

# Meaningful access to basic education

Shirley Pendlebury (Children's Institute)

Section 29(1)(a) of South Africa's Constitution states that "everyone has a right to basic education, including adult basic education". For children, this corresponds to the period of compulsory schooling from 7 – 15 years of age (or until the end of grade 9).

Compulsory education places a responsibility on government to ensure that schools are accessible and affordable for children of compulsory school age. The national Department of Education (together with provincial departments and the schools and teachers under their authority) is also responsible for ensuring that within every school *children can learn and teachers can, and do, teach*.

This essay draws on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Review of Education Policies: South Africa*, Department of Education documents and other independent reviews, such as the review by Motala and co-authors and the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) review. The essay focuses on:

- What is meaningful access to basic education?
- What policies provide for meaningful access?
- What are children's prospects for meaningful access?
- What factors influence children's meaningful access to education?
- What is the government doing to improve meaningful access?
- What are the recommendations?

## What is meaningful access to basic education?

Concepts in this section come from Wally Morrow, who first distinguished 'formal' and 'epistemological' access.

Formal (or institutional) access focuses on the proportion of school-aged children who are enrolled at school. Yet access is meaningful only when schools ensure epistemological access, and support children's systematic learning of basic



© Jenni Karlsson

skills, knowledge, values and practices, and do so in a manner that respects children's dignity and background.

The phrases 'epistemological access' and 'systematic learning' imply that learning must be structured so that children develop coherent ways of understanding and engaging with different learning areas. Teaching for meaningful access is about carefully designed learning programmes and materials that enable children gradually to develop competences that cannot be learned in an instant, and that go beyond the informal learning that goes on daily at home. Basic education provides the foundations for this developmental continuum.

Basic education for school-aged children in South Africa covers the General Education and Training Band (GET) over three phases: foundation phase (grades 1 – 3); intermediate phase (grades 4 – 6); and senior phase (grades 7 – 9). A reception year, grade R, becomes compulsory from 2010. It is not yet clear whether the current definition of 'basic education' will change in light of the new Ministry of Basic Education.

Developing literacy is a central purpose of basic education. Literacy includes the reading, writing and numeracy skills that children acquire through formal schooling, as well as in different community and household contexts. Adult basic education complements children's education because it helps to build a literate society, where literacy practices outside of school support and extend school-based learning.

At the heart of basic education are learning to read and write, to reason, to work with number, shape and pattern, and to use concepts to understand the content of different learning areas. Children have meaningful access to education when schools enable them to do these things. When basic education is meaningful and adaptable, its content and teaching methods work together to foster generative learning that extends children's capacity to think for themselves and with others, and to apply what they have learnt in different contexts. In the process, basic education should also prepare young people for a productive role in society.

### **What policies provide for meaningful access to basic education?**

Through the National Education Policy Act of 1996, the Minister of Education determines national norms and standards for education planning, provision, governance, monitoring and evaluation. Provincial departments of education exercise executive responsibility for basic and further education, aligned with national policy and goals.

The South African Schools Act of 1996 gives legal form to school access, seeks to ensure that all learners have access to quality education without discrimination, and specifies the conditions for school governance and funding.

Education White Paper 6 presents government policy on

inclusive education. It envisages a school system that meets the full range of learning needs and supports children in overcoming a wide range of barriers to learning. Barriers to learning are all those factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, that prevent children's optimal learning or reduce the extent to which children can benefit from education.

The Employment of Educators Act of 1998 governs teachers' terms of employment. The South African Council for Educators is responsible for professional development and ethical standards. The Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development of 2006 establishes guidelines for initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) of 2002 specifies the scope, conditions and outcomes for access to systematic learning. Eight learning areas comprise the curriculum for basic education. The RNCS stipulates learning outcomes and sets assessment standards that describe what a learner will be able to do to demonstrate competence in each grade.

The Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding of 2006 introduced a policy of no-fee schools, which together with school-fee exemptions, as outlined in the South African Schools Act Regulations of 2006, aim to alleviate poverty and improve access for learners from poor communities.

The Education Laws Amendment Act of 2007 introduces minimum norms and standards for all schools, outlines school performance indicators, and provides measures to curb the presence of drugs, weapons and other dangerous objects.

Overall, South Africa has a strong suite of policies to support meaningful access to education. The OECD review team argues that although reform policies are of a high conceptual quality, "change management" has failed. Key aspects of policy reform have not reached schools and classrooms.

### **What are children's prospects for meaningful educational access?**

Children's institutional access to education in South Africa is extensive. Analysis of General Household Survey data shows that 96.5% of children aged 7 – 17 years attended some form of education facility in 2007. Attendance rates are high until the age of 14 years, with a 98% attendance rate for 14-year-olds in 2007. Thereafter, attendance rates drop to 95% for 15-year-olds, and 88% for 17-year-olds. Unfortunately, attendance rates do not provide any information on how often children attend school.

Motala and her co-authors argue that children's prospects for meaningful access to basic education depend largely on who has access to what kind of schooling and on what basis. Poverty, race, gender, geography and disability may all affect school attendance and the quality of schools that children attend, as case 3 on p. 28 illustrates.

In terms of attainment, access is meaningful if children are able to progress through school to attain at least grade 9. In terms of achievement, access is meaningful only if children achieve the appropriate learning outcomes at a level right for their grade.

Although the proportion of the population attaining grade 9 has increased, for the majority of children in South Africa meaningful access remains elusive. Poor national averages for language and mathematics in grades 3 and 6 indicate that most children do not acquire the skills and understanding that give substance to the right to education.

The Department of Education has conducted two grade 3 systemic evaluations of children’s literacy and numeracy learning achievements, in 2001 and 2007. Provisional results of the 2007 evaluation show improved national and provincial averages (with the exception of Limpopo). Average provincial scores mask variations within provinces. The Western Cape, with the highest mean scores, also has some of the districts with the largest proportion of children out of school. (See the essay on *Children out of School: Evidence from the Community Survey* on pp. 41 – 45 .)

**Table 1: Grade 3 mean achievement scores (%) for literacy and numeracy, 2001 & 2007**

	Literacy		Numeracy	
	2001	2007	2001	2007
Eastern Cape	24	35	34	36
Free State	27	43	29	42
Gauteng	33	38	32	42
KwaZulu-Natal	35	38	31	36
Limpopo	27	29	26	24
Mpumalanga	28	32	29	31
North West	29	35	25	29
Northern Cape	23	34	26	31
Western Cape	33	48	32	49
South Africa	30	36	30	35

**Source:** Department of Education (2008) *2007 Grade 3 Systemic Evaluation*. Pretoria: DoE. [Leaflet]

Schools still have a long way to go to enable all, or even most, children to learn to read, write, reason, and work with numbers. For 2011, the Department of Education has set a benchmark of at least 50% for standardised achievement tests. Yet in 2007, only 20% of the participating schools met this benchmark in either literacy or numeracy or both. Interestingly, 31% of the participating learners achieved the benchmark or higher. In other words, even at schools that performed poorly, some children performed well. The reasons for this need to be explored, but may well be related to home circumstances.

Results of the grade 6 national assessment, in 2005, also show that the education system is failing to enable meaningful access for most children. The national average for the language of literacy teaching was 38% and for mathematics only 27%. Overall, children from urban schools fared best; children who fared worst were from provinces that inherited former homelands.

### What factors influence children’s meaningful access to education?

Children in South Africa are just as able as children anywhere else in the world. So why do their learning achievements fall so far short of international and national benchmarks?

As the OECD review shows, the reasons are complex and relate to children’s home circumstances, as well as to conditions within the education system and its schools. (See the essay on *Schools and Communities: Building effective partnership* on pp. 50 – 54 for a discussion on how home circumstances impact on meaningful access.)

Within the school system, inadequate teacher preparation, shortages of textbooks and other materials, language issues, and inadequate or poorly focused learning time all hinder meaningful access. Teachers’ competence in the language of learning and teaching is critical. Also, teachers’ classroom practices play a crucial role in helping or hindering children’s learning. In a review of 20 evaluations of primary mathematics, science and language programmes, the Centre for Development and Enterprise identified key weaknesses: poor curriculum coverage; slow curriculum pacing; little progress in cognitive demand; insufficient written work; inadequate reading practice; and poor feedback to learners.

Willingness to learn is an important condition for meaningful access. A key question for every school and every teacher is how to cultivate a willingness and desire to learn. Case 1 illustrates how children choose to exclude themselves when they do not regard lessons as worthwhile.

#### Case 1: Locked gates

At a Children’s Institute roundtable on education, a participant described a school that locked the school gate when learners were in class and opened it only at the start and end of the school day, and at break.

Perhaps the closed gate helped to make the school more secure. Perhaps it was meant to get teachers and learners to arrive on time and not to shirk during lessons. Instead, learners chose to come for the early or late morning session depending on which teachers and classes they found useful, relevant and stimulating.

**Source:** Children’s Institute (2008) *Meaningful access to basic education. Report on roundtable discussion, 15 October 2008*. Cape Town. Unpublished.

### Textbooks and other learning materials

Textbooks are an indispensable educational resource, especially where there are not enough competent teachers for all learning areas. Textbooks help to get national curriculum requirements into the hands of learners and teachers. The OECD review points out that, despite South Africa’s strong educational publishing industry, books are scarce in many schools. Learners share books; teachers’ reference books are in short supply; photocopied notes and copious copying from the chalkboard are wide-spread. Without books and properly stocked libraries, children have few opportunities for independent and collaborative learning. Only 7.2% of public schools have stocked libraries (see figure 2 on p. 28). An analysis of provincial data shows that schools in predominantly rural provinces are worst off.

### Time, class size and teachers’ presence

While there are shining examples of well-functioning, caring schools, endemic disorder ravages many of the schools serving the most disadvantaged children. Teacher and learner absenteeism affect the amount and quality of learning time; so, too, do haphazard starts to the school year, lateness for class, and time wastage through copying notes from the chalkboard. In a study undertaken for the Education Labour Relations Council, Linda Chisholm and fellow researchers found that organisational practices at schools and teachers’ management of their assessment and reporting duties also seriously erode teaching time.

Although the average ratio of learners-to-teachers for public primary schools is below the official norm of 40:1, overcrowded classrooms and high learner-to-teacher ratios remain a dominant feature in pockets of South Africa’s schooling system, especially in schools catering to children from disadvantaged communities. In large classes teachers struggle to attend to individual needs, as is described in case 2.

High teacher absenteeism lowers educational quality and feeds cynicism about the value of education. Reducing teacher and learner absences is key to accomplishing education for all.

### Curriculum

The Revised National Curriculum Statement sets out the skills, concepts and values for each learning area, as well as “learning outcomes” for each grade. The three nationally prescribed learning programmes (literacy, numeracy and life skills) for the foundation phase stipulate the scope, pace and sequence of classroom learning from grade R to grade 3. In the intermediate and senior phases, teachers are responsible for developing learning programmes for a full suite of learning areas. Unless children acquire a strong basis in the foundation phase, the increased number of learning programmes in later phases may be too steep a climb for some children.

Teacher Dyson: *Most times, there is no time you can give those who are struggling. You find that you’ve got to push-push-push. And at the same time you find you are not ... doing justice to those who are struggling.*

Teacher Sungi: *I know most teachers won’t agree with me when I say that seven hours is not enough ... The seven hours that I spend here at school is not only for classroom work, there is administration, there are committees ... work in this and work in that ... then there are ... special children who need attention. So ... when I feel, really, I need more time with them ... on Saturdays I come here, and they enjoy it so much ... It’s not just time ... inclusive education can work only if our educators are committed.*

**Source:** Materechera EK (2008) *The Making of Inclusive Schools in a District of South Africa’s North West Province*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.

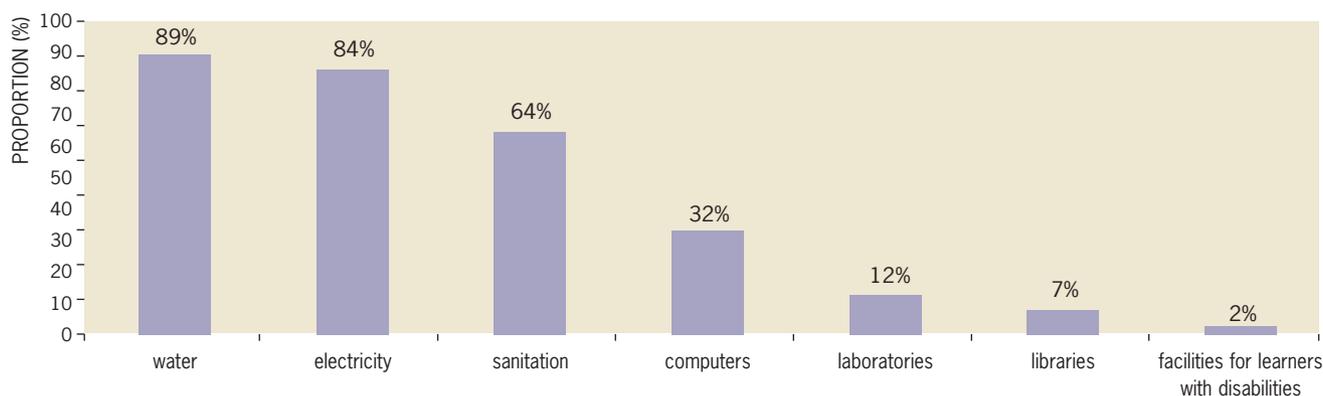
### Teachers, teaching and teacher education

Low morale pervades the teaching force, and many teachers are bewildered by the multiple demands on their time, the OECD review observes. As a professional practice, teaching entails the organisation of systematic learning. Demanding too much of teachers can distract their attention from this important work. So, what must teachers know and be able to do if they are to fulfil their role in enabling systematic learning? First, because school knowledge is complex, teachers must have an understanding of the ‘design’ of each learning area they teach, so that they can arrange what is to be learnt in a meaningful sequence. Second, they need a clear conceptual structure for the content to be learned. Finally, they need to think about what learners will do during lessons. Learning happens through children’s engagement with cognitive tasks related to the main concepts of the learning area or subject.

### School climate

At their best, schools are safe places where children can develop emotionally and socially as well as intellectually, and where they learn — through example and experience, as much as through instruction — of their own and others’ rights and responsibilities. At their worst, schools are places where children are vulnerable to abuse, rape, bullying, humiliation, and inadequate support for learning — all of which may impede meaningful access. Unrecognised learning disabilities or poor concentration due to hunger, disease or trauma can also result in children’s silent exclusion and eventual drop-out.

**Figure 2: Proportion of schools with access to physical infrastructure in 2006**



**Source:** Department of Education (2007) *National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS)*. Pretoria: DoE.

### Facilities

Access to water and sanitation is essential for children's and teachers' health and well-being. As figure 2 on the next page shows, school infrastructure is inadequate in a substantial proportion of South Africa's schools. While access to electricity has improved dramatically over 10 years, poor sanitation remains a concern. Physical access is limited for people with movement disabilities; very few schools have ramps or toilets for people in wheelchairs.

Case 3 draws on a study of courting practices amongst orphans affected by HIV/AIDS in rural KwaZulu-Natal and illustrates how the interplay of different factors can hinder meaningful access to education.

### What is the government doing to improve meaningful access?

The quality of education and meaningful access are closely related. The Department of Education has several initiatives for improving the quality of education at schools. For example, designated Dinaledi schools have been designed to promote meaningful access to mathematics, science and technology, particularly in rural and township areas, while the QIDS-UP programme provides teacher and district support to 5,000 low performing primary schools. The government also plans to train an additional 6,000 teachers over the next three years to address current shortfalls particularly in poor, rural schools.

The Foundations for Learning Campaign targets grades R – 6 at all schools and aims to increase every child's performance in literacy and mathematics to at least 50% by 2011. Learning programmes prescribe the minimum time that teachers must spend teaching literacy and numeracy skills every day, and set milestones for pacing curriculum content. A resource list prescribes minimum resources (eg wall charts and counting apparatus) for every classroom. Reading kits should have been distributed to primary schools in 2008.

During the campaign, district officials must check that schools are testing children's progress regularly and reporting results to parents. In 2011, the Department of Education will evaluate learning achievements in grades 3 and 6.

#### Case 3: Forfeiting education?

In the eyes of children's activists in the region, young girls who ... entered *ukugana* relationships were foreclosing their 'futures' in forfeiting their education. Yet the education people received ... was of a particularly low standard...

Although educational approaches had changed ... in terms of government policy, this did not translate into quality education for young people at their school. Teachers were unskilled in the creative teaching methods that the new ... curriculum required. Most lessons involved teachers copying sections of textbooks onto a black board and getting the children to read and repeat what was written there. A shortage of textbooks ... reinforced this method of instruction. Most lessons were written in English, a language that many of the young people spoke hardly at all ... The political culture of the school emphasized deference towards teachers and unquestioning obedience to their orders, creating an atmosphere that discouraged questions from the young, even when they did not understand what had been written on the board. Although corporal punishment had been outlawed ... some teachers carried sticks with them to class ...

Teachers themselves were demoralised, something that seemed to be symbolised in a burnt-out classroom that remained neglected for over nine months. Another classroom was empty except for a discarded pile of torn text books strewn in the dust ...

**Source:** Henderson P (2009) *'Ukugana': Informal marriage and children's rights discourse among 'Aids-orphans' in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*. Paper presented at the Living Rights Symposium, Institut Universitaire Kurt Bosch, Sion, Switzerland, 19 – 20 January 2009.

The campaign tackles many in-school barriers to learning, such as insufficient time on task, poor curriculum pacing, insufficient reading and writing practice, and inadequate learning materials. It holds schools, teachers and districts accountable for supporting learning. If it succeeds, the campaign could go a long way towards enabling epistemological access for many more children.

## What are the recommendations?

Despite impressive accomplishments in policy development and high enrolment rates, meaningful access to basic education is a reality for only a small proportion of children. Children in South Africa have the same capacities as children elsewhere and poor learning achievements result largely from failures within the education system, at district and school levels. For many children, home and community circumstances are also barriers to meaningful educational access.

What can be done? Some key recommendations:

- **For teachers and learners:** Show up, on time, every day, for every class; use teaching and learning time well.
- **For school principals:** Support teachers to teach; reduce interruptions to teaching and learning time; work with teachers, the school governing body, children and their parents to create a safe and supportive learning environment.
- **For parents, communities and civil society:** Monitor, and lobby for, equitable distribution of core resources (ie every primary school should be receiving and using reading packs for the Foundations for Learning Campaign).
- **For district officials:** Provide constructive oversight; communicate clearly and support schools in a way that facilitates the implementation of policy, builds relational trust and holds staff accountable.
- **For the Department of Education and teacher educators:** Provide incentives such as bursaries and occupational-specific dispensation to attract and retain teachers; ensure pre- and in-service teacher education which prepares teachers to teach effectively in the different contexts of South African schools; put support systems in place to ensure the quality and well-being of teaching staff.

## Sources

- Centre for Development and Enterprise (2007) *Doubling for Growth: Addressing the maths and science challenge in South Africa's schools*. CDE Research No. 15. Johannesburg: Centre for Research and Enterprise.
- Chisholm I, Hoadley U, waKivulu M, Brookes H, Prinsloo C, Kgobe A, Moisa D, Narsee H and Rule S (2005) *Educator Workload in South Africa*. (Report prepared for the Education Labour Relations Council). Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Department of Education (2008) *2007 Grade 3 Systemic Evaluation*. Pretoria: DoE. [Leaflet]
- Department of Education (2006) *The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education*. Pretoria: DoE.
- Department of Education (2005) *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education: A National Framework for Teacher Education*. Pretoria: DoE.
- Department of Education (2002) Policy: Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R–9 (Schools): Overview. *Government Gazette* No. 23406, Vol. 443, 31 May 2002, Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Education (2001) *Education White Paper 6: Special needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*. Pretoria: DoE.
- Global Campaign for Education (2009) *Education on the brink. Will the IMF's new lease on life ease or block progress towards education goals?* London: GCE.
- Henderson P (2009) 'Ukugana': Informal marriage and children's rights discourse among 'Aids-orphans' in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Paper presented at Living Rights Symposium, Institut Universitaire Kurt Bosch, Sion, Switzerland, 19 – 20 January 2009.
- Materechera EK (2008) *The Making of Inclusive Schools in a District of South Africa's North West Province*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Morrow W (2007) *Learning to Teach in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Motala S, Dieltiens V, Carrim N, Kgobe P, Moyo G & Rembe S (2007) *Educational access in South Africa: Country Analytic Report*. Prepared for the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE). Johannesburg: Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand.
- National Education Policy Act (27 of 1996).
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2008) *Reviews of National Policies for Education: South Africa*. Paris: OECD.
- Statistics South Africa (2008) General Household Survey 2007. In: *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile* (2009) Children attending an educational institution. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT. Viewed 21 April 2009: [www.childrencount.ci.org.za/content.asp?TopLinkId=10&PageID=64](http://www.childrencount.ci.org.za/content.asp?TopLinkId=10&PageID=64).
- South African Schools Act (84 of 1996).