

Access to and achievement of quality education in South Africa

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Introduction

Since 1994, South Africa's education policy and legislation has been largely concerned with processes of transforming the systemic legacy of apartheid. The burden upon all involved in the complex process of restructuring, especially the teachers, has been immense. Since 2009, President Jacob Zuma has placed education as a central priority and the democratic government has been able to achieve universal access to basic primary education and is on track to achieving the same for basic secondary.

Though the current government has undertaken numerous measures to reform policies, practices and institutions, the burden of the past continues to weigh on the present and will inevitably take years to overcome completely. In May 2010, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, MP, noted the following challenges when she presented the Education budget to the National Assembly:

We have achieved an enormous amount in terms of transforming the education system in a relatively short space of time. However, given what we have achieved, we are determined to address those challenges that continue to detract from how far we have come. We accept that South Africa's learning outcomes continue to be unsatisfactory. All local and international assessments are agreed that far too many of our learners, especially African learners, do not perform at the required level. We have identified the underlying factors and we are determined to work systematically to resolve them.

Overview of education in South Africa

- In 2008, South Africa had 12.4 million learners, some 394,225 educators and 26,065 schools, including 1,086 registered independent or private schools.
- Approximately 2.5% of all schools in the country make up the independent schooling sector. Of the almost 12.5 million learners in the country, 352,396 (2.8%) were attending independent schools in 2008.
- Of all schools, approximately 6,000 are high schools – Grades 8 to 12 – and the rest primary – Grades R (Reception Year) and 1 to 7.
- In government-funded public schools, the average ratio of learners to educators is 31.5 to 1.

Responsibility for schooling is shared between national and provincial governments. The Department of Education develops national norms and standards and creates the main policy and

legislative frameworks for schooling. The nine provincial departments of education are largely responsible for enacting policy and making funding decisions.

Power is further devolved to grassroots level via the election of school governing bodies, which have a significant say in the running of their schools (DoE, 2009a).

The three bands of education

South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) recognises three broad bands of education: General Education and Training, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education and Training.

The General Education and Training Band, which represents Basic Education, runs from Grade R to Grade 9. The final three years of secondary school (Grades 10 to 12) represent Further Education and Training and are not compulsory, but the government is obliged to make this progressively available. Further Education and Training also includes career-oriented education and training offered in Further Education and Training Colleges, community colleges and private colleges. These colleges now fall under the new band of Higher Education and Training. Diplomas and certificates are qualifications also recognised at this level.

Access to education

According to a recent South African Human Rights Commission report on the right to education, access to education has three overlapping dimensions:

- *There must be no discrimination*

While there is little evidence of active discrimination in the schooling system, inequities in the availability of infrastructure and services in schools continue to exist. Although great strides have been made to ensure that many more schools have access to services such as water, electricity and sanitation, the availability of libraries and laboratories across schools remains inequitable. The language of teaching and learning, health and disability excludes many children from full access to appropriate education.

- *Schools must be physically accessible and provide safe travel*

Safe transport for all urban and rural learners who live far from their schools has not yet been ensured. Although specially organised school transport is available to over 200,000 learners, much remains to be done. Safety of learners and teachers from violent attack continues to be a pressing preoccupation of the education department.

- *Education must be affordable for all and free at primary level*

Great advances have been made, including the legislation of fee-free primary schools for the poorest 40% of the population, but fully fee-free primary education has not yet been achieved.

However, school is free, subject to a test of income, for all learners whose parents cannot afford the fees.

Despite all the barriers to access referred to above, participation levels in the South African education system are generally high. Evidence from household surveys confirms that by 2007, as many as 8% of 6 year olds and 62% of 5 year olds participated in some form of early childhood education. Provision of the reception year, Grade R (aged 4–5), has improved significantly.

In 2007, 94% of youth aged 7 to 18 were involved in education programmes. Progress in primary school completion is also positive and suggests that at the current pace, 98% of appropriately aged learners in South Africa will complete primary school by 2015.

It is apparent that participation in education remains high, despite numerous barriers to success and the poor quality of outcomes for many. Withdrawing children from basic education for parents appears to be a measure of last resort – even in the context of HIV and AIDS. Although most learners enrol and complete primary education, retention at secondary level remains a challenge.

Out-of-school children

Out-of-school children remain a matter of concern. The Department of Education estimates that there are about 200,000 children in the 7 to 15 age group that are out of school. However, this number increases substantially when 7 to 17-year-old children are considered. According to a report prepared by the Presidency, about 446,000 children in the 7 to 17 age group are out of school (RSA, 2009), many of which are likely to live in rural areas and in some townships, and to be older children (Create, 2008).

There is a rapid decline in enrolment after age 14 and again after age 16. The South African Children's Institute notes a significant drop in attendance among children older than 14. It concludes that 'whereas 98% of 14 year olds were reported to be attending an educational institution in 2007, this dropped to 95% of 15 year olds, 88% of 17 year olds, 74% of 18 year olds, and by age 19, the attendance rate was down to 59%' (Children's Institute, 2009).

This reflects a systematic drop-out process that cannot be entirely explained by transfer to other sub-systems such as Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) or Further Education and Training (FET).

A comparative analysis of school access across population groups by the Children's Institute indicates that access is most problematic among Coloured and African youth. In 2007, 100% of White 14-year-old children were reported as attending school, compared to 98% of African and 95% of Coloured 14-year-olds. At the age of 18, the difference in attendance rates is striking: 80% of White children, 77% of African, and only 45% of Coloured children attended an educational institution in 2007. At the age of 21, attendance levels reach a low of 32% nationally, with significant provincial and racial differences: with attendance rates of 46%, 33% and 14% for White, African and Coloured youth respectively (Children's Institute, 2009).

Achieving quality learning and teaching

Meaningful access in terms of regular attendance, positive learning experiences and quality learning outcomes is yet to be achieved for many children in the country. Access remains very unequal in terms of quality, inefficient in terms of learning outcomes, and still shaped strongly by the apartheid legacy (Create, 2008).

Government interventions

The Department of Education has made a number of key interventions recently to improve learner performance. These included:

- The Foundations for Learning Programme – geared towards ensuring that sufficient and suitable resources are made available to schools to promote basic numeracy and literacy at the foundation phase of learning.
- The QIDSUP programme – targeted at supporting the poorest schools.
- The Dinaledi Project – aimed at promoting the quality of maths and science teaching at schools.
- The expansion of the national school nutrition programme to poor secondary schools.

However, international tests and studies have found that, despite spending more per child as compared to most African countries, learners perform poorly on basic literacy and numeracy tests. And despite important gains in equalising public spending per child, the apartheid legacy of racial inequality casts shadows over educational access and outcomes.

Targets

In order to address the aforementioned challenges, the Minister of Education has established the following targets that the basic education sector needs to achieve by 2014:

- The number of Grade 12 learners who pass the national examinations and qualify to enter a Bachelor's programme at a university to increase from 105,000 to 175,000.
- The number of Grade 12 learners who pass mathematics and physical science to reach 225,000 and 165,000 respectively.
- The percentage of learners in Grades 3, 6 and 9 in public schools who obtain the minimum acceptable mark in the national assessments for language and mathematics (or numeracy) will increase from between 27% and 38% to at least 60%.

In order to support the achievement of our targets for the education system, the Ministry of Basic Education has set out the following priorities:

- By 2014, there will be universal access to Grade R for all age-appropriate children.
- Adequate learning and teaching materials will be developed and distributed particularly to those schools we have identified.
- Standardised national assessments of the quality of learning will take place in Grades 3, 6 and 9 on an annual basis.

Basic Education Action Plan

In March 2010, the Minister announced the development of a national Basic Education Action Plan. This long-term plan for the basic education sector will be known as Schooling 2025: the Department of Basic Education's Action Plan. This plan will coordinate and guide all interventions in the basic education system in order to turn the system around. It will commit provinces and provincial education departments to clear, agreed outcomes and will ensure that all in the system are accountable for attaining these outcomes.

Interventions

Key interventions as part of the strategy to meet the targets include the following:

1. Curriculum interventions. These will include: streamlining the curriculum in order to provide clear guidelines of what teachers ought to teach on a grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject basis; emphasising the importance of textbooks; and reducing the number of subjects for learners in the Intermediate Phase.
2. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of the basic education system through the establishment of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU). The unit's role will be to assess and develop strategies for improving the quality of educational outcomes and supporting schools to achieve this.
3. Annual National Assessment (ANA) for grades 3, 6 and 9. In order to improve the average performance in grades 3, 6 and 9, from 2010, independently moderated annual assessments will be administered in these grades. The results will inform many of the decisions that the department must take regarding tracking and improving the quality of learning and teaching in the system.
4. The development of a National Teacher Development Plan. This detailed action plan will include activities, timelines, responsibilities and outputs for the next five years. It is crucial that teacher subject and pedagogical knowledge is improved in order to realise the rights of all learners to quality education.
5. Accelerated Infrastructural Development Strategy. In order to speed up the infrastructure improvement programme, South Africa needs to draw on the momentum created to complete the stadia for the FIFA 2010 Soccer World Cup. In 2000/01, provincial education departments spent a mere R553 million on payment for capital assets. Currently, the budget for infrastructure is at R5.5 billion and will reach R9.4 billion by 2012/13.

Conclusion

Since 1994, the South African schooling system has expanded to take in a million additional learners. The government has also undertaken numerous initiatives to improve the quality of learning experiences and learner achievement, with an emphasis on the strengthening of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy.

Our targets are high and will require a lot from us, so our systems must improve to achieve these targets. This paper provides only a glimpse of the work that is being done and still needs to be done.

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