

# Teacher quality in Southern Africa



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Those who have invested large amounts of energy securing national and international commitments to increased access to education have won only a small step in the larger battle of providing access to *quality* education for all children. If 'access' to schools does not provide 'access' to improved life chances, then this is of questionable value. A quality education must provide the basis for economic and social participation and the strengthening of socio-economic development and of democracy.

South Africa has challenges that have less to do with rapid expansion of access and much more to do with the crippling inequalities inherited from apartheid and the fatal impact these inequalities have had on the quality of education. There is near-universal enrolment in schools but quality challenges are visible in the poor retention rates, high drop-out rates and weak pupil performance. We have little difficulty in getting our children to school; we simply don't know how to keep them there, arguably because of the unfulfilling experience schooling is for so many in terms of quality. Many of the strategies and challenges South Africa faces in regards to tackling the problem of teacher supply and teacher quality have much in common with other developing countries facing challenges of expansion.

### The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers: implications for expanding systems

UNESCO's 2008 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report provided evidence of significant gains between 1999 and 2005 in primary school enrolment (particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia), but drew attention to persistent problems of poor quality. In developing countries, up to 40% of students do not reach minimum achievement standards in language and mathematics.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be a sound and sustainable investment to prioritise access as a primary goal rather than the improvement of 'all aspects of the quality of education'. Quantitative expansion necessarily implies challenges to quality and these two imperatives cannot be separated in planning.

Rapid expansion of education access requires a rapid production of teachers. The 2008 EFA report estimates that Sub-Saharan Africa will need nearly four million new primary school teachers by 2015.<sup>2</sup> The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. The expansion of educational access demands careful

multi-year planning for infrastructure and other resources, but more fundamental is the planning for the quantity of teachers on the uncompromising imperative of quality. Where incremental steps have to be taken to achieve numerical expansion, action must be taken to scaffold education quality for teaching and learning in the short term, and for the systematic development of teachers in the long term.

When an education system anticipates rapid expansion that existing teacher supply and training capacity is not likely to meet, the response to this demand crucially depends on the lead-time for planning and the resources available. Where planning scenarios have sufficient lead-time for the incremental building of institutions and resources on which that expansion will depend (e.g., adequate number and quality of training sites, sound qualification and curriculum frameworks, relevant learning materials, an able corps of trainers, and good quality entrants) and where there are sufficient and sustainable resources to support these expansions, then the chances of building quality is stronger than when any of these factors are absent or weak. Where structural weaknesses exist, lead-time can be protracted by years. Physical infrastructure may be the easier but this still takes years of planning and labour. The other factors, unlike bricks and mortar, are more resistant to quick interventions and, while inadequacies persist, undermine the very possibility of success.

Accurately anticipating demand and quality needs requires information that is not always available. There are demographic factors to be considered; for example:

- How many children and where?
- What are the birth rate and mortality projections (especially in conditions of an HIV/AIDS pandemic) and what are the implications of these for enrolment patterns?
- In what languages will teachers need to be proficient?

There are also education decisions that impact on planning; for example:

- What content areas will the curriculum require, and will these be consistent throughout primary and secondary education?
- What are the demographics and age distributions of the current teaching corps and what attrition can be reasonably anticipated?
- Will this affect all areas of education specialisation equally?
- Is increased mortality (e.g., from HIV/AIDS) a factor and is this regionally consistent?



- Is the schooling system supplying sufficient numbers of potential entrants of adequate quality?

And some factors are more political; for example:

- At what rate will the system expand?
- What are the resources available to sustain required levels of pupil–teacher ratios, and will this be even across the system?

Without such information, planning is flawed and teacher supply to meet demand is at risk. Where the balance between supply and demand falters, the implications for education quality can be disastrous. Steps commonly taken to meet teacher shortfalls include:

1. Truncating initial training to pump ‘teachers’ into the system more rapidly.
2. Lowering the bar for entry into initial teacher education – or failing to raise entrance requirements when quality improvement requires this.
3. Employing inadequately trained or untrained personnel to fill gaps without long-term plans for their professional upgrading and integration (however temporary an intervention, experience shows that these teachers become permanent features of the system).
4. Increasing the size of classes in the crucial primary years.
5. ‘Importing’ teachers from another country.

All of these measures have fatal implications for quality in the long term if they are not supported by coherent and sustained teacher support.

In any education system, it is essential that teacher development should be viewed as a career-long process; credible and desirable development opportunities should be made available and adequate mechanisms put in place to provide teachers with the support they need in the classroom. Ideally, teacher development needs to be conceptualised as a continuum with in-service education. No pre-service teacher education can hope to produce anything but novice teachers with a great deal to learn. Where the policy choices and constraints outlined above mean that inadequacies in initial teacher education are known, it is critically important that in-service education is systematically and rigorously planned to support teachers’ ongoing development if quality is a goal.

Where teacher education has been inadequate to meet quality goals, the provision of excellent teacher and learning support materials is critical. The availability to learners of good quality textbooks has been repeatedly demonstrated to have a significant impact on learner performance,<sup>3</sup> and teachers need to have well-structured teaching support texts that will compensate for resource deficiencies that limit opportunity to research teaching topics. Learning time – another key variable in learner performance – needs to be maximised through effective management of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the cost-reduction strategies that often result in poor teacher education also manifest in inadequate supplies of textbooks, weak administrative support and high teacher–pupil ratios. It is an utterly false economy to provide poor quality education when for a relatively small additional investment, learning can be enhanced through provision of sufficient quantities of quality textbooks.

In addition to the provision of good quality resources, teachers themselves need to be used as a resource to each other. Once teachers are deployed in schools, opportunities for intensive periods of further training are seriously constrained. Creative use of quality distance materials accompanied by mentoring systems, and the mixing of highly skilled teachers with those less skilled – with clear delineations of roles and responsibilities and recognition of the contribution of the mentor – are all achievable. It is also possible for teachers to work as teams, which would allow for collaborative teaching of large groups and specific concepts or fields to be taught to smaller groups. Such responsiveness requires confident curriculum leadership.

Confident leadership of teaching and learning is best developed by those officials who are in most regular contact with school, and should be a resource to school leadership in crafting solutions to the challenges faced. Too often, officials supporting schools themselves lack confidence in the face of overwhelming challenges, and retreat into the safety of their unquestionable authority. This is inimical to the creative exploration of alternatives to resolving the problems. To whom must teachers turn when they experience difficulties in teaching and learning?

All of these possibilities can be enhanced when teachers are encouraged to be organised with a strong professional identity and accountability, however incompatible this may be with political goals of compliance.

## A South African case-study: challenges of teacher supply and quality in a complex transition

In South Africa, the complex constitutional changes that occurred after the first national democratic election of 1994 were overlaid on the structurally weak teacher education systems of the apartheid era, resulting in serious consequences for both teacher supply and teacher quality.

For a range of reasons that will be explored below, South Africa has experienced the following difficulties.

1. A loss of capacity in teacher supply with a consequent complex and growing teacher shortage.
2. A spatial distortion in provision and supply.
3. A structural separation between initial and continuing teacher education.
4. Curriculum changes that have effectively ‘de-skilled’ teachers, with serious consequences for quality.

These difficulties are fundamentally a consequence of planning failure during a complex political and administrative post-apartheid transition.

1994 was a watershed year for South Africa. This was the year of the first non-racial democratic elections and the dawn of a new constitutional era. Prior to 1994, each of the ethnic or racially separated apartheid education departments was responsible for its own teacher training colleges. Teacher education (especially for primary and junior secondary school levels) was closely associated with the schooling sector, and governed and funded on similar



*Secondary school students in Guyana*

principles. It reflected the inequalities and intentional fragmentation of the apartheid education system. The logic of apartheid resulted in racial differentials in the resource base of colleges, in the level of qualifications offered and in the quality of training. In many colleges, the intellectual potential of teachers was denigrated by curricula that represented the worst of Bantu education and did not extend subject knowledge beyond matric. While a close association between an employing authority and a teacher education system might be expected to result in an optimum balance in supply and demand, under apartheid this was not the case. In the 1980s, there had been an increase in the capacity of the state to produce teachers and many new teacher training colleges were established in urban and rural areas. Teacher education was seen as a major access route to post-school education – a key ‘deliverable’ for apartheid’s Bantustan leaders, who had imposed limitations on the provision of university education – and a way of channelling, or even co-opting, the aspirations of urban youth. This expansion and its attendant oversupply in the early 1990s had huge consequences for the new state, which inherited a large number of unemployed, poorly qualified teachers.

In the post-1994 new dispensation, the Bantustans ceased to exist as political and geographic entities. The education departments serving white children, and children of Indian or coloured descent, were redistributed – together with the administrative remnants of the Bantustans – across nine newly created provinces, all of which had to establish new administrations. Several other critical

governance decisions were taken as part of the new constitutional framework. Key policy and legislative functions on higher (university) education were allocated to the national level, in a constitutional framework that allowed ‘concurrent’ legislative powers, but all administrative functions were allocated to the provincial level. Provincial departments became the employers of teachers.

In this complex, legal, political and administrative process, the location of teacher training colleges became the responsibility of the national government as a consequence of a determination that colleges would be part of the higher education sector. Historically, universities in South Africa had played a role in the professional education of secondary school teachers, but many universities were unfamiliar with the sector-specific requirements of teacher education for primary schools. Teacher training colleges were ‘incorporated’ into higher education institutions. In reality, the ‘incorporation’ of colleges in a context of immensely unequal power relations meant that most of them simply closed down, resulting in a reduction of national capacity, particularly in areas that had not been part of higher education offerings, such as the training of primary school teachers. In 1994, there were 102 colleges of education and about 30 universities training teachers. By 2000, all colleges of education were either closed down or incorporated into the higher education sector. Only 25 public universities now have teacher education programmes. Spatially, there are provinces with no initial teacher education capacity and those provinces that do have teacher education capacity have limited or no capacity in key areas such as foundation stage.



With the move of teacher education to the higher education sector, teacher education programmes, generally seen as under-funded and costly, have struggled at the margins of higher institutions battling with their own deficits and institutional changes. Teacher education has been left to fend for itself in this much-contested environment.

There have been unintended consequences of these major structural shifts. In the past, colleges of education were geographically distributed across the country – even if unevenly. This meant that students outside of urban centres could attend a college reasonably near to their home. But the move of teacher education to the higher education sector has located it in institutions far from home for a high proportion of students, making teacher education increasingly inaccessible to rural students and putting at risk teacher supply to rural schools. 74% of newly qualified teachers complete their schooling in an urban context, 13.9% in a peri-urban/semi-rural area and only 9.7% in a rural area.

For complex reasons not explored in this article, young African school-leavers are not entering teacher-education programmes in the numbers required. Of newly qualified teachers, 80% are white and 66% are white women. While these teachers are needed, without substantial increase in African enrolment there will be difficulties in the early years of schooling where African languages should be the medium of instruction.

There is no doubt that South Africa is producing fewer teachers and has lost capacity in teacher education. On the basis of current projections of teacher demand and supply, there is now an emerging consensus that we are not producing sufficient teachers to attain the EFA goals. The report, *Teachers for the Future*, reaches the following conclusion:

*There is compelling evidence that South Africa will suffer from a catastrophic shortage of teachers sufficiently equipped to offer quality education to learners in the different phases of the South African education system ... unless an intervention strategy is designed, funded and implemented in the short to medium term to avoid the shortage becoming unmanageable.<sup>4</sup>*

In 2003/04, a total of 21,000 state-paid teachers left the teaching profession. If the present number of state-paid teachers remained stable, a 1% increase in the attrition rate would add another 3,700 to the annual requirement. In addition, independent schools would be looking to replace their departing teachers, and so would public schools with School Governing Body teachers.<sup>5</sup> The figure of 21,000 can be taken as the minimum annual requirement for new public school teachers to replace those who left the preceding year. Some estimate that we need to produce 20,000 new teachers annually (the MTT Report<sup>6</sup>; Crouch and Perry<sup>7</sup>). A more realistic estimate for the next few years would be 25,000. We may be producing only a third of this number.

We are seriously short of meeting this target. The best information available<sup>8</sup> is that public higher education institutions produced about 5,000 newly qualified teachers in 2003, and less than 9,000 in 2004.<sup>9</sup> This generic shortage needs to be disaggregated into specific learning areas, phases and languages of instruction for planning purposes.

A second feature of the new constitution has been the severing of the vital link between in-service and pre-service education. Pre-service teacher education is located in universities, and that on the margins of the sector. In-service teacher education, and the budget for this, has been allocated to provincial departments whose response to this quality imperative has been tardy and often incoherent.

In-service teacher education is also a critical adjunct to curriculum change. South Africa has embarked on an ambitious restructuring of the school curriculum, both in terms of the subjects offered and the pedagogic orientation away from a content-driven approach to an outcomes-based model requiring high levels of educational literacy and initiative. Planning for teacher supply and development for new constituent subjects in the new curriculum has been inadequate and there is evidence of a high proportion of teachers teaching in fields in which they have not qualified.

South Africa, like many countries grappling with the quality imperatives of expansion of access to education to meet the EFA goals, struggles with teacher quality challenges. We too must take action to scaffold education support for teachers in the short term and for the systematic development of teachers in the long term. These challenges are being increasingly recognised, and the implementation of new policies is being considered. Teacher quality is an urgent matter, as multiple studies of learner performance attest, and we have much to learn from the best of international experience in achieving the millennium development goals.

#### Endnotes

- 1 UNESCO (29 November 2007). *Education for All on the right track finds Global Monitoring Report 2008* launched by UNESCO Press release No. 2007-147.
- 2 *Ibid* p.2.
- 3 *EFA Report* (2008). p.74.
- 4 DoE/ETDP-SETA/ILO, *Teachers for the Future: Meeting Teacher Shortages to Achieve Education for All* (advance electronic version), p 9.
- 5 School Governing Bodies currently employ 8% of all full-time educators in public ordinary schools.
- 6 ELRC (2003). *Educator Attrition and Mortality in South Africa* [the MTT Report], p.5
- 7 Crouch, L. and Perry, H. Chapter 21 of Human Sciences Research Council. *Human Resources Development Review 2003: Education, Employment and Skills in South Africa*, Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- 8 Morrow (2004). *The supply of teachers for the schooling system in South Africa: A Note to the SAUVCA AGM*.
- 9 The anomaly between these two figures may indicate the inadequacy of the available data – itself an indication of the planning problem.

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