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Remembering June 16 – 30 years later
Shireen Motala

June 16 2007 marks thirty years since school children in Soweto and other parts of the country took the lead in rejecting the inferior, unequal and racially divided system of apartheid education. It is ten years since our new and globally-acclaimed Constitution guaranteed the fundamental rights of all South Africans, including the right to education. This year's Grade 12 leavers are the first group of learners to have spent their whole school careers in a free and democratic South Africa.

In 1994, most schools in South Africa suffered from poor infrastructure and inadequate facilities, with under-qualified teachers dispensing a biased curriculum in overcrowded classrooms. Eighteen ethnically separate education departments distributed resources in terms of a hierarchy of privilege, with children in white schools benefiting the most. Since 1994 education policy and practice has undergone a radical transformation, and the burden on all involved in this complicated and as yet unfinished process of restructuring has been great.

Equalising education provision and opportunity in a deeply divided society is a complex and demanding challenge. Parents, teachers and officials, indeed all in the broader community, are working tirelessly to ensure that all our children have meaningful access to quality education. There have been significant structural and systemic changes, with the primary focus of transformation falling on redress, access and quality.

The structure and governance of the post-apartheid South African education and training system now reflects a democratised and unified order, with a single national education department supported by a range of statutory bodies responsible for areas such as quality assurance, skills development, adult education and early childhood education. Education is now compulsory for all children of school-going age and the constraints of poverty and inequality are being directly addressed by pro-poor education policies such as the fee-free schools, nutrition and transport programmes, and funding formulas from national to provincial level which are weighted in favour of poorer provinces.

South Africa is striving hard to meet the international targets of the Millennium Development Goals. Unlike a number of other developing countries, we have improved access to basic education to such an extent that we can boast near universal enrolment in primary schooling, along with ever-increasing numbers of children in secondary school. Quality issues have been addressed by extensive teacher training, with especial emphasis on mathematics and science. Many more children progress through the system now without dropping out. Community, parental and pupil participation and involvement have been encouraged by the establishment of democratic governance structures at the school level.

Much has been achieved, but much still needs to be done. As we draw nearer to our third democratic general election in 2009, we are still confronted with enormous challenges, and it behoves us to ask and try to answer a number of important questions on which the educational future of our country depends. Have we managed to substantially shift the once-

grossly unequal distribution of financial and other resources so that all our children have equal access to schooling? Have we managed to 'level the playing fields' between former black and white schools and between rich and poor schools in our public schooling system?

Furthermore, why have we fared so badly in international monitoring tests, even in comparison to our regional counterparts? What more can be done to ensure that our children acquire the basic numeracy and literacy skills needed for the 21st century? How pedagogically prepared are our teachers to deliver the new curriculum, and does the overall quality of the schooling that most children get expand their life chances, improve their employment opportunities and provide increased access to tertiary education? How can we prevent the effects of gender, disability or lack of familiarity with the language of learning from excluding many learners from full access to quality education?

What is very clear is that while almost all children enrol in schools and stay there until Grade 9, they battle to complete the final three post-compulsory years. The education system haemorrhages learners from Grade 10 to Grade 12 and, while some of these enter further education and training, many more join the ranks of the unemployed youth. The quality of education for the majority of learners is still very poor and cognitive achievement is low. Many children sit in classrooms without gaining the required knowledge and skills and are vulnerable to dropping out. Compounded by pressures of poverty and HIV/Aids, the indirect costs of schooling in the form of transport and uniforms place undue burdens on household budgets that are already overstretched. Far more significant than the availability of school places, economic accessibility continues to be a problem.

What is the way forward, then, towards achieving our Constitutional guarantee of quality basic education? The key issue is that we need to ensure that all our children have meaningful access to quality learning. This includes making sure that teachers have better knowledge and skills to transmit the curriculum, and that learners are sufficiently enabled and motivated to progress through the system acquiring first basic and then increasingly higher level skills. The problem of 'silent exclusion', of children who overcome hardships to come to school and yet come away, even after many years, with next to nothing in the form of useful learning, has to be addressed. All remaining inequalities in resource provision must be eliminated. Simply put, all schools must have water, electricity and sanitation – and be safe. Beyond fee-free schools, the promise of a fully free primary education must beckon us on. School leadership, not just principals, school governors and district officials but also teachers and parents, need to take more responsibility for organising an efficient and accountable system.

We have made tremendous strides in ensuring that almost every child is able to find a place in a school. But this is just the beginning. Mere physical access is not enough. Our next challenge is an even greater one: if we wish to prepare the next generation to help build our new and rapidly transforming society, we must provide them all with meaningful access, in the fullest sense to quality education.

Shireen Motala
Director
Wits Education Policy Unit
University of the Witwatersrand