



AT SCHOOL BUT NOT LEARNING: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SOUTH AFRICAN LEARNERS

CREATE SOUTH AFRICA POLICY BRIEF 5

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Despite progress in access to basic education in South Africa, achieving *meaningful* access to education (involving regular attendance, appropriate achievement, progress on schedule, and successful completion) is still a dream (Motala et al 2007). This policy brief explores the issue of meaningful access and makes policy recommendations for improving access and quality in South Africa. It is based on two chapters in the CREATE book on education in South Africa: Pereira and Du Toit (forthcoming) and Letsatsi, S. (forthcoming). Both chapters draw on data from CREATE's research on educational access, enrolment and drop-out in Gauteng and Eastern Cape as well as secondary data sets.

Attainment in South Africa

Deteriorating levels of numeracy and literacy have been identified by the Department of Education as critical concerns that urgently need to be addressed. Currently, out of the 14 countries participating in the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) study, South Africa is ranked 8th in literacy and 9th in numeracy (SACMEQ 1995-2010). The SACMEQ (2005) report highlights the challenges in numeracy and mathematical literacy faced by South African schools, and suggests that the failure to increase the number of qualified mathematics instructors is a likely cause of the low levels of achievement amongst South African pupils.

The findings from CREATE research shed further light on the poor quality of learning in numeracy. In 2009 CREATE researchers administered a Grade 4 mathematics test (which was supplemented with a few Grade 3- and Grade 5-level questions) to 487 Grade 5 learners, and a Grade 6 Mathematics test to 662 Grade 7 learners, across twelve primary and secondary schools in the Dutywa (Eastern Cape)

and Ekurhuleni South (Gauteng) districts. The outcomes revealed a severe deficiency in overall levels of numeracy. The following tables report the average scores which learners achieved on five mathematical Learning Outcomes (LOs), namely: LO1: Numbers, operations and relationships; LO2: Patterns; LO3: Shape and space; LO4: Measurement; and LO5: Data handling.

Table 1: Mean percentage scores per learning outcome on the Grade 4 test

LO	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
LO1 Gr3	487	0.0	100	41.9	27.3
LO1 Gr4	487	0.0	78.6	20.1	17.3
LO2 Gr4	487	0.0	100	12.9	20.4
LO3 Gr4	487	0.0	100	28.3	27.4
LO4 Gr4	487	0.0	75.0	8.2	14.5
LO5 Gr4	487	0.0	100	24.8	34.1
LO1 Gr5	487	0.0	100	17.4	22.4

(Source: Pereira and Du Toit, forthcoming)

Table 2: Mean percentage scores per learning outcome on the Grade 6 test

LO	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
LO1 Gr6	662	0.0	83.3	21.5	14.8
LO2 Gr6	662	0.0	88.9	38.2	16.8
LO3 Gr6	662	0.0	100	40.1	21.2
LO4 Gr6	662	0.0	88.9	26.4	16.9
LO5 Gr6	662	0.0	80.0	15.4	18.3

(Source: Pereira and Du Toit, forthcoming)

These dismal average (mean) scores suggest that most of the learners are not operating at the required levels expected by the National Curriculum Statement. Indeed, many learners are at least two years behind what the curriculum expects of them (Pereira and Du Toit, forthcoming).

The reasons for low levels of academic attainment in South Africa's classrooms are many and varied, but chief amongst them is the poor quality of teaching, particularly teachers' poor subject content knowledge, limited pedagogical abilities and low productivity (DoE, 2007:6; NPC, 2011:15).

If South Africa is not to squander its achievement of near-universal enrolment in education, and to make good its commitment to the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals and Education for All (DoE 2008), it needs to ensure that what happens in its classrooms provides all learners with good quality education. To this end, more needs to be done to investigate the nature of and possible solutions to the poor quality of teaching and learning, so that physical access to education can be translated into meaningful access.

Methodology

The research reported on in this policy brief examines meaningful access to quality education by observing an ordinary 'day in the life' of selected South African schoolchildren, focusing in particular on teaching and learning practices and classroom interactions. It is derived from a study of five of the CREATE case study schools at which the Grade 4 and 6 mathematics tests were later administered. The five schools, all located in the Ekurhuleni South district of Gauteng Province, comprised three primary schools and two secondary schools. Over a period of two consecutive days in 2008, researchers shadowed 180 learners from Grades 2, 4, 6 and 8, observing them during and in between lessons and taking detailed ethnographic notes (and video recording where possible) of teaching

methods, lesson content and teacher and learner behaviour.

Findings

South Africa has succeeded in providing almost all children of school-going age with access to a school, but it has a long way to go before this access can be said to be meaningful. In the five schools at which this research took place, the quality of education being provided was systematically undermined by lacklustre teaching, lack of assessment and rudimentary content coverage.

Lacklustre teaching

It was evident that many teachers relied on the use of a basic structure to which most lessons seemed to conform – the teacher talked, the learners responded to questions in chorus and, finally, an exercise, limited to simple sentences, was assigned. Note copying was regularly used by teachers as a strategy to avoid teaching. In one observation, a Grade 4 mathematics teacher scolded learners for not studying, instructed them to copy down corrections from the board, and then left the classroom.

In some cases, there were long periods of time during the school day where there was no teaching happening; one set of learners was left unattended for an hour and a half. Teachers mentioned that they often attended workshops, sometimes on a weekly basis, and these and other meetings were usually scheduled during teaching time. There were also times, however, when researchers arrived at a school to find teachers lounging outside.

'Lots of time we sit around doing nothing, and it is rare on a given day to get teachers to honour all their periods. There is at least one teacher who is absent or who is at school but busy with other things. We often play cards and gamble in class'. Grade 8 learner.

Teaching large classes is undoubtedly a frustrating business. Teachers often spoke with exasperation of the workload required to teach and mark the tests of classes containing well over 40 learners, as well as their inability to provide individual attention to any learner, let alone those who might be struggling. For their part, learners often felt lost in the crowd, and learners in one school indicated that teachers did not even seem to know their names. Group work – a strategy that can be very effective in large classes – was rarely seen being used in any of the classes researchers observed, though it

was not always feasible given that classroom space was often at a premium, with desks crammed together and noise levels high. Teachers' almost exclusive resort to a lecturing style of instruction may simply have been the easiest approach under the circumstances. But there was more to the lack of variation in teachers' methodologies than just this: teachers sometimes appeared ignorant of or indifferent to the likelihood that learners had different learning abilities, and assumed that most learners would learn something if they talked at them throughout the entire lesson.

'It's best to go with those who want to flow, those who don't want to, we leave them behind'. Primary school teacher.

Lack of assessment

Few opportunities presented themselves for teachers to systematically check comprehension. In the lessons observed, it was clear that learners often did not understand the content. Teachers usually answered their own questions, with learners repeating in chorus. There were no examples of learners raising their hands to ask a question. This might be attributed to the fact that they had not yet learned enough to ask; however, equally disconcerting was that the learners were often not corrected when giving factually incorrect answers and the teachers themselves sometimes posed incorrect questions.

'They [learners] are quite ignorant because verbally they can understand but when it comes to reading, it's where the problem lies. Here we are spoon-feeding'. Primary school teacher.

Many teachers complained that learners could not read well or retain information readily enough. This is unsurprising, given that teachers rarely checked for comprehension while administering the lesson, and learners almost never received any formative feedback that would allow them to redirect their learning and ask questions about topics or concepts that they did not understand.

Rudimentary content coverage

Strikingly, this study revealed an especially glaring absence in almost all classrooms and schools and this was the near-total lack of writing by learners, which means in effect that they are being denied a tool which has been proven to be critical in the learning process of the child (Jansen 1998).

Writing activities were limited to copying notes from the board or answering questions in single words or

sentences. In addition, what might be called 'slow teaching' was a common practice, where very little was actually achieved in class and where the lecturing style rarely gave way to independent reading or writing. Even when children did read, it was often in chorus. In the primary school classes, the content of the lessons seemed to be too easy, with questions not stretching learners beyond simple recall, while in the Grade 8 classes, complex concepts were glossed over without adequate explanation.

Policy Implications

These findings provide additional confirmation of what is already widely known about schooling in South Africa, and that is that teaching and learning practices and classroom interactions are of very poor quality. Teachers observed in this study seemed to lack the content knowledge, pedagogical skills and classroom management ability to conduct lessons that encourage learning and foster intellectual and personal growth. Learners seemed to lack opportunities to learn, to seldom participate, to read and write very little and, if required to respond, to do so mainly in chorus. The paucity of contact time, the one-dimensional approach, the low level of expectations, the lack of assessment and overall lack of commitment are of particular concern, and policy strategies need to be developed accordingly.

- There are no quick-fix solutions to problems of this nature. It is critical to develop and implement a long-term strategy for teacher development that can methodically and in a step-by-step fashion address these weaknesses.
- Fundamental to any strategy is to provide quality and sustained opportunities for teachers to improve their knowledge of their subject matter. The training and development of Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase teachers must be prioritised, for it is in the primary grades that children must acquire strong foundations in the basic tenets of literacy and numeracy, if their future learning is not to be compromised.
- Teachers, and schools, also require more sustainable forms of support and professional development. Such efforts should include mentoring and induction programmes. Teachers also need explicit incentives to implement the tools they learn during training.
- Teacher training must pay far more explicit attention to everyday classroom realities, which

include overcrowded classrooms at schools with few teaching materials and inadequate infrastructure located in communities with meagre resources.

- Principals, school management teams and school governing body members need improved training so as to be able to provide teachers with instructional leadership rather than focusing solely on administrative matters. School officials also need to be held more accountable, so that time intended for teaching and learning is maximised and used optimally.
- Closer monitoring and stricter standards of teaching need to be applied and adhered to, such that teachers are held more accountable for being in class, covering the curriculum and administering assessment in ways which improve learners' academic attainment.
- Current Department of Education policy which prevents learners from repeating more than one grade in each phase encourages teachers to promote children whom they know to be unqualified to progress. School-wide programmes in literacy and numeracy should be considered for children who would have failed two years in a row if policy did not prevent this, leading to 'fast-track remediation' programmes intended to achieve grade-level proficiency in numeracy and literacy.
- While the quality of education is not going to be improved simply by throwing more money and resources at schools, some problems do require more funding, or at least better use of existing funds. Even the most skilled and best intentioned teachers find it difficult to command classes containing 40 or more learners; accordingly, new infrastructure and improved classroom organisation should be made a high priority at the poorest schools. In the long term, reducing class sizes must be the main objective.

Conclusion

Improving teacher quality is the key to improving learning outcomes in South African schools. International efforts to provide Education for All, as well as government's pro-poor education financing policies in the form of the spread of 'no fee schools', have made it possible for almost all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged communities and rural areas where poverty is most rife, to enjoy full physical access to schooling. But, though they are in school, they are not learning much. Their low levels of achievement make it clear

that a policy focus on access to education is insufficient if it does not include meaningful access to quality education, and this, in turn, requires good quality teaching.

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