national report by the Public Service Commission found that over 64% of middle managers reported difficulty financing higher education for their children, despite being excluded from formal financial aid programmes.

The report also emphasizes how these public employees frequently support people outside of their immediate nuclear family financially. Their financial burdens are exacerbated by the fact that many are in charge of extended family members, such as aging parents, siblings, or relatives. Meeting educational costs is made more difficult by this social duty, but funding eligibility requirements hardly ever take these factors into account (Public Service Commission, 2022). In addition, a large number of public employees reside in urban or peri-urban areas, where living expenses are substantially greater than in rural areas. Household budgets are under pressure to increase due to urban housing, transportation, and daily expenses. Urban middle-class families are disadvantaged by the current bursary policies and funding mechanisms, which fail to sufficiently take into consideration these regional cost disparities (Bureau for Economic Research, 2024). The lived reality of the missing middle thus presents a paradox: while these families contribute to the tax base that funds public services and education subsidies, their children are systematically excluded from the very financial aid intended to facilitate equitable access to higher education. This exclusion has far-reaching implications, as it limits the educational opportunities of a sizable portion of the population, perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities, and contributes to the phenomenon of “generation debt” where young adults carry significant financial burdens from the outset of their careers.

Beyond financial exclusion, the idea of the missing middle also refers to problems with recognition and identity. Programs that target either the poorest or the wealthiest students make many impacted families feel invisible in policy discussions (CHE, 2023). Their ability to advocate for support is further weakened by this invisibility, which also fuels growing discontent with the current funding systems. The missing middle is a complicated, multidimensional group that is influenced by a variety of social obligations, economic pressures, and geographic factors in addition to income thresholds. It takes sophisticated policy responses that go beyond gross income measures to capture the whole range of financial and social realities in order to comprehend and address the needs of this group, especially those of children of public servants.

2.4 The Invisibility of Public Servants’ Children in Funding Allocations

Public servants play a foundational role in the administration and delivery of essential services in South Africa, yet the educational needs of their children remain conspicuously absent from the prioritization frameworks of higher education funding policies. This invisibility is a critical yet underexplored dimension of the broader discourse on equitable access to tertiary education. Despite their contributions as taxpayers and state employees, the children of government workers are seldom explicitly recognised as a distinct beneficiary group in the design and allocation of bursaries and financial aid. Robeyns (2021) criticizes current policy mechanisms for relying too much on oversimplified eligibility requirements that ignore the complex nature of educational need. This criticism is particularly relevant to funding programs run by individual government departments and Sector Education and Training Authorities

(SETAs). Despite being funded by public monies, such as taxes withheld from government employees' salaries, these bursaries frequently function in institutional silos without a clear plan for internal beneficiary prioritization. As a result, public servants' children are frequently disregarded, despite the fact that they should be taken into account given their parents' operational and financial contributions to these funding pools.

Empirical research by Ndlovu and Mpofu (2022) highlights this exclusionary pattern in their examination of bursary allocations within the Health and Welfare SETA (HWSETA) and the Department of Agriculture. Their study revealed that fewer than 15% of internal departmental bursaries were granted to the children of employees, despite evidence of substantial unmet demand from within these employee populations. This disparity exists even though these employees contribute tax revenues that partially fund the bursary programmes. The finding underscores a systemic disconnect between the source of funding and the beneficiaries who receive prioritised support. This form of exclusion is not merely technical or administrative but carries significant symbolic weight. It reflects a broader institutional failure to recognise government employees as stakeholders in the very benefits system they sustain. Such invisibility undermines the social contract between the state and its workforce, contributing to perceptions of inequity and disenfranchisement among public servants (Public Service Commission, 2022).

This invisibility is made worse by the fragmented nature of funding streams. Despite being required to promote the development of skills specific to a given sector, SETAs frequently fail to take into account the familial circumstances of their contributors, including government workers. Similarly, departmental bursaries frequently operate with tight budgets and mandates, emphasizing external applicants or merit-based standards over the socioeconomic circumstances of employees' families (DPSA, 2023). Children of public servants are marginalized in funding allocations as a result of this lack of an integrated, holistic approach. There are wider ramifications for employee retention and morale when funding mechanisms fail to give public servants' families priority. Employees become alienated and dissatisfied when they believe that their contributions are not being repaid by providing them with tangible support for their dependents. This dynamic can erode organisational commitment and negatively affect service delivery outcomes (Mouton & Nel, 2023).

Deliberate policy interventions that specifically acknowledge public servants' children as a separate beneficiary category are necessary to address this invisibility. Multidimensional assessments of need that take into account factors like family size, dependency ratios, and the socioeconomic burdens particular to public sector workers should be incorporated into policies. In order to expedite bursary allocations and guarantee fair prioritization in line with contributors' circumstances, there is also a need for improved coordination between SETAs, government agencies, and central funding bodies. The systemic policy fragmentation, limited eligibility requirements, and symbolic exclusion are the reasons why public servants' children are invisible when it comes to higher education funding allocations. A deliberate move toward inclusive, equity-focused policy frameworks that acknowledge the mutual relationship between state employees and the benefits system they support is necessary to address this.

2.5 Structural Contradictions in Departmental and SETA Bursary Frameworks

Many government agencies and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) manage bursary programs designed to promote skill development in line with sectoral priorities within South Africa's complex higher education funding ecosystem. In order to address skills shortages and promote economic growth, the state and public agencies use these bursaries, which cover vital fields like engineering, education, health sciences, and agriculture. But as the 2023 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) report points out, these bursary frameworks have structural inconsistencies that compromise their goals of equity and internal coherence. A fundamental tension arises from the fact that many of these bursary schemes are designed with externally focused eligibility criteria. In other words, their primary beneficiaries are prospective entrants into the labour market from the general population rather than the dependents of current employees within the funding institution itself. This external orientation reflects an explicit policy choice aimed at expanding access and addressing broader sectoral skills deficits. Yet, it simultaneously results in the exclusion of a significant internal constituency, namely, the children of the public servants who both administer the departments and contribute to the financial base through salaries and levy payments (HSRC, 2023).

This paradox is particularly salient in SETA bursaries. SETAs are funded through mandatory levies imposed on employers, including government departments, which are deducted from public servants' wages. These levies are intended to finance skills development initiatives that benefit both the sector and individual learners. Despite this, SETA bursaries rarely prioritise the children of the very employees whose contributions sustain the funds (Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022). Similarly, departmental bursaries, although budgeted internally, tend to emphasize external applicants or merit-based schemes that do not systematically account for employee dependents. According to Mouton and Nel (2023), this discrepancy is an example of the public funding system's "fragmented ethics of redistribution." This phrase sums up the fact that current bursary allocation procedures do not reward institutional loyalty, which is the belief that those who donate public funds will be fairly compensated. Rather, redistributive initiatives are fragmented and divided by conflicting mandates and bureaucratic silos, which lessens their ability to promote social cohesion and solidarity among public sector employees.

Public employees experience a type of internal marginalization as a result of this structural contradiction. Their families continue to be on the periphery of the benefits system they support, despite their invaluable labour and financial contributions. The operational realities of benefit distribution and the rhetoric of public sector solidarity are at odds, as evidenced by this exclusion. This marginalization has material and symbolic ramifications that affect employee engagement, workplace morale, and perceptions of justice (Public Service Commission, 2022). The disjointed bursary frameworks impede the creation of a cohesive, integrated strategy for social welfare and workforce development. The effectiveness and legitimacy of funding schemes are jeopardized when there are no coordinated policies that specifically integrate internal beneficiaries. As a result, public servants may perceive the system as unjust and unresponsive, which may diminish their motivation to invest in long-term service or contribute to sectoral development initiatives.

In order to resolve these structural inconsistencies, bursary frameworks must be purposefully realigned to balance equitable beneficiary prioritization with institutional funding flows. Reforms to the policy could include provisions that specifically set aside a portion of bursary awards for employee

dependents, acknowledging their dual role as potential recipients and contributors. Furthermore, encouraging cooperation between departments and SETAs may improve resource pooling and guarantee more fair distribution among overlapping jurisdictions. A basic mismatch between funding sources and beneficiary selection is revealed by the structural inconsistencies found in departmental and SETA bursary frameworks. The achievement of inclusive, equitable, and efficient financing for higher education is hampered by larger issues in South Africa's public funding system, which are reflected in this misalignment.

2.6 Economic Realities and the Illusion of Affordability

The inadequacy of using gross household income as the main indicator of a family's ability to finance higher education is a recurrent theme in current scholarship and policy analysis. Income thresholds like the R350,000 annual NSFAS cutoff are useful policy tools, but they don't adequately reflect the complicated economic realities that many middle-class South African households, especially those headed by public servants, face. The purchasing power of middle-class salaries has been steadily declining in recent years due to inflationary pressures across important expenditure categories, such as housing, transportation, food, and education (Bureau for Economic Research, 2024). Public servants are disproportionately affected by this dynamic, as many are required to reside in urban or peri-urban areas where living costs are significantly higher than in rural settings. This geographic imperative creates a pronounced mismatch between nominal salary levels and real disposable income, undermining the assumption that gross income equates to affordability.

Van der Berg and Mosomi (2023) offer a thorough examination of the monthly spending habits of public employees who make between R350,000 and R600,000 per year, a range that is frequently referred to as the "missing middle." According to their research, these households have negative savings rates, which means that their monthly expenses usually outweigh their income. Increased reliance on consumer credit, such as credit cards, personal loans, and overdraft facilities, is usually used to make up this shortfall, which raises debt levels. Crucially, children from these families frequently turn to credit facilities or unsecured loans to pay for their postsecondary education. Due to the stress of repayment and related financial vulnerability, this reliance on debt increases the likelihood of academic dropout (Van der Berg & Mosomi, 2023). The consequences are compounded by the fact that the South African Reserve Bank (SARB, 2024) reports that student loan default rates are disproportionately higher among middle-income borrowers, in contrast to lower-income students who often benefit from grants or subsidised funding.

The traditional policy narrative that classifies middle-income households as financially secure and able to cover their own educational expenses is called into question by this data. Rather, it exposes a false sense of affordability in which underlying financial fragility is concealed by an outward appearance of income sufficiency. Despite their substantial unmet needs, middle-class families are excluded from financial aid due to policies that fail to accurately estimate the cost burden on them. Other important factors that affect affordability, like family size, the number of dependents enrolled in postsecondary education, healthcare costs, and the cost of urban housing, are overlooked when income thresholds are overused. The social expectations and extended family responsibilities that are common in many South African communities make these factors especially important for public servants (Public Service Commission, 2022).

Affordability's illusory quality also has social and psychological facets. Families with middle-class incomes frequently find themselves in a "double bind," torn between the stigma associated with financial need and the reality of financial difficulties. Many are deterred from applying for loans or bursaries by this dynamic, which further maintains their lack of visibility in policy frameworks (CHE, 2023). The economic realities faced by middle-class earners and public employees highlight how inadequate gross income is as a measure of financial capacity. More complex, multifaceted metrics that capture real household financial burdens, including debt levels, living expenses, and dependency ratios, must be adopted by policymakers. Addressing the illusion of affordability is essential for creating equitable funding frameworks that genuinely support all students in need, including the children of public servants who currently fall through the cracks.

2.7 Social Justice and the Moral Economy of Exclusion

The exclusion of public servants' children from tertiary education funding schemes transcends mere financial calculations, touching on profound issues of social justice and the moral economy underpinning the relationship between the state and its employees. This exclusion is a sign of structural injustices that go against the reciprocity and fairness that are fundamental to a just society. A strong theoretical framework for comprehending these disparities is offered by Robeyns' (2021) Capability Approach. Robeyns contends that a person's actual freedoms and capacity to pursue worthwhile opportunities should be taken into consideration when defining equitable access to education, rather than just in terms of income eligibility. These complex aspects of capability are not taken into account by the strict income requirements that are currently in place to establish eligibility for financial aid programs such as NSFAS. Because of this, a large number of students who have the drive, aptitude, and social ambition to seek higher education are unfairly excluded from admission based only on rigid policy requirements.

This framework highlights the multifaceted character of disadvantage and promotes policy designs that take into account a greater number of variables influencing educational access, such as geographic disparities, family obligations, and socioeconomic burdens. This failure to take into account substantive capability rather than formal income status is best illustrated by the strict exclusion of children of public servants, who frequently fall into the so-called "missing middle." Building on this viewpoint, Soudien and Wilson-Strydom (2020) contend that structural bottlenecks caused by exclusionary funding policies impede upward economic mobility, thereby contributing to intergenerational immobility. When children of public servants, who represent a significant segment of the middle-income working class, are systematically excluded from educational subsidies, their families face artificial

ceilings on social advancement. This perpetuates cycles of inequality, limiting not only individual prospects but also the broader goals of social cohesion and economic transformation.

The effects of such exclusion in the particular setting of the public service go beyond the impacted immediate families. When workers believe they are not given equitable access to the public goods that their labour and taxes support, they undermine the moral economy of public employment, which is the implicit contract of mutual benefit and recognition between the state and its employees. According to Dlamini and Sehoole (2022), this betrayal of trust can result in employee disengagement, attrition, and low morale, which will impair institutional capacity and the standard of public service delivery. Citizens' trust in public sector fairness and governance structures may be undermined by this feeling of disenfranchisement, which may also breed cynicism toward state institutions. Such outcomes are particularly concerning in a democratic society where legitimacy depends on inclusive policies that foster both material well-being and social recognition. The moral dimension highlights the need for reciprocity in public policy. As public servants contribute financially and operationally to government functions, it is equitable that their families receive commensurate support in accessing educational opportunities. The failure to uphold this reciprocity not only exacerbates social injustice but also risks alienating a crucial workforce.

Therefore, the current exclusion is both a financial and a symbolic injustice. The families of public servants are symbolically marginalized within the larger socio-political contract, and their children are not eligible for financial assistance programs intended to advance social equity. In order to address this, policy must be reframed to recognize public employees as stakeholders who should receive focused assistance, thereby promoting the moral economy of respect for one another and shared investment. Reforms toward more inclusive, equitable, and efficient systems can be guided by incorporating the capability approach and social justice principles into higher education funding policies. In order to ensure that exclusionary thresholds do not impede the development of human potential or the legitimacy of public institutions, these reforms should place a higher priority on the multifaceted realities of families.

2.8 Emerging Policy Responses and Their Limitations

The South African government launched the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) as a pilot project to provide financial assistance to students from households making between R350,000 and R600,000 per year in response to the ongoing difficulties faced by the missing middle. In order to close the gap left by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which primarily assists students from households making less than R350,000, ISFAP was introduced in 2018 and is a significant policy innovation (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2023). ISFAP was designed as a focused intervention to help the large number of students who do not meet the income eligibility requirements for NSFAS but do not have the funds to attend college without experiencing financial hardship. The programme provides a combination of bursaries and loans to qualifying students, focusing on fields aligned with national skills priorities such as engineering, health sciences, and information technology. This focus reflects government efforts to simultaneously address skills shortages and increase access to higher education (DHET, 2023).

ISFAP's reach is still restricted in comparison to the size of the missing middle population, despite its encouraging goals. Less than 12,000 students were supported by the program each year as of 2023, which is far less than the estimated 300,000 students who make up the missing middle (CHE, 2023). This glaring disparity highlights ISFAP's pilot status and the lack of a fully funded, expanded financial assistance program that can effectively combat systemic exclusion. ISFAP's eligibility requirements and prioritization processes are a major drawback. The children of public servants, who are known to constitute a vulnerable group within the middle-income range, are neither specifically targeted nor given priority in the program. Instead, access to ISFAP funding is often contingent on academic merit, course selection, and alignment with government skills development priorities (Govender & Mabunda, 2023). While merit-based criteria ensure quality and strategic skills development, they risk sidelining students whose financial need and familial contribution to public service warrant special consideration.

The lack of institutional commitment to expanding ISFAP beyond its pilot phase is further criticized by Govender and Mabunda (2023). The program's ability to serve the larger missing middle population is hampered by its small budget, administrative limitations, and fragmentation across several funding bodies. This deficiency is a reflection of a larger policy gap in which middle-class financial difficulties are acknowledged in theory but not sufficiently addressed in reality. Concerns regarding student debt, which the #FeesMustFall movement originally aimed to address, are brought back to life by the ISFAP's reliance on a mixed bursary-loan model. Additional loans may worsen financial stress and raise the risk of dropout for middle-class students who are already juggling household debt loads (Van der Berg & Mosomi, 2023). The fragmented nature of higher education funding also affects ISFAP's effectiveness. Coordination between NSFAS, ISFAP, SETA bursaries, and departmental schemes remains weak, resulting in duplication, inefficiencies, and coverage gaps. For public servants' children, who may be eligible for various funding streams, this fragmentation complicates access and awareness of available opportunities (Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022).

ISFAP is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough to provide all-encompassing assistance. ISFAP needs a major scale increase, more transparent prioritization frameworks that take into account the children of public employees and other vulnerable groups, and improved institutional integration with other funding sources in order to realize its transformative potential. Without these changes, the program runs the risk of escalating rather than resolving middle-class students' structural exclusion from financing their higher education.

2.9 The Role of Labour Unions and Civil Society

The cause of increasing tertiary education funding to more inclusively support civil servants' dependents has gained more support in recent years from labour unions that represent workers in the public sector. Unions like the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and the Public Servants

Association (PSA) have taken the initiative to push for legislative changes that acknowledge the particular financial difficulties government workers face in paying for their children's college education (Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council [PSCBC], 2023). At the negotiation forums of the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC), these unions have tabled formal proposals demanding that at least 25% of departmental bursaries be reserved for qualifying children of staff members. This proposal reflects a strategic effort to institutionalise preferential treatment within existing funding frameworks, thereby addressing the historic exclusion of public servants' families from bursary allocations. The union-driven advocacy underscores a broader recognition of the moral economy of the public sector workforce, wherein employees seek reciprocal support in return for their labour and financial contributions.

Although the issue has gained more attention thanks to these union initiatives and the voices of impacted workers have been heard, formal legislative or regulatory reform has not yet resulted from the movement. Policy frameworks have not changed much in spite of persistent advocacy, and departmental bursaries still function without specifically giving employee dependents priority. The ability of these reforms to result in significant, systemic changes is constrained by the lack of legally binding mandates (PSCBC, 2023). In addition to labour union activism, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in promoting more inclusive and equitable funding policies for higher education. Groups such as Equal Education have been vocal critics of the current fragmented funding system, which they argue undermines the constitutional principle of universal access to education as enshrined in Section 29 of the South African Constitution (Equal Education, 2023).

Equal Education and related CSOs draw attention to the inconsistencies in a funding system that simultaneously promotes education as a public good and places financial obstacles in the way of a sizable portion of prospective students, including children of public employees. Their campaigns call for a comprehensive reform of funding structures, imploring decision-makers to abandon disjointed programs and strict income thresholds in favour of integrated, needs-based strategies that guarantee fair access for all eligible students. The opacity and complexity of the current bursary systems, which frequently disadvantage families with limited resources or less knowledge, have drawn criticism from the CSOs. They demand more openness, better communication tactics, and systems that enable applicants, especially those from marginalized or vulnerable backgrounds, to successfully complete funding applications.

A strong, if unofficial, coalition supporting systemic change has been formed as a result of the cooperation between civil society and labour unions. The legitimacy and urgency of funding reform are strengthened by this partnership, which unites the direct interests and practical knowledge of public servants with the larger rights-based agenda of civil society. However, there are still major obstacles to overcome. Financial limitations, conflicting policy priorities, and bureaucratic inertia all work against the political will to enact comprehensive reforms. Consequently, advocacy initiatives are still negotiating a challenging landscape characterized by slow advancements and enduring systemic obstacles. One important aspect of the developing conversation in South Africa about financing higher education is the active participation of labour unions and civil society organizations. Their combined efforts are instrumental in foregrounding the needs of public servants' children and the missing middle more broadly, advocating for policy frameworks that are more just, inclusive, and responsive to the lived realities of learners and their families.

2.10 Summary of Gaps and the Need for Policy Realignment

A careful analysis of the literature shows that there are still major and enduring gaps in South Africa's higher education funding system, especially when it comes to middle-class earners' support and recognition. The funding landscape is still structurally biased against a significant portion of the population, the missing middle, despite the nation's admirable progress in increasing access for the poorest students and addressing politically visible constituencies through programs like NSFAS and targeted bursaries. Public employees and their kids hold a paradoxical and mostly invisible place in this group. When it comes to the creation and application of policies, middle-class people, especially those working in the public sector, are continuously left out. The eligibility criteria that dominate financial aid frameworks prioritize income thresholds without adequate consideration for the multidimensional financial burdens these families face. This oversight has resulted in a systemic exclusion of public servants' children from meaningful access to tertiary funding, despite their parents' crucial role as taxpayers and service providers sustaining the very institutions that manage these funds (Public Service Commission, 2022; Mouton & Nel, 2023).

The effectiveness of a number of promising funding tools, including departmental bursaries, the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) interventions, and the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP), has been limited by a lack of institutional coordination and fragmented planning. Inequities and administrative inefficiencies are sustained in the absence of an integrated funding strategy that synchronizes these mechanisms with a logical framework for prioritization (CHE, 2023; Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022). Furthermore, there is frequently a discrepancy between the source of funding and the distribution of benefits because these programs do not specifically target the children of public employees. Crucially, existing research tends to address the missing middle as a generic category, failing to interrogate the unique contradictions that arise when individuals who both fund and operate within state institutions find their families excluded from reciprocal benefits. This oversight neglects the social and moral dimensions underpinning the public sector employment relationship, as well as the implications for workforce morale and institutional legitimacy (Robeyns, 2021; Dlamini & Schoole, 2022).

This article seeks to fill this important gap by centering the children of public servants as a distinct policy category deserving of focused attention. By highlighting their experiences, it hopes to promote more complex understandings of the missing middle and push for ethically sound and financially viable policy changes. There is an urgent and complex need to realign policies. It entails reevaluating eligibility requirements to include multifaceted needs assessments, combining various funding sources to optimize effectiveness and equity, and putting in place procedures that clearly acknowledge public employees as stakeholders deserving of mutual support for their families. In addition to being a question of distributive justice, this realignment

is strategically necessary to maintain a motivated and engaged public workforce, which is essential to South Africa's development goals. The literature signals a clear mandate for reform. Addressing the invisibility of public servants' children in higher education funding policies offers an opportunity to reconcile equity, social justice, and institutional loyalty, thereby strengthening the social contract between the state and its employees.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Capability Approach and Policy Gap Theory serve as the main theoretical pillars upon which this study is based. In addition to framing the normative arguments about fairness, opportunity, and social justice, these frameworks collectively offer a strong basis for comprehending the systemic exclusion of children of public servants from funding for postsecondary education.

3.1 Policy Gap Theory

Policy Gap Theory explores the disparities between policy intentions and actual outcomes, particularly where formal policies fail to address the lived realities of target populations (Cloete & Wissink, 2022). This theory clarifies how structural design flaws in South Africa's well-intentioned education funding programs, like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), can nevertheless have exclusionary effects on particular groups. The strict income requirements used to assess eligibility for funding in this instance are an example of the policy gap. Despite their intention to target underprivileged students, these thresholds ignore factors like family size, debt loads, and regional variations in cost of living. Consequently, children of middle-class public servants are placed in a grey area where socioeconomic complexity and policy do not align (Mouton & Nel, 2023). The inconsistent administration of bursary programs across government agencies and SETAs is another example of how Policy Gap Theory draws attention to problems with institutional fragmentation and policy coherence. These organizations' conflicting but overlapping mandates cause inefficiencies and the neglect of internal employee dependents (Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022). A crucial group, the children of public servants, remains underserved as a result of the fragmentation, which creates a systemic gap. By suggesting that policymakers conduct iterative, evidence-based reviews that take into account the lived experiences of impacted populations, the theory promotes a critical evaluation of policy design. It argues for more complex, multifaceted policy tools and implies that a limited focus on income as the only factor is insufficient for equitable access.

3.2 The Capability Approach

The capability approach, which was developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and further developed by Martha Nussbaum (2011), focuses on people's true opportunities or "capabilities," as opposed to just their formal resources or entitlements. This framework is particularly relevant to education, which is a way for people to increase their freedoms and fully engage in society in addition to being a right. According to Robeyns (2021), the capability approach is a normative basis for social justice that goes beyond crude metrics like enrolment rates or income. When it comes to funding for postsecondary education, access should be interpreted as actual chances for students to enrol, continue, and finish their education rather than just formal eligibility or financial requirements. The capability approach highlights the hidden disadvantages that children of public servant's experience in the context of South Africa's "missing middle." These households' limited resources, high debt levels, and conflicting demands limit their actual freedom to pursue higher education, even though they might not be eligible for funding based on gross income (Van der Berg & Mosomi, 2023). Thus, this theoretical lens moves the emphasis from bureaucratic eligibility to equity of opportunity and lived reality. The capability approach emphasizes how crucial it is to take into account the larger social environment, which includes social inclusion, psychological aspects, and the function of institutional support. When public servants' children are excluded from bursaries, it not only limits their educational attainment but also affects their sense of belonging and morale, factors critical for academic success (Soudien & Wilson-Strydom, 2020).

3.3 Integration of Theories and Implications for the Study

A thorough examination of the issue is made possible by combining the Capability Approach with Policy Gap Theory. A crucial diagnostic tool for locating and elucidating institutional fragmentation and systemic flaws in education funding policies is Policy Gap Theory. It aids in placing the exclusion of children of public servants in the larger framework of difficulties in designing and implementing policies. By providing a normative framework that prioritizes justice, equity, and human development, the Capability Approach enhances this. It draws attention to the practical effects of exclusion, such as how a lack of funding opportunities restricts impacted students' potential and perpetuates social injustices. These frameworks work together to guide the study's methodological decisions and analytical perspective, supporting the use of secondary data and policy documents to highlight institutional gaps and lived economic realities. They also underpin the study's call for more inclusive and adaptive policy reforms that reflect both economic complexity and normative commitments to equity.

4. Methodology

This study investigates the exclusion of children of public servants from South Africa's tertiary education funding frameworks using a qualitative research design based on policy analysis. A document-based approach was chosen in order to allow for a thorough analysis of official policy, legislative texts, and publicly accessible reports without direct interaction with human subjects, given the emphasis on institutional arrangements, policy content, and systemic contradictions. This method naturally circumvents the need for ethical clearance.

4.1 Research Design

Since the research problem focuses on comprehending how policy creates eligibility criteria, distributes funding, and results in unintended exclusionary outcomes, a qualitative policy analysis was judged appropriate. A methodical analysis of the language, content, and structure of pertinent policy documents and reports is made possible by this design. The method emphasizes contextual comprehension and critical evaluation of policy texts over statistical measurement, which is consistent with interpretivist paradigms.

4.2 Data Sources

The study draws on a purposive selection of secondary data sources, including:

- Policy documents issued by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), particularly NSFAS eligibility guidelines and annual reports (DHET, 2023).
- Budget reports and speeches from the National Treasury outlining funding allocations and priorities (National Treasury, 2023).
- Parliamentary committee reports on education funding and public service remuneration (Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, 2023).
- Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) bursary guidelines and annual performance reviews (HWSETA, AgriSETA reports, 2022–2023).
- Departmental bursary scheme documents from selected government departments, accessed via official websites and government gazettes.
- Published academic literature and government-commissioned research reports relevant to higher education funding, public service income, and socio-economic analysis (e.g., Public Service Commission, HSRC reports).

This combination of official, academic, and grey literature provides a comprehensive view of the policy environment, funding mechanisms, and socio-economic context.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In order to collect data, pertinent documents were systematically retrieved and compiled from academic databases like JSTOR, ResearchGate, Academia, Google Scholar, official government portals, and institutional websites. In order to maintain contemporaneity, documents were chosen primarily for their direct relevance to the goals of the study, with an emphasis on those released in the most recent five years (2019–2024).

The analysis employed a thematic content analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved several iterative steps:

1. Familiarization: Multiple readings of each document to identify salient policy features, terminology, and eligibility criteria related to tertiary education funding.
2. Coding: Systematic coding of text segments related to funding eligibility, target beneficiaries, and references to public servants or middle-income groups. Codes also included themes such as affordability, social justice, institutional fragmentation, and policy coherence.
3. Theme development: Grouping codes into broader themes to capture patterns of exclusion, contradictions, and institutional dynamics. Particular attention was given to identifying gaps between policy intentions and reported socioeconomic realities.
4. Interpretation: Integrating thematic findings with the theoretical frameworks of Policy Gap Theory and the Capability Approach to interpret the implications of policy design choices.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to assist in organizing codes and visualizing thematic relationships.

4.4 Sampling and Scope

Using a purposive sampling approach, the study focuses on policy documents and reports that are pertinent to funding for postsecondary education and public employees. Since it doesn't use surveys, interviews, or human subjects, ethical approval is not required. In addition to reviewing specific provincial bursary programs and SETA guidelines, the scope takes into account national policies and frameworks in order to account for institutional complexity and variation.

4.5 Limitations and Delimitations

Although a document-based approach makes it possible to examine policies in great detail, it is not always able to capture the entire range of lived experiences of those who are impacted. The inclusion of secondary academic and government reports with empirical data on the economic realities faced by public servants, however, somewhat offsets this limitation. The study's goal is to identify systemic gaps and offer a nuanced policy critique, not statistical generalization. By performing primary qualitative or quantitative research with public employees and their families, future studies could expand on these findings.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Since the study only used secondary data and publicly available documents, there was no need for ethical approval because no human subjects were involved. In accordance with academic standards, all sources are appropriately referenced and acknowledged.

5. Results

A number of important conclusions regarding the exclusion of children of public servants from funding for post-school education were drawn from the qualitative examination of policy documents, government reports, and scholarly literature. To highlight the issue's institutional, economic, and social facets, these findings are presented thematically.

5.1 Rigid Income Thresholds and Eligibility Criteria

One of the most prominent findings is the persistence of rigid income thresholds in funding policies such as NSFAS. Eligibility is primarily determined by gross household income, with a threshold set at approximately R350,000 per annum (DHET, 2023). Households earning above this amount are automatically excluded, regardless of other financial pressures. Important contextual factors like family size, the number of dependents enrolled in postsecondary education, outstanding debt, and regional differences in living expenses are all disregarded by this binary cutoff. Consequently, despite severe financial hardship, many public employees, particularly those in salary bands 7 to 10, are not eligible (Public Service Commission, 2022). Similar trends were found when SETA bursaries and departmental funding programs were analysed. The majority of SETAs demand that applicants fulfil income requirements that are in line with NSFAS thresholds or base bursary distribution on sectoral priorities and merit, regardless of the employees' family status (HWSETA, 2023; AgriSETA, 2023). Despite being supposedly created to aid in staff development, departmental bursaries frequently do not accept internal dependents because of stringent eligibility requirements or a lack of funding.

5.2 Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination Among Funding Bodies

A second major finding is the fragmented nature of education funding mechanisms in South Africa. The responsibility for tertiary education funding is distributed across multiple agencies and departments, including NSFAS, various SETAs, and individual government departments with their own bursary schemes. Gaps in coverage and policy incoherence result from this fragmentation. For instance, departmental bursaries differ greatly in terms of eligibility and scope, SETAs concentrate on sector-specific skill development, and NSFAS targets low-income students (Ndlovu & Mpofu, 2022). To guarantee that public servants' children are consistently taken into account across these mechanisms, there is no cohesive system or framework in place. Employees' and their families' access to bursaries is complicated administratively and inconsistently due to the division of funding authority. Exclusion is made worse by the fact that many public employees are not aware of available bursaries or encounter administrative obstacles when attempting to apply (Public Service Commission, 2022).

5.3 Contradiction Between Tax Contributions and Benefit Exclusion

A critical theme emerging from the analysis is the contradiction between public servants' tax contributions and their children's exclusion from funding benefits. Through income taxes, public employees make a significant contribution to state revenue, which is used to pay for educational initiatives like NSFAS and SETA bursaries. However, due to eligibility requirements and income thresholds, their children are mainly shut out of these programs. Public employees expressed concerns about being "left out" of the benefits that their taxes fund, and this contradiction was specifically brought up during parliamentary committee discussions (Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, 2023). The public sector workforce's morale and sense of justice are weakened by the symbolic exclusion it produces (Mouton & Nel, 2023). The exclusion is especially pronounced in departmental bursaries, where policies frequently do not account for the families of their own employees, despite the reasonable assumption that departments would prioritize them, instead concentrating on external applicants (DPSA, 2023).

5.4 Economic Pressures on Middle-Income Public Servants

According to the findings, a large number of middle-class public employees face severe financial strains that are out of proportion to their gross income. According to data from the South African Reserve Bank (2024) and the Public Service Commission (2022), this group has numerous dependents, low savings, and high household debt. Costs of housing, transportation, and education have increased more than wages, according to an analysis of cost-of-living indices. Costs are particularly high for public employees in urban areas, which house the majority of government buildings (BER, 2024). Due to these economic realities, many families find it difficult to cover tuition and associated costs without taking on debt, even though they are not eligible for financial aid. These pressures contribute to increased dropout rates and academic underperformance among the children of public servants, who may resort to loans or part-time work to finance studies (Van der Berg & Mosomi, 2023).

5.5 Limited Impact of Pilot Initiatives

Government pilot initiatives like the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP) were designed to address the missing middle but have had limited reach and impact. In comparison to the size of the excluded population, ISFAP's funding envelope and applicant pool are still small (CHE, 2023). Children of public servants are not given special priority under the ISFAP's eligibility requirements, so many of them continue to go without assistance. According to academic critiques, the program relies more on course selection and academic merit than on thorough socioeconomic profiling (Govender & Mabunda, 2023).

5.6 Perceptions of Injustice and Implications for Public Sector Morale

A recurrent theme in parliamentary reports and academic literature is the perception of injustice among public servants whose children are excluded from funding. Lower morale, less loyalty, and worries about job retention are all consequences of this perception (Mouton & Nel, 2023; Dlamini & Sehoole, 2022). The apparent paradox of funding public goods they cannot fully access and funding policies that seem disconnected from their lived realities are sources of frustration for public servants. This dynamic could have long-term effects on the stability and efficacy of the public sector and run the risk of eroding the social contract between the state and its employees.

5.7 Summary of Results

The analysis reveals a multi-layered set of challenges: rigid eligibility thresholds that fail to account for economic complexity; fragmentation of funding across multiple agencies with limited coordination; contradictory dynamics where public servants fund but do not benefit from education subsidies; significant economic pressures on middle-income households; insufficient pilot initiatives; and the negative socio-psychological impact on public sector employees. These results highlight the need for a systemic policy realignment that takes a more nuanced view of affordability and fairness and incorporates public servants' children as a separate category within funding frameworks.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a significant and underexplored issue within South Africa's higher education funding landscape: the systemic exclusion of public servants' children, particularly those from middle-income households, from accessing tertiary education financial support. This discussion situates the results within broader scholarly debates, theoretical insights, and practical policy considerations.

6.1 Revisiting the Policy Gap and Institutional Fragmentation

According to Cloete and Wissink's (2022) theory, the continuation of strict income thresholds and disjointed funding mechanisms represents a classic policy gap. Although policies like NSFAS were created with the noble goal of assisting historically underprivileged students, they have remained rigid and have not changed to reflect shifting socioeconomic conditions. Since middle-class public employees, as this study has demonstrated, do not easily fall into the "poor" or "affluent" binary categories, this rigidity is especially harmful to them. This issue is made worse by the disarray in bursary administration among NSFAS, SETAs, and other government agencies, which results in administrative silos and uneven eligibility requirements. This disjointed system makes it difficult for affected families to navigate the available options and contributes to the invisibility of their specific needs in policy design. Ndlovu and Mpofu's (2022) observations about the lack of coordination among funding bodies are confirmed here, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach that transcends institutional boundaries.

6.2 Economic Realities versus Policy Assumptions

The findings highlight a critical disconnect between the state's assumptions about income and the lived economic realities of public servants. Van der Berg and Mosomi (2023) argue that using gross income thresholds as a stand-in for affordability ignores important variables like debt balances, the number of dependents, regional cost variations, and non-discretionary spending. This restrictive criterion gives the impression that middle-class people are financially stable, but in reality, many of them are extremely vulnerable. By moving the emphasis from formal eligibility to actual opportunity, the capability approach provides an engaging lens in this situation (Robeyns, 2021). Children of public servants are essentially denied the opportunity to pursue higher education when they are excluded based on strict income criteria, which limits upward mobility and perpetuates social injustices. According to Soudien and Wilson-Strydom (2020), policies that recognize the multifaceted nature of deprivation are necessary for achieving true educational equity.

6.3 The Paradox of Contribution and Exclusion

One of the more striking findings is the paradox whereby public servants fund education subsidies through their taxes yet their children are excluded from these benefits. The social contract between the government and its workers is called into question by this contradiction. Employee retention and morale are directly impacted by the symbolic exclusion mentioned in academic analyses (Mouton & Nel, 2023) and parliamentary reports (Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, 2023). This dynamic is indicative of what Mouton and Nel (2023) refer to as "fractured distributive justice" in the context of public sector employment. Employees may become disengaged or leave an organization if they believe that their benefits are unfair in

comparison to their contributions. Resolving this paradox is essential for sustainable governance because public servants are crucial to providing basic services.

6.4 Limitations of Pilot Interventions and the Need for Scaled Reform

Although initiatives like ISFAP are a step in the right direction, their impact is limited by their small size and scope. Many deserving students are denied access to ISFAP due to its narrow eligibility requirements and emphasis on academic merit, especially those whose socioeconomic hardship is less apparent on paper (Govender & Mabunda, 2023). This emphasizes the necessity of systemic changes that go beyond pilot programs and toward an all-encompassing set of policies. In addition to incorporating sophisticated socioeconomic assessments and explicitly prioritizing children of public servants in middle-income brackets, such a framework would integrate financial aid programs across government departments and SETAs. Furthermore, to guarantee that public employees are aware of and have access to pertinent bursaries, transparency and communication must be improved.

6.5 Implications for Social Justice and Equity in Public Sector Employment

Concerns regarding social justice, fairness, and the moral economy of public service are raised by the exclusion of public servants' children from funding programs. According to Robeyns (2021), distributive policies should be assessed based on their ability to increase real freedoms and capabilities as well as their economic efficiency. The results show how current policies unintentionally maintain socioeconomic stratification and exclusion in the public sector. This contradicts the government's pledge to transform the public service as a means of promoting social uplift and the constitutional mandate for equal access to education (Section 29, South African Constitution) (DPSA, 2023). Therefore, inclusiveness, equity, and an understanding of the public servant's dual role as a taxpayer and service provider should serve as the guiding principles for reform initiatives. Aligning bursary policies with these principles can enhance morale, improve retention, and contribute to a more just and effective public service.

6.6 Directions for Future Research and Policy Development

The results of the study suggest a number of directions for further investigation. Understanding the socioeconomic dynamics at work would be enhanced by empirical research that incorporates the perspectives and experiences of public employees and their families. Comparative studies with other nations may provide insights into best practices, and quantitative research could more accurately quantify the scope and effects of funding exclusion. From a policy standpoint, it is imperative to set up procedures that methodically incorporate the children of public employees into frameworks for funding education. This could entail developing interdepartmental bursary coordination, updating income eligibility requirements, and designing focused support programs. DHET, Treasury, DPSA, SETAs, and public sector unions must work together to implement such reforms.

6.7 Summary of Discussion

This conversation emphasizes how the exclusion of children of public servants from financing for postsecondary education is a complex issue with roots in institutional fragmentation, economic realities, and policy design. In addition to technical fixes, addressing it calls for a normative commitment to social justice and equity in public sector employment.

7. Conclusion

The systematic exclusion of children of public servants, especially those from middle-class families, from South Africa's tertiary education funding frameworks has been critically examined in this study. The results show that even though their parents play a vital role in providing and maintaining public services, many of these kids are not able to receive financial aid because of strict income requirements and disjointed, disorganized bursary programs. This exclusion draws attention to a serious policy flaw in which eligibility requirements do not fairly represent the lived economic realities of middle-class public employees. The study's analysis, framed by Policy Gap Theory and the Capability Approach, demonstrates that South Africa's current funding policies produce unintended consequences that limit educational opportunities for a vital segment of the workforce's families. The paradox of contributing taxes to fund bursaries from which public servants' children are excluded undermines perceptions of fairness and erodes morale within the public sector. This dynamic poses a risk to retention and the effective delivery of public services.

Although pilot programs like the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Program are an attempt to fill the gap, their efficacy is limited by their narrow focus and disregard for the children of public servants. This highlights the need for extensive policy changes that take a more flexible, inclusive, and sophisticated approach to determining who is eligible for funding. Reforms should include multifaceted affordability assessments, integrate funding plans across agencies, and specifically acknowledge the special status of public servants' families. To guarantee that public employees are aware of and have access to bursary opportunities, enhanced communication and transparency are crucial in addition to policy realignment. More studies that use primary data from impacted families would help us better understand the social and economic effects of exclusion and guide more successful interventions. Ultimately, addressing the funding exclusion of public servants' children is not merely a technical or budgetary issue but a matter of social justice, equity, and the moral economy of public employment. Aligning education funding policies with these values will strengthen the social contract between the state and its workforce and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable higher education system.

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