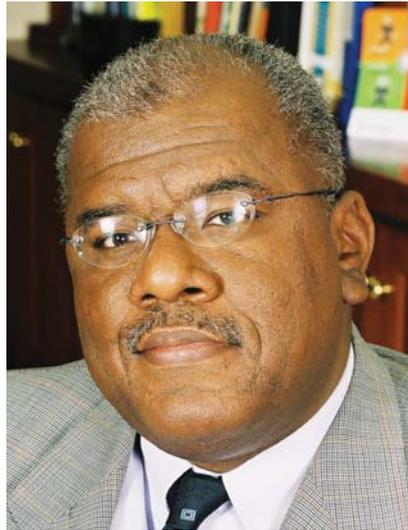


# Reflections on meaningful access to education

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At least since the end of colonial rule in Africa and apartheid in South Africa, the question of access to education has remained central to national policies of African governments and international donor policies of foreign agencies. Yet the attainment of access in schools has proven to be much more elusive in concept and in practice than often claimed in the ambitious policies and plans of governments. Why is this the case?

First of all, the question of physical access alone is not as easy as it appears. While some countries find it easy to get children into school, others do not. Cultural factors continue in many contexts to enable boys to attend but block access to girls, especially in communities where the education of girls enjoys less social priority than that of boys. Economic factors play a major role in the decision of poor parents as to whether they can forego income, as the economists call it, by sending a healthy boy to school rather than to earn whatever meagre (but vital) income on the streets or in the fields. Health factors play a role in that more and more older children are forced into the role of taking care of younger or ill siblings in families where parents are dead or incapacitated as a result of HIV/AIDS.

Second, it has become clear from research that gaining physical access to schools is one thing; keeping children in school is a completely different matter. That is why the focus of more recent educational research has been on the factors that retain or repel children from school after initial attendance. The push-out factors are formidable, and include schools with unpredictable timetables and erratic teaching commitments from educators within those institutions. Time after time evidence shows that especially township schools have very low “instructional time” commitments compared

to more established schools. The pull-out factors are no less significant, for the allure of gangs and the attraction of making quick money through drugs or theft are especially powerful in the lives of young black rural and urban township boys.

Third, researchers like the late Professor Wally Morrow have made the point that, even though children might have physical access to schools, the question of epistemological access (that is, access to knowledge) remains

highly unequal even in the same school or classroom. Schools do not distribute knowledge equally. Children with domestic access to the internet or to middle-class parents with networks and capital are much more successful in accessing formal knowledge than children whose parents are illiterate and where computers and books are not as common in the home. So, for example, the capacity to do homework or science projects depends very much on things like social class even when simple physical access to schools is achieved for both working-class and middle-class children.

Fourth, schools (and universities), as is the case with the broader society, still grant access to able-bodied children more easily than they do to children with disabilities of various kinds. A blind child, or a child in a wheelchair, or a child with diabetes, struggles much more to gain access to schools than children without special needs. Schools target “the normal child” and while there are some “special schools” for especially severely handicapped children, there is very little to show in practice for integrating children with special needs into mainstream public schools.

Fifth, even though South Africa enjoys one of the highest rates of formal enrolment of any developing country, access

does not result in success for more than 50% of children. Very few children who start school finish the 12 years of formal education. Those who write the final examination at the end of 12 years often do not pass or pass well enough to enter university. Research indicates a massive failure to achieve among young learners in literacy and numeracy in the early grades. The link between access and success is therefore very weak in South Africa's schools, compared to less well-funded school systems in the southern African region, for example.

It follows therefore that access for whom (equity), access for how long (retention), access to what (curriculum), and access for success (achievement) are much more complicated than often suggested in policy and planning. Let me illustrate further.

One innovation on the part of government is to deal with equity of access through "no-fee schools." This is an admirable policy. However, tuition fees are simply one of many costs borne by poor parents. Parents pay for school uniforms, school lunches, school trips, school textbooks, and for many other hidden costs of schooling, including as indicated earlier, paying by foregoing income while the child is at school. It also turns out that in poor schools in South Africa tuition income was low anyway, in large part because of the simple incapacity of parents to pay. From the perspective of the parent, therefore, schooling can never be "free" and therefore the problems of access can never be resolved simply by removing the additional burden of fees.

In short, much has been achieved in gaining formal access to schooling for South Africa's children. Much more needs to be done to ensure they stay in school, and that once there, all our children experience and achieve success inside and beyond the classroom.

