

## The Failing Standard of Basic Education in South Africa

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In South Africa there are many signs that show that there is a crisis in education. With high enrolment rates each year, and increasingly poor grade 12 output, it is clear that more concentration needs to be focused on the quality of education. Quantity should, however, also be considered when the majority of those learners who pass matric do not meet the minimum requirements for university entrance. In addition, of the number of learners enrolled in grade 1, only half make it to grade 12. It has been established that a number of factors or problems hinder learners from receiving a good standard of education. These include: parents' lack of participation in their children's education and the weak functioning of School Governing Bodies (SGBs). SGBs were formed in all South African public schools to oversee the administration of the schools, but they are often sidelined due to the lack of formal education and training of members, especially in the area of finance and general administration of the school. Good leadership in schools is also needed to make sure that teachers attend to their classes diligently and learners take the importance of education seriously. Government needs to ensure that teachers are trained accordingly and schools have adequate basic resources. This paper will discuss these factors that have been identified as causing the drop in the standard of education in South Africa, and some recommendations will be made to improve this untenable situation.

### Introduction

An educated population remains the fundamental platform for meeting most of the other Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs), and a well-oiled education system is important for many reasons. It is a means to encourage a knowledge movement which reflects the traditional heritage of South Africa and develops it into a living force for the future. A good education system is crucial, not

only for ensuring that the citizenry are well educated; but also for human development and for the maintenance of socially responsive economic and political systems.

Despite the fact that South Africa has reached MDG2 and spends 18,5 per cent of its annual budget on education, the education system remains largely in a poor state of affairs.<sup>2</sup> In fact, over the past five years the country has seen a

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doubling of the education budget to ZAR165, 1 billion, but still the system has failed to reverse unacceptably low exam results or to improve the standard of teaching.<sup>3</sup> The quality of education remains very poor, and the output rate has not improved. Furthermore, classrooms are still overcrowded: the ratio of teachers to learners is 1:32 in South African public schools.<sup>4</sup> The dropout rate is very high, and literacy and numeracy levels are low. Other challenges include: poor teacher training; unskilled teachers; lack of commitment to teach by teachers; poor support for learners at home; and a shortage of resources in education despite the large budgetary commitments by government. It is clear, based on the facts, that there is a need to improve the quality and functionality of education. Within this context there is also a need to place emphasis on the human rights of learners, which guarantee the right to education and protect them against any disciplinary action that might be harmful to them.

### Enrolment rate

According to statistics, South Africa has attained almost universal access to primary education.<sup>5</sup> It is thus clear that this is not where the problem lies, as over 98 per cent of South African children attend school.

### Literacy and Numeracy

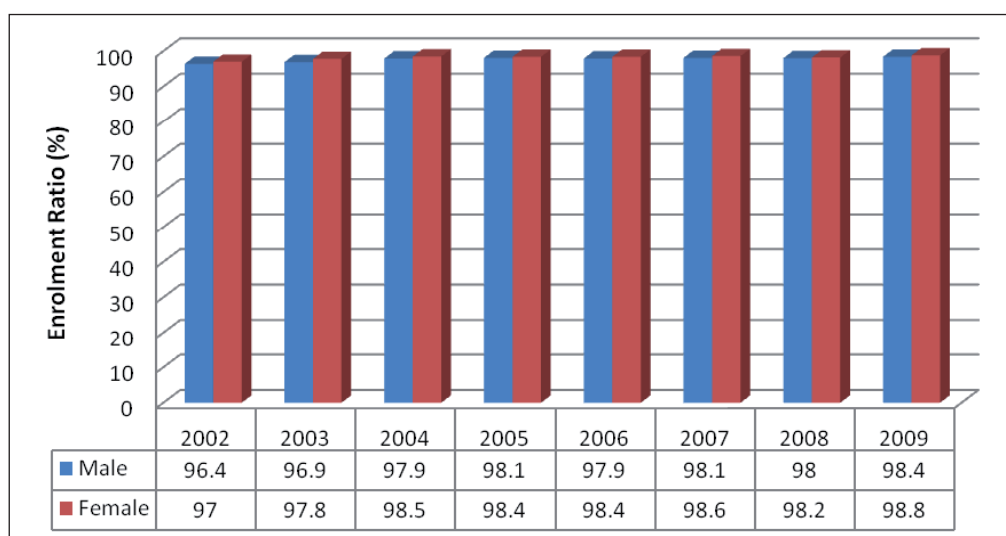
It is accepted that literate and educated people are better situated to obtain decent formal

employment and to create job opportunities for themselves and others. Annual National Assessments (ANAs) for Grade 3 and 6 learners have found low levels of literacy and numeracy for South African learners. Without secure foundations of literacy and numeracy, our learners will never obtain the high-level skills needed by a nation to address poverty and inequality for development and growth.<sup>7</sup> The assessments found that only 35 per cent of learners can read, with results ranging from 12 per cent in Mpumalanga to a 'high' of 43 per cent in the Western Cape.<sup>8</sup>

### South Africa's standard of education

In her press release statement for the Annual National Assessment for 2011, the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, stated at the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) that the results of 2007 had shown some improvement in reading since 2003, but not in mathematics.<sup>9</sup> She further indicated her concern over the standard of South African education by stating: 'This is worrying precisely because the critical skills of literacy and numeracy are fundamental to further education and achievement in the worlds of both education and work. Many of our learners lack proper foundations in literacy and numeracy and so they struggle to progress in the system and into post-school education and training'.<sup>10</sup>

National Planning Minister Trevor Manuel, also found in his ministry's diagnostic overview (June 2011) that the quality of schooling is sub-standard, especially in the township schools.<sup>11</sup>



Source: Statistics South Africa, *General Household Surveys 2002–2009*.<sup>6</sup>

Violence in schools remains a key issue. The rape of schoolgirls and sexual violence and abuse, often by teachers, has been a marked feature of the schooling experience of many boys as well as girls. Sexual abuse, pregnancy and poverty are factors increasing the drop-out rate in secondary schooling.<sup>12</sup> Mbuyisi Mgibisa mentions that the South African Institute of Race Relations has also expressed concern about the high dropout rate, especially in poor black schools.<sup>13</sup> The report states that of the 920 716 pupils in Grade 11 in 2007; only 64 per cent went on to take their Senior Certificate examination in 2008.<sup>14</sup> The poor standards have also been exacerbated by a large number of under-qualified or unqualified teachers who teach in overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms, with severely limited resources.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that good school performance is linked to the participation of all stakeholders in education. These stakeholders include parents, teachers, learners, SGBs, government departments, and the private sector. It is therefore submitted that building relationships of mutualism among the stakeholders in education will improve the quality of education.

## Parents

There are many good reasons why parents should be involved in their child's education. One of the reasons is the ratio of teacher to learner in schools. One classroom teacher and 25 to 35 young minds to educate can be a very difficult task to accomplish.<sup>16</sup> The ratio of learners to teachers is too high, and although it is difficult to acknowledge, some learners simply fall through the cracks in the system. Parents are the safety net for their children, yet too many of them fail to realise this important fact. The greatest 'resource' any classroom teacher can utilise is the parents.<sup>17</sup> The question is: What can parents do to help their children develop in conjunction with the efforts of the formal education system? The one simple thing that parents can do to assist in the formal education of their child is to take an interest in all aspects of their child's school activities: academic projects, extra-curricular activities and relationships. This means helping them with their homework and knowing what they are doing in class. It means getting them involved in school sports teams, music, drama, clubs, and so on. Finally it means knowing whom their child interacts with, how he or she interacts with others, and whether they need parental direction that can and will be provided.<sup>18</sup>

Parents have a fundamental responsibility to ensure that their children are at school and their homework is done. Unfortunately, many parents have never attended school themselves, and so do not know how to read, write and count properly. Nevertheless, the more parents participate in the schooling of their children, in a sustainable way, at every level: in advocacy, decision making and oversight roles, as fundraisers and boosters, as volunteers and para-professionals, and as home teachers, the better for learner achievements.<sup>19</sup>

Some parents work long hours; and when they get home they are often too tired or unmotivated to ensure that their children's homework is done properly. Other parents do the homework for their children; which does not help them or show them how it must be done, so the child will not learn how to find the right answers. A study conducted by Feinstein and Symons found that a very high parental interest in a learner's education is associated with better exam results. Children whose parents show little or no interest are low achievers.<sup>20</sup>

Parents who are well informed on policies and resource allocation in the education sector, and involved in decision making regarding their children, can exert considerable influence and contribute solutions to the challenges in the education system.<sup>21</sup> Involved communities are able to articulate local school needs, hold officials accountable and mobilise local resources to fill gaps when government response is not adequate.<sup>22</sup> All communities should value education for their children. Families either have the power to take command and work towards the wellbeing of their children, or remain powerless and leave their children worse off. Education as a public good, therefore, must not only be valued by the community, but must be advanced and protected or preserved to ensure a better future for all. As mentioned, this is the responsibility of all community role players and stakeholders, as well as educational institutions themselves.<sup>23</sup>

## School Governing Bodies (SGBs)

In the past, school governance in South Africa was characterised by a top-down approach. Educators, learners, parents and communities were excluded from making important decisions about schools and education.<sup>24</sup> Principals and inspectors were the main decision makers for schools.<sup>25</sup> It can be argued that the transformation and reform of the education landscape in South Africa has influenced all parties involved, including the SGBs.<sup>26</sup>

The SGB is the 'government' of the school, established in terms of the South African Schools Act (Act no 84 of 1996). It is mandated to set policies and rules that govern the school, and to monitor the implementation of the rules. The SGB gets its mandate from the different members (learners, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff) of the school community.<sup>27</sup> An SGB must ensure that the school is governed in the best interests of all the stakeholders. All SGB members must always put the best interests of the school before any personal interests.<sup>28</sup> However, SGBs do face challenges. They continue to be under-representative in terms of race and gender, and so fail those SGB members who are not literate.<sup>29</sup> One of the key challenges is that there are many SGB members who lack the necessary financial knowledge and skills, and are placed under tremendous pressure because they are unable to develop practical solutions to practical problems.<sup>30</sup>

## Government

Projections from the 2005 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) *Study of demand and supply of educators in South African public schools*, commissioned by the Education Labour Relations Council South Africa (ELRCSA), estimated that between 18 000 and 22 000 teachers leave the teaching profession every year, either voluntarily or forcibly.<sup>31</sup> The assumption is that the 18 000 to 22 000 educators who exit the teaching profession need to be replaced by an equal number of teachers. There is an estimated output of 6 000 to 10 000 new teachers graduating annually from higher education institutions, some of whom might not enter teaching or who might go abroad to teach, as a result of low salaries and poor working conditions in South Africa.<sup>32</sup> In the light of this, government needs to respond to the problems raised in the report. The other aspect that government should look at is the time spent by teachers in classrooms. Strike action, sometimes unofficial, consumes as much as 10 days a year (5 per cent of school time) and holding a union meeting during school time is often the norm in township schools.<sup>33</sup> Research has highlighted the significance of factors or problems within the education system itself, including: the ongoing changes and amendments to curricula, the unsatisfactory type of teacher training, inadequate support for teachers, teaching time compared to other activities, and unavailability of learning and teaching materials such as textbooks.<sup>34</sup>

According to the South African Bill of Rights, everyone has the right to education, and it is the state's duty: to build enough schools and provide enough teachers for everyone to be able to go to school and obtain a proper education.<sup>35</sup> Equal access to education signifies an equal and dignified society and holistic equity in all spheres of life, while Learner-Teacher-Support Materials (LTSMs) refer to any tool or resource used to enhance teaching and the understanding of the subject content. The explanation of these two concepts is important in facilitating an understanding of the past and present education system in the previously disadvantaged schools. They are also important in understanding the reason why such schools are still facing inequality of access to resources in education.<sup>36</sup> However, 17 years into democracy, a high number of South African schools still lack vital learning resources. In many instances the South African Government fails not only to provide facilities such as libraries and laboratory material, but also crucial learning materials such as books.<sup>37</sup> The shortage of learning materials results in a further decline in the standard of education. Most teachers prefer not to teach at schools with few or old resources, as it hinders their performance and that of the learners. A study in India sampled 59 schools and found that of these only 49 had buildings and of these, 25 had toilets, 20 had electricity, 10 had a school library and four had a television. In this case, the quality of the learning environment was strongly correlated with pupils' achievement in Hindi and mathematics.<sup>38</sup>

## Teachers

A study conducted by the HSRC found that almost 20 per cent of teachers are absent on Mondays and Fridays.<sup>39</sup> Absentee rates increase to one-third at month end. Teachers in black schools teach an average of 3,5 hours a day, compared with about 6,5 hours a day in former white schools. This amounts to a difference of three years' schooling in total. 'We have not had a teacher development system, empowering teachers to use their techniques,' says Mathew Prew of the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), pointing to the closure in the mid-1990s of the country's teaching colleges.<sup>40</sup> That move followed a government decision that university training could provide a better standard of teaching. But universities have proved unable to produce teachers in sufficient numbers, and too

few teaching graduates are willing to move to impoverished rural communities.<sup>41</sup>

In February 2011 Mrs Motshekga said she did not believe that the South African education system was in crisis, but that the education of black children was in crisis. She blames this on lack of discipline and focus by teachers.<sup>42</sup> There is strong evidence suggesting that some poorly resourced schools nevertheless achieve good results because of strong leadership given by principals who insist that teachers come to school punctually, teach when they should teach, and remain sober.<sup>43</sup> This disciplined environment has proved to be conducive to good teaching and learning.

The other teacher behaviour that hinders performance at school is teachers' sexual involvement with learners. Some shocking reports in the newspapers from 1999 to 2004 have indicated that sexual harassment of female learners is a serious problem in many of our schools. More than 30 per cent of girls are raped at school.<sup>44</sup> The situation in South Africa regarding HIV/AIDS is currently at epidemic proportions, with the incidence rate among South African youth at 22,9 per cent, and with the incidence rate among girls and young women more than three to four times higher than that of boys and men.<sup>45</sup> Parents, educators and researchers express concerns about teachers who create an unsafe physical and emotional environment for learners, whether girls or boys.<sup>46</sup> In some schools in Malawi, for example, male teachers sexually harassed girls even with outside observers present.<sup>47</sup> School leaders should play an integral role in ensuring that transformational leadership prevails in their schools.<sup>48</sup> In terms of leadership, decision-making processes, policy determination, problem-solving processes and general governance of the school should be participatory in nature.<sup>49</sup>

## Learners

One of the major causes of class repetition at school is substance abuse. Drugs are easily obtainable by students and their use is prevalent even at primary school level.<sup>50</sup> The substance most abused by students is alcohol, followed by cigarettes and marijuana. According to a report from the Bureau of Justice (2011), 85 per cent of teenagers claim that they know where to obtain marijuana, while 29 per cent state that someone has offered or sold them an illegal substance at school.<sup>51</sup> Drugs are known to affect the brain. Alcohol and inhalants are actually the most brain-damaging drugs of all, as they literally destroy

neurons. But all mood-altering drugs alter the way neurons receive process and transmit information. They do this by altering the level of certain neurotransmitters in the synapse, the space between neurons.<sup>52</sup>

Another cause of the decline in school work has been identified as teenage pregnancy: 'The disturbance of schooling that may accompany "adolescent pregnancy" is seen as problematic both internationally and in South Africa, as it may limit the young mother's future career prospects, thereby contributing to a lower socio-economic status for her and her child'.<sup>53</sup> Teenage pregnancy can have a negative impact on young mothers and their children by placing limits on the mother's educational achievement and economic stability, and predisposing her to single parenthood and marital failure in the future.<sup>54</sup> Pregnant learners may also experience difficulty in studying because of pregnancy-related illnesses. Sometimes they find it hard to balance being a mother and a learner, as more time may be spent with the baby than on school work. Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, section 9(3) provides that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, age disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture or birth, which includes pregnant learners.<sup>55</sup> Despite the progressive legislation in South Africa allowing young women to return to school post-pregnancy, only around one-third actually re-enter the schooling system.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Education is about much more than children sitting in classrooms, acquiring skills that can be objectively tested. Both the inputs to, and the outputs from, education are far more complex than much of the usual international discourse suggests.<sup>57</sup> The inputs to education are described in technical terms, such as optimal pupil-to-teacher ratio or the availability of chalk and textbooks. Outputs are often described in economic terms, including the higher incomes associated with each additional year of education.<sup>58</sup> Because education is first and foremost the vehicle through which societies reproduce themselves, both the inputs and the outputs in an education system may more rightly be thought of as a set of ideas about how a society is structured and should be structured in future. This means that the concept of providing



each child with education is not simply a function of sending a child to school.<sup>59</sup>

Most importantly, parents as the primary caregivers of children must be actively involved in the education of their children. Phindile Lukhele-Olorunju, in an article entitled 'Education and civil service: parents, teachers, students and government all stand accused' states:

I do not think government alone has the solution, but should make this a national challenge that invites South Africans to throw in their contributions, no matter how seemingly insignificant. We are aware of the fact that there are many teachers who believe in their vocation and students who desire excellent education and are being frustrated by a few disasters. A system of flushing out the bad eggs and recognising dedicated teachers and hardworking students is needed. Since parents are also victims and contributors to this problem, they will be more than willing to come up with a good suggestion to pave the way to solving this problem.<sup>60</sup>

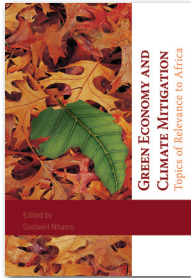
## Policy recommendations

- Policy regarding pregnant learners should be reconsidered: pregnant teenagers should stay at home until they have given birth and only then return to school. Teachers are not equipped for the task of working with pregnant learners.
- There should be better discipline at schools and increased involvement of parents.
- Teachers should be recognised and rewarded adequately by government. Better incentives should be provided for teachers, especially those who teach in rural areas. This would enhance their commitment to their profession. Government should also ensure good working conditions, adequate resources and support, as job satisfaction is multi-faceted.
- There should be better teacher training; re-opening of teacher training colleges could train more teachers.
- SGBs must be fully trained, especially in the areas of finance and policies of the Department of Education (DoE) and the provisions of the Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996). Members should be made aware of their responsibilities towards the school and its teachers and learners.
- Drug awareness campaigns and sex education should be introduced at an early age and be part of the formal curriculum.
- Life skills programmes should be designed to address the attitudes of young person's towards binge drinking and drug abuse, specifically attempting to modify adolescents' perceptions regarding the positive consequences of binge drinking and the use of drugs, and to introduce less risky alternative activities which are also likely to lead to more positive outcomes.<sup>61</sup>

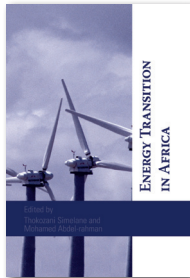
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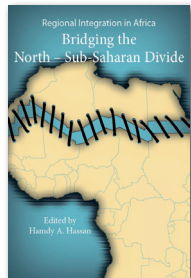
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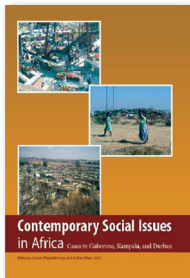
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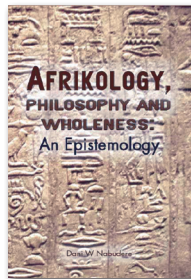
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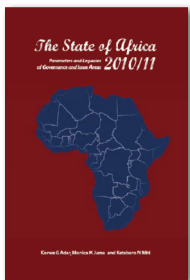
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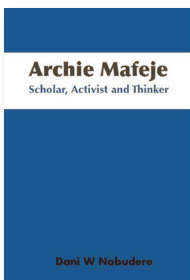
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