

Profile

Education: meeting the MDGs is not enough

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Introduction

The Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 target aspires to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. South Africa's education system experiences a range of problems extending beyond the simple issues of meeting the MDG targets. Poor quality education reinforces major racial inequalities in society and inadequate systems make it difficult for South Africa to deliver on internal infrastructural promises or to achieve competitive levels in a globalised economy. These factors impact negatively on long-term development and internal stability in the country.

Education in South Africa has been the focus of increased interest and effort during the past year. Since the African National Congress's (ANC) Polokwane resolutions calling for education to be 'national priority number one' and the concern of the entire nation, there has been public debate and official action of a new kind. Two new ministers were appointed to head two reconstituted education departments; Presidential summits' on the role of principals and other

stakeholders were held; and a range of official statements on education, including a new medium-term plan – Vision 2025, have been released.

Education is closely linked to health outcomes. Poor vision, the widespread phenomena of intestinal worms, foetal alcohol syndrome, the ravages of HIV and AIDS on families and the consequent existence of child-headed households, all impact negatively on educational achievement – as does schoolgirl pregnancy and the effect of sugar-daddies on the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. Achieving higher levels of education, together with women aspiring to higher goals, can be expected to impact positively on health outcomes – as in improved nutrition, better knowledge of and action around HIV and AIDS, better child and birthing expectations from mothers, and improved ability to manage the impact of ill-health and mitigate its effects. Reduced levels of poverty resulting from improved chances of employment through higher levels of education can also be expected to improve health outcomes in the long run.

What is an education of good quality worth?

There is good evidence that the benefits of education to individuals and society are enhanced when its quality is high. Better learning outcomes, for example – as represented by pupils' achievement test scores – are closely related to higher earnings in the labour market. Differences in education quality are thus likely to indicate differences in individual worker productivity. Furthermore, the wage impact of education quality appears to be stronger for workers in developing countries than for those in more industrialised societies. The quality of education influences the speed with which societies become richer and the extent to which individuals can improve their own personal efficacy, productivity and incomes.

Schools try to encourage creativity, originality and intolerance of injustice – non-cognitive skills that can help people challenge and transform society's hierarchies rather than accept them. These, too, are important results of good schooling, having broader benefits for society, irrespective of their impact on personal earnings. Education can influence the ways in which society can become more equitable.

Good quality in education also affects other aspects of individual behaviour in ways that bring strong social benefits. It is well known, for example, that the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, especially by women, has an impact upon fertility behaviour. More recently it has become clear that the cognitive skills required to make informed choices about HIV and AIDS risk and behaviour are strongly related to levels of education and literacy. For example, HIV and AIDS incidence in Uganda has fallen substantially in recent years for those with some primary or secondary education, whereas infection rates have remained unchanged for those with no schooling. It seems that the higher levels of cognitive achievement fostered by better schools enhance the skills required to process and respond to information about HIV and AIDS from a wide variety of sources.

Accordingly, the quality of education makes a significant difference to the prospects of achieving a wide range of individual and development goals.

Source: Adapted from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005.¹

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes three core principles underlying quality in education – its relevance to everyday life; equity of access and of outcome; and observance of individual rights.¹ Poverty, rural status and gender discrimination are three of the main factors determining lack of access and poor educational outcomes, combined with poor instruction.¹ This understanding has been incorporated into the slogan of the South African Department of Education, which stresses “Quality Education for All”.

History and transition

The growth of global, knowledge-based economies has accentuated the need for strategies that emphasize high-level skills competitive on the global stage. At the same time, globalisation often marginalises and degrades lower-level skills and occupations as economic sectors collapse under the competitive pressures of low-wage economies.

The changed global context, overlaid in South Africa on the inflexibility and inefficiencies of apartheid education, creates difficulties for any transition and for the emergence of equitable, sustainable and developmental education options.

Significant achievements in turning apartheid education and its gross inequalities around have occurred in South Africa’s first 15 years of democracy. In fact, the MDGs for education have already been achieved. In both the levels of universal primary education and the gender balance in schools, the country has moved beyond the 2015 targets. This achievement is likely to be enhanced by the current move to non-fee paying schools, with well over 40% of poor schools already targeted for this intervention.²

Further significant achievements in transforming the South African education system include the amalgamation and unification of the apartheid multiple education systems into a single national Department responsible for broad policy, with the provincial establishments responsible for delivery. The SA Schools Act of 1996 laid the basis for a non-racial approach to education with common perspectives for all. Meaningful progress was made towards equalising expenditure across the racial divides and in relation to provincial inequalities, as well as in dealing with issues such as size of classes, access to teachers and availability of course materials, through new norms and standards that saw increasing pro-poor expenditure. These advances have been followed by a raft of policy papers, reports, legislation, implementation directives and institutional developments that show broad-based progress across higher to vocational educational levels.³

Important achievements since 1994 include:

- access to primary and secondary schooling improving to near universal enrolment, with the participation rate of girls also amongst the highest in the world;
- significant increase in the numbers of pupils that have progressed to higher levels of schooling since 1994;
- exempting poor learners from paying school fees and outlawing discrimination against and exclusion of learners who cannot afford school fees;
- an increase in the matriculation pass-rate from 58% in 1994 to 65% in 2007;⁴ and
- improved pupil-to-teacher ratios from 43:1 in 1996 to 32:1 in 2006.⁴

There have been dramatic institutional changes in the Higher Education and Further Education and Training (FET) College landscape. A total of 120 Colleges of Education have been merged into university education departments in an attempt to improve quality and critical approaches.³ In addition, the Higher Education arena has seen 36 institutions merged into 21 universities and universities of technology and about 150 FET colleges reduced to 50 through the 1998 FET Act.³ The emergence of a new Higher Education and Training Department prepares for a new era of emphasis on vocational skills and training.

Black student enrolment at universities and technikons grew from 191 000 in 1993 to 343 000 in 1999 to 449 000 in 2003 (including 717 793 students in distance learning situations).³ Black students comprised 59% of the university headcount in 1999 and 64% in 2003, while for technikons this figure was 86%.³ Of the student totals at universities and technikons, 53% were women.³ The National Student Financial Aid Scheme has expanded from R70m in 1994 to a R985m scheme in 2004, with some 114 000 beneficiaries (28 000 in 1994) and still further expansion envisaged.³

These figures show that, despite the massive challenges associated with transformation, there is clearly a positive pattern of improvement in the school and wider education system. Systems are stabilising, delivery improving and there is a cohort of students who are attaining high levels of achievement.

Slippages and weaknesses

The gains recounted above are, unfortunately, offset by significant problems. The problems become more important in the context of global competition, together with the local context of deep inequalities and poverty traps faced especially by the poor and those living in rural areas who are part of the ‘second economy’.

Despite significant improvements and achievements in the first 15 years of democracy, it remains clear that outcomes are inadequate in terms of standard scores for literacy, mathematics and science, where South Africa routinely came last even amongst less-developed and less-well resourced African countries. Skills scarcities and dependencies have their roots in an inadequate baseline of achievement within the schooling system from very early grade levels.³

In addition, the education system's poor outcomes impact far more heavily on poor, rural and township schools, which are also predominantly black. Whilst a small proportion of schools achieved success, whichever way it is measured, 80% of the schools remain dysfunctional.³ Gangsterism, ill-discipline, hunger and AIDS impact negatively on the social functioning of schools. Teacher issues, for a variety of reasons, result in a largely dispirited, demoralised, under-performing teacher corps. This, in turn, impacts particularly on the poorer schools, leading some commentators to talk of 'two school systems'.

Concern about the public school system and its shortcomings has been widely and publicly expressed and the situation has even been acknowledged by education authorities.

These concerns found expression, amongst other places, in the education resolutions of the ANC conference in Polokwane. This important conference defined a more grassroots-based approach in education by the ruling party. There was a call for greater attention to the impact of poverty on schooling and to address access issues for the poor, including through nutrition schemes and the extension of non-fee paying schools from 40-60% of schools.³ In addition, crucially, there was a call to "restore teaching to the noble profession" it had once been. In return for this commitment by society, teachers were to reciprocate by being "in-class, on-time, and teaching".³

Two systems: inequality reinforced

Over half the cohort of learners that starts school each year never gets to the end, with Grade 9 being a major point of drop-out.³ Evidence has shown, surprisingly, that enhancing resource inputs has little effect on outcomes in poorer schools. It is not (only) money or even physical infrastructure that is important, but how the education process is ordered, managed and translated into classroom practice. The result for those in such hostile and bleak environments has often been teacher brain-drain and student flight, or desertion from township schools where possible. Only a small number of black students acquire an education of any meaningful quality – there is a huge gap between the top quintile of learners and the rest. Poor schools effectively play a warehousing function or have become 'sinkholes', although there are some notable exceptions. In short, rural and poor schools effectively form a

second system of education, trapping participants behind the massive blocks of the second economy.³

Test scores at various levels, when consistently administered, as well as drop-out and cohort rates are widely accepted as giving the best indication of proxy outcomes of the schooling system. Comparative scores for mathematics, numeracy and literacy in South Africa are consistently among the worst in the world; The Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality shows South Africa's poor performance relative to other southern African countries and, according to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study in 2003 and updates, South Africa fared worst out of 46 countries surveyed for mathematics results.³ While skills at the top-end may be cutting-edge, South Africa does not have the broad base necessary to ensure adequate responsiveness to the changing pressures of globalisation and the knowledge economy.

The number of learners matriculating now is no greater than in 1994, with similar poor higher grade mathematics results and minimal university-exemption passes. It is estimated that only 52 of every 100 learners who start grade one make it through to grade 12.⁵

Seventy-nine per cent of high schools fall into the poorly performing category, producing 15% of the higher grade passes in mathematics, while two-thirds of the passes are produced by 7% of the schools.³

These systemic problems are compounded by high levels of unemployment, in particular amongst the youth. Where educational effort is not seen to lead to improved life prospects, and where access to further education and training becomes a financial and educational battle with poor prospects, there is a risk that education is no longer valued. This can be seen in the denigration of matric results, even while pass levels have improved.

Conclusion

A comprehensive approach to education policy and improving education quality will have to be tabled. Medium-term plans and priorities must be developed. National consensus amongst stakeholders on the way forward is imperative.

References

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