

REVIEW | The challenge of South African schooling: dimensions, targets and initiatives

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The crisis in South African schooling is not new. It predates the achievement of democracy in 1994 and has been an ongoing refrain in public discourse since 1994. What is new is the emerging consensus on its dimensions and causes. Since the 1990s, both the government and donors have invested substantial resources in understanding what exactly the problems may be. The government has not been slow to respond to such findings, but in the welter of everyday crisis-talk, these responses have gone largely unnoticed and are rarely analysed and discussed. The resulting public debate is the poorer for it.

It is important to analyse these directions, however, and to understand them, as they form part of a wider palimpsest of debates and approaches not only in South Africa but also globally. The crisis discourse surrounding education and the policy approaches adopted locally resonate with international debates. The discourse is one of comparative learning performance and what to do about it. This article accordingly considers what some of the research informing government thinking shows on the dimensions and causes of the education quality challenge, what the government is doing about it, how it fits into broader international debates and what it means.

The challenges in schooling

Dimensions

The quality of education, linked to equity in the system, was identified as the main challenge facing South African education since the early 1990s. Its principal manifestation until recently was matric results. However, as international and provincial assessments of children's literacy and numeracy skills lower down in the system gathered momentum, so the full extent of the problem in South Africa was also laid bare through scholarly and popular syntheses and elaborations of the evidence relating to underperformance (Reddy 2006; Howie 2007; Howie & Plomp 2008; Fleisch 2008; Bloch 2009; Taylor & Yu 2009). Despite improvements in more equitable spending, relieving poor schools of fee burdens, introducing school nutrition, increasing the number of children attending Grade R classes, achieving near-universal enrolment in the compulsory phase of schooling and dramatically expanding the number of

qualified teachers in the system, learning outcomes are still abysmal by any measure (DBE 2011a).

Recent assessments provide ample evidence. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) collaboration in the form of the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) has enabled comparison of Grade 6 literacy and numeracy capabilities across the SADC region at two key points in 2000 and 2007 (see IIEP, UNESCO & SACMEQ 2011). South Africa does well on gender equality and a gradual reduction of its high repetition rates over the period, but there is no change in the overall trend for South African pupils' *reading* achievement and a negligible improvement in their *mathematics* achievement. South Africa performed below the SACMEQ mean in both reading and numeracy. South Africa also performed worse than other much poorer countries in the region, such as Swaziland and Tanzania (IIEP 2010). One of the most telling findings is the association between household poverty and learning achievement. As UNESCO pointed out in its analysis, 'children from the wealthiest households in South Africa are ten times as likely as children from the poorest households to score well on reading. This is more than double the comparable wealth differential for Namibia', which has a similar level of achievement to that of South Africa (UNESCO 2011: 87).

Most disturbing of all, however, have been the results of the education department's own annual national assessments (ANAs), first conducted in 2009 and again in 2011 (DBE 2011a). The tests were administered in all Grade 1–6 classes across the country, and the Human Sciences Research Council verified the results and conducted an analysis of learners' responses. The ANAs not only document and confirm the wide disparity in test scores between schools located in different socio-economic contexts, and progressive deterioration in results from Grades 1 to 6, but also provide insight into what children are getting wrong and, consequently, are not learning to do (DBE 2011b). The latter is instructive.

On the whole, children simply did not understand what they were being asked, even when they were responding in their home language. Handwriting, even beyond the Foundation



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Phase, revealed a lack of writing practice. Children were unable to answer simple grammar questions, including spelling of commonly used words, the proper use of prepositions, plural forms, tenses and opposites. Reading comprehension was limited, as was the children's ability to write their own text from given prompts. A Joint Education Trust school-effectiveness study (see Taylor 2011) has provided similar in-depth information on reading. The study estimates that, on average, South African children perform writing of any kind in language classes once in about four days, despite the curriculum providing time for language teaching every day.

In the ANA numeracy tests, children were unable to perform basic numeracy operations, such as subtraction, multiplication and division, involving whole numbers. They had seriously limited or distorted conceptions of fractions and could not translate a problem given in words and write it in a way that enables them to solve the problem. Common mathematical misconceptions seem to be shared by teachers and students (Carnoy, Chisholm & Chilisa forthcoming; Taylor 2011).

Not surprisingly, in part as a consequence of such little learning, there are high repetition rates in the lower grades and high drop-out rates in the higher grades. So, although South Africa can be proud of its high enrolment and attendance rate, as well as the achievement of gender parity in enrolment and performance, its repetition rates are much higher than the international norm, especially among boys in the lower grades, and far fewer girls excel academically than should be the case (Motala & Dieltiens 2010). Over-age learners are much less likely to persist in school and much more likely to repeat and drop out. Such 'silent exclusions', where children are nominally enrolled but learn very little and are at risk of dropping out, are significant in the Western Cape, in particular, but learners across the country are affected (Lewin 2008; CREATE n.d; Gilmour & Soudien 2009; Lewin 2009; Meny-Gibert & Russell 2009). These access issues mask the deeper quality challenge of providing 'meaningful access' to learners.

For those who do survive to matric, the certificate is still their gateway to the labour market. Matric is now less of a gate-keeper than it was under apartheid: while the number of candidates increased from 518 225 in 1996 to 537 543 in 2010, the number of passes increased even more from 278 487 to 364 573 over the same period. The employment and earnings prospects for those with a matric remain higher than for those without and higher still for those with some form of tertiary education. It is even better for those with a matric and pro-

ficiency in English (Casale & Posel 2010). Of consistent concern has been the small numbers passing mathematics and science and qualifying for higher study in these subjects. From 2009, the old higher and standard grade distinction was phased out and mathematics literacy, a subject intended to provide basic mathematical skills to a broader range of students, replaced mathematics standard grade. The result was that many students who could be taking and passing mathematics at a higher level have tended to opt for mathematics literacy instead (Simkins 2010). Again, proficiency in English is a good predictor of success in the matric exam.

The cumulative consequence is that far too many learners are stigmatised as failures, leaving school without literacy and numeracy capabilities, and heading for unemployment and bare survival in a society and global world that thrives on and rewards high-level education and skills, knowledge and innovation. The hidden depths and dimensions of these lived realities and their underlying causes can be glimpsed through Jonathan Jansen's regular public interventions and riveting weekly column in *The Times* (Jansen 2011).

Reasons

Explanations and reasons pivot around whether such outcomes are seen as principally contextual or school-based. Government explanations tend to link poor results to school functionality. School functionality, in turn, is seen as the consequence of a variety of linked issues. The National Planning Commission (NPC) has summarised an emerging consensus that acknowledges the role of inequality and contextual factors but sees school and classroom-based issues as decisive in the functionality of a school and its results. School functionality is linked to a combination of leadership, management and administration, teaching, resourcing and support-related issues. Without dismissing all the factors that have a bearing on poor performance, the NPC's assessment is that 'the main problems in schools lie in teacher performance and school leadership' (NPC 2011: 15). The idea is that if a school is dysfunctional, its school leadership and classroom practice need attention, in the first instance. The view that a combination of factors rather one cause is necessary for a full explanation and understanding of the problem is borne out by analyses of the SACMEQ III results.

To understand why the education system reinforces current patterns of poverty and privilege instead of challenging them, Van der Berg (2011: 08) refers to a 'double burden' that



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learners from poor communities in South Africa face – the burden of poverty and ‘the burden of attending a school that still bears the scars of neglect and underfunding under the apartheid dispensation’. What matters in schools are the management of resources, the number of teachers and teacher quality, textbooks, classroom practices, discipline and management, assessment and feedback and home background. On resources, IDASA’s Russell Wildeman goes so far as to say that while they are important, their availability and efficient use will not by themselves bridge the education quality gap in South Africa (Wildeman 2010). He, too, points to classroom factors as mattering most in learning outcomes.

Although education is the highest item of budgetary expenditure in South Africa, and per capita expenditure has increased substantially in both nominal and real terms since 1995, government expenditure on schooling as a percentage of the country’s GDP declined from 4.9 per cent in 1995 to 4.1 per cent in 2009, and education’s share of government expenditure declined from 22 per cent in 1996/97 to 17.7 per cent in 2009/10 (DBE 2011a). This is much less than, for example, Botswana, Kenya and Namibia spend on education. Thus, global spending allocations are not as extravagant as is often claimed. Even so, the annual auditor-general’s provincial reports show significant under-spending and financial management challenges in several provinces (see PMG 2011). The availability of resources at school level has as much to do with household income as with how it is managed at provincial and school level, and with systems that militate against equity.

School leadership and teacher performance, as the NPC (2011) mentions, are critical in-school factors accounting for school functionality and literacy and numeracy achievements. Honing in on these issues, more specific analyses of teacher quality have linked it to what teachers know, their ability to convey complex concepts and ideas and their commitment and motivation to teaching, otherwise known as content and pedagogical-content knowledge. When they are unsure and unconfident of what they know and have to teach, teachers will then also be unlikely to teach it well, will avoid teaching those parts of the curriculum they find difficult and will seek to find ways of spending less time in the classroom (Carnoy et al. 2011; Taylor 2011).

The ‘critical shortfall’ of learners passing mathematics and science at higher levels seems to be linked to poor levels of teacher content and pedagogical-content knowledge, the small number of teachers who are actually able to teach these subjects, and the fact that many teachers qualified to teach scarce subjects do not actually teach them, while teachers not qualified to teach mathematics and science do teach these

subjects (Paterson & Arends 2009; Simkins, Rule & Bernstein 2007; Simkins 2010). The issue of shortages is one of quantity and quality, across the system, and is part of a wider problem in the recruitment, retention, education and deployment of teachers faced in the system as a whole.

A link is also often made with the language of learning and teaching. Learners who are proficient in English are more successful in matric as well as later in the labour market (Casale & Posel 2010). This is something that schools and parents recognise and that results in their choosing English as the language of learning and teaching, even though home-language proficiency in the early years is critical for later success, and despite teachers’ English proficiency being weaker than their home-language proficiency. Moreover, UMALUSI (the education quality-assurance council) has drawn attention to the fact that the issue in home-language teaching in African schools is that standards and expectations are low and that until this changes the transfer to English will be ineffective. The priority here, therefore, is improving home-language instruction, a matter principally of teacher education and resources. However, it is made more difficult when student-teachers do not take up bursaries to specialise in the teaching of home languages and when classrooms, especially in urban areas, have a variety of languages in them and a common language has to be found. The curriculum review of 2009 (DBE 2009) argued that the transition from home language in Grade 3 to English as a language of learning and teaching in many African schools in Grade 4 gave rise to learning difficulties that would be solved by starting with English in Grade 1, such that both the home language and English as the first additional language would be taught simultaneously. English would not substitute for the home language but would be taught alongside it.

The problem to be addressed, in the perspective sketched above, is located in the classroom and centres on classroom practice. Both contextual and school-based issues have a bearing on classroom practice, but it is seen as capable of change with the correct policies and strategies in place. In searching for reasons or underlying causes of the problem in South African schooling, the tendency is not to go for mono-causal but to favour complex yet focused explanations that enable key issues specific to classroom practice to be addressed.

What the government is doing about it

Dialogue, debate and participation

The dimensions and cluster of reasons discussed above all point to what needs to be done. There is no single, overarching

policy intervention that will solve all problems; a range of small changes across different areas relating specifically to the school-based factors, however, will make a big difference (Carnoy et al. 2011). In addition, an approach committed not only to improving learning outcomes but to social justice and democracy more broadly also requires 'processes of dialogue, consultation and debate' (Tikly 2011: 11) and a more substantial engagement with diversity in South African classrooms (Sayed & Ahmed 2011). The National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996 provides for consultative processes in the determination of national policy, and a national framework for inclusive education does exist. However, what are national commitments in practice?

In this respect, the role of the teacher unions has come under scrutiny. The NPC itself has acknowledged that educational issues 'cannot be fixed without the active participation and engagement of teachers, their unions and parents' (NPC 2011: 15). This is in line with the commitment by the ruling party to ensure that education becomes a 'societal issue,' an issue that engages, mobilises and harnesses all sectors of society towards addressing the crisis in education and improving teaching and learning in schools. When wage talks stalled in 2010 and the teacher unions went on strike at a critical juncture in the year for matriculants, national mobilisation in support of the matric class of that year was overwhelming. Supplementary tuition activities mushroomed and have continued in many cases. In this vision of learners being at the centre of a society-wide national educational effort, labour peace is considered preferable to labour conflict. Unions and government acting together is considered more beneficial to the overall goals of education than a showdown between them that can result in vitiating rounds of labour conflict.

In pursuance of education becoming 'a societal matter', a national Accord on Basic Education was launched in October 2011. The Accord is a partnership between the Department of Basic Education (DBE), business and organised labour. It is explicitly intended to mobilise support for schools in the light of the ANA results and their analysis to identify schools most in need of assistance (see DBE n.d.). While the government considers dialogue essential, there is evidence that unions, teachers and analysts do not think there is sufficient consultation and dialogue on key policies. Official forums and channels exist for such dialogue, but the time frames of research, consultation, policy and implementation frequently conflict and produce tensions, as evidenced in recent curriculum revision processes. Conflict and co-operation exist in tension with one another in a society and sector that is highly divided but increasingly focused and united on the key priority of improving classroom practice.

Dialogue, consultation, debate and participation go beyond dialogue between the government, business and unions and include the involvement of parents and other members of civil society. One of the aims of the ANA is to help parents understand better how their children are performing and how they

can help them to improve. This is based on the perspective that lack of information constitutes a key blockage in the system, and providing such information will help the 'consumers of education' (parents) make demands on the 'producers' of education (teachers and principals) to improve the quality and supply of it. Here, the assumption is that education quality will improve only when the demand for and expectation of better quality education are higher than they are currently. This is a model that underestimates how social class works in education and schooling in South Africa; low levels of literacy among parents historically have tended to reinforce rather than help parents to challenge power differentials between themselves and school principals and teachers. Since the unintended consequences of education have a habit of undermining the good intentions, it is important to monitor and assess whether this aim is met or not and with what consequences.

Where projects have been undertaken independently to mobilise communities in the interests of education, they have resulted in the successful establishment of reading clubs, homework centres, matric catch-up classes and campaigns for school libraries (Kgobe 2011) as well as innovative projects that use 'mentoring as an alternative model for teacher training' (Bloch et al. 2011: 37). The Western Cape, especially, has been the site for numerous reading club initiatives, including the Vulindlela reading clubs and Learning-to-Read project, which trains volunteers to teach and assist with the teaching of reading in schools. Perhaps the most visible and successful of such mobilisation initiatives has been the NGO, Equal Education, which campaigns for school libraries and librarians, and conducts various forms of youth leadership training and educational programmes as a means not only of mobilising communities but of enabling youth and interested supporters to become active agents in their own educational and social development. Through its Bookery project, Equal Education has been able to start libraries in schools. Such projects can be no substitute for government responsibility but are a vital part of a democratic society in which citizens are also able to take the initiative to ensure the realisation of broader social and educational goals.

Diversity

Recognition of diversity is as central to South Africa's formal commitment to democracy as is its commitment to debate, dialogue, consultation and participation. Yet, policy activity in education, according to Sayed and Ahmed (2011: 111), 'suggests a failure to substantially address this link' between diversity, equity and quality. Classrooms in South Africa have become much more diverse than they were. Linguistic, race, class, culture and gender differences often compound the barriers to learning that learners face in classrooms. At least one province, KwaZulu-Natal, has made major strides in improving its results by placing an inclusive framework at the centre of its education implementation strategies. Thus, it can work.



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Nevertheless, despite the existence of national and provincial frameworks for inclusive education, many provinces, districts, principals and teachers are inadequately trained to recognise and address differences and specific needs. Research on the experience of migrants, for example, shows that regardless of policies, frameworks and curricular intentions, a lack of awareness of rights and xenophobic or discriminatory practices still prevail in many schools. This suggests a need for ongoing dialogue between researchers, teachers and policy-makers at national and provincial level to design appropriate interventions. Fataar (forthcoming) offers vivid insights into different learning dispositions that children bring to schools and the 'suppressions of learning' that occur in those spaces.

An approach to quality that takes diversity seriously might differentiate 'one-size-fits-all' policies that are generally framed in the interests of the middle class (Soudien 2004). It would support the approach popularised by the McKinsey report among policy-makers on *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed, Chijioko & Barber 2010). The report essentially argues for the principle of differentiated strategies for different schools and classrooms on the basis that all systems have different starting points and all can improve. By extension, an approach that takes diversity in the classroom seriously needs to think about structured teaching and learning strategies that take different starting points and experiences of learners in classrooms seriously. The issue is complex and requires careful attention.

Target-setting approach

Policies to redress inequalities in order to improve the quality of education have been central priorities since the mid-1990s. They have not produced the desired outcomes. Responding to the mounting evidence of implementation failure across a wide range of sectors, but education most importantly, the administration voted into office in 2009 not only made education 'an apex priority' but also introduced an intersectoral approach focused on target-setting, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of activities to enable the achievement of goals and targets. The approach of the DBE is informed by this broader governmental approach. The Minister of Basic Education has signed a delivery agreement to improve the quality of education. Her success will be measured by the achievement of national targets set for literacy and numeracy in Grades 3, 6 and 9 and for mathematics and science in matric. By 2014, it is expected that at least 60 per cent of learners in the early grades will be able to perform at the required level. Targets have been mapped for each province against their

ANA 2011 results, and provinces will set targets and design interventions for districts and schools.

The DBE has developed an Action Plan to 2014, which sets in place the priorities, strategies and activities to ensure achievement of the targets. Activities are organised around four themes: improving early childhood development; the quality of learning and teaching; undertaking regular assessments to track progress; and improving and ensuring a credible, outcomes-focused planning system. It identifies specific cross-cutting activities for the national, provincial and school levels to take up in accordance with constitutional responsibilities. The focus of the national department is on policies, frameworks, norms and standards, and monitoring and evaluation, whereas that of the provinces, is on actual implementation.

National and provincial alignment and co-ordination

The system is designed constitutionally to allow considerable decision-making and diversity of approach at provincial and local level. In effect, this has meant that while some provinces such as Gauteng, the Western Cape and, to some extent, KwaZulu-Natal have surged ahead in designing and implementing specific literacy and numeracy implementation strategies in line with the overall approach, others such as the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, with their more difficult inheritances, have been less successful. Thus, provincial and urban-rural inequalities are reinforced. The Eastern Cape is a case in point. Here, financial and administrative collapse of the provincial educational administration at the beginning of 2010 led to the establishment of a Cabinet-approved national intervention team consisting of representatives from several departments led by the DBE. It was their task to work with provincial counterparts to get systems back in place. However, the provincial authority mounted a successful legal challenge to the authority of the national department in the province, reaffirming a more limited role of the national team in addressing the crisis there. Thus, the tragedy of the Eastern Cape continues. At the time of writing, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) was threatening strike action during matric exams to effect removal of the Basic Education Superintendent-General in the province (see reports on the Eastern Cape to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee, 23 March 2011; *Daily Dispatch* 15.09.11; *Daily Dispatch Online* 05.11.11).

The national department has vested considerable energy in seeking alignment and national co-ordination of provincial

initiatives so that they focus more equitably on the key priority of improving teaching and learning in the classroom. The main instrument for this has been the ANAs. Through the Council of Education Ministers and Heads of Education Departments, a methodology has been developed to assist all provincial and district officials and schools to analyse the results and to develop plans and strategies to address them. Leading by example, the national minister and deputy minister have visited poorly performing schools and districts across the provinces, checking scripts, providing feedback to schools on difficulties experienced by learners in the tests, meeting with regional-level principal and district bodies, motivating them to turn their schools around by setting realistic improvement targets and providing concrete suggestions for the kinds of improvement strategies to be adopted. In this way, the message is going out that the expectations are higher than the outcomes that are being delivered, and that turning education around requires concrete plans and action from everyone at all levels in the system.

Curriculum

Other national-level initiatives to support teaching and learning have included a continued focus on the strengthening of early childhood education curricula and teacher education, the streamlining of the national curriculum and assessment framework, new developments in teacher recruitment, education and development, the introduction of a national catalogue of textbooks and the development of 24 million Grade 1–6 workbooks for learners in 18 854 public primary schools. Successful curriculum implementation requires not only clear and accessible curricula, but also motivated, knowledgeable and well-qualified teachers, adequate teaching and learning support materials, appropriate district support and guidance and realistic implementation time frames. In line with the recommendations of a review committee (DBE 2009; see also *Curriculum News* 2010, 2011), the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) combine previously disparate documents and provide more detailed guidance to teachers on what is to be taught and assessed on a term-by-term basis. Implementation will be gradual and incremental, starting with the Foundation Phase in 2012. Provinces will continue to develop plans for the improvement of teaching home languages and the first additional language from Grade 1 and up.

Teacher recruitment, education, development and deployment

Improvements in teacher recruitment, education, development and deployment are critical to better teaching and learning. This is a function that is split between the DBE and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The DBE manages the recruitment of students intending to enter teaching, and provides in-service training to already-serving teachers, whereas the DHET manages the provision of teacher education. In order to address shortages, the Funza Lushaka

bursary scheme was introduced in 2005. These bursaries specifically target students intending to become language, mathematics and science teachers, as well as those who intend to teach in the Foundation Phase. Bursaries are provided at all 23 institutions providing teacher training. The number of awards has risen from 5 447 in 2008 to 8 532 in 2011. The average value of a bursary is R52 700. Additional bursary opportunities are provided through provinces and the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA). More than 65 per cent of Funza Lushaka graduates are teaching in schools that serve poorer communities.

Despite teachers graduating in increasing numbers, the profession is still not attracting enough new teachers; consequently, the allocation to the Funza Lushaka fund for 2012 and 2013 has been increased by R220 million. In order to retain bursaried teachers in the system, the contractual obligations attached to the bursary have been increased and require that newly qualified teachers provide a minimum of four years of service. Should they default, they have to repay the bursary with interest. In addition, incentives are in place for teachers who teach in rural areas and hard-to-reach schools.

In 1994, 65 per cent of teachers had a matric plus a three-year qualification; 95 per cent of teachers are now so qualified (DBE 2011a). Teacher development is being provided at some 140 district teacher development centres. However, despite the improvement in qualifications and a long history of in-service teacher development, there seems to be little relationship to learning outcomes. Questions are raised, therefore, about the quality of teacher education and development programmes. A National Institute for Curriculum and Professional Development is being established to ensure, among other things, that content-rich, pedagogically sound short courses are in place that are aligned to the content frameworks of particular subjects and phases or specialist areas. Successful learning on these courses must enable teachers to improve their teaching practice.

In order to ensure that teacher education and development are oriented towards providing the knowledge and skills that teachers require to do their jobs well, the DHET has developed a policy on minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications. This is in accordance with the Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education (2011) developed by the department and teacher unions. The DBE, together with the Treasury, is also finalising a protocol in terms of which teacher unions will be able to provide for teacher development. Departmental training initiatives in 2011 focused on the redesign of roles and responsibilities of district officials to support the curriculum, as well as preparation of training frameworks for provinces to use in the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements. A Mathematics and Science Strategy focuses specific attention on how to increase the numbers and improve the quality of teachers teaching mathematics and science.



In a context where only 45 per cent of children in South African schools have sole use of a textbook, cheaply-produced yet attractive workbooks can play a supplementary role in boosting literacy and numeracy practices in schools.

Inefficiencies in the appointment and deployment of teachers that result in mismatches are a major focus of attention for the short to medium term.

Resources

Good resources are vital in all contexts, but are more so in schools and classrooms surrounded by poverty. Decentralised systems of textbook procurement introduced in the post-apartheid dispensation have not had equitable consequences, and have been expensive for the state. Each child still does not have a textbook and other necessary resources for each subject. In order to ensure that every learner has a text for every subject, the department has sought to improve equity and efficiency in the system. In line with the recommendations of the Curriculum Review Committee (DBE 2009), it developed a national catalogue for books to be used in Grades 1–3 in 2012. This catalogue recommends eight books in each subject (languages, mathematics and life skills) from which schools can choose. The intention of the catalogue is also to control pricing. The rapid introduction of the new approach led to considerable anxiety on the part of publishers and tensions between publishers and the department. After consultation with publishers, the system is being introduced more gradually for other grades. Such consultation and dialogue is ongoing and considers various aspects of the process.

Another controversial new development in 2011 was the department's initiative to provide learner workbooks to children in the poorest quintiles. In a context where only 45 per cent of children in South African schools have sole use of a textbook (IIEP 2010), cheaply-produced yet attractive workbooks can play a supplementary role in boosting literacy and numeracy practices in schools. The intention, accordingly, was to provide something where there is nothing and/or augment resources where they are limited. Although the principle of state development and distribution of learner workbooks has been welcomed, critics have had difficulties with the underlying conceptualisation of literacy acquisition, the perceived threat to the professionalism and autonomy of teachers embodied in the provision of texts to teachers, and the inefficiency in the delivery of the books to schools. The latter was due to gaps in information systems. This is another area where national and provincial alignment is being sought, as there is great variation in the quality of the learner and school information-gathering systems in provinces.

There is a long way to go in the development, use and dis-

tribution of workbooks. Workbooks on their own are unlikely to result in major learning improvements. They need to be supported by more extensive and linked teaching resources and broader reading, writing and numeracy practices that cut across home, community and school. Still, they are a small start that can make a difference alongside other small changes contributing towards a bigger reorientation in schools to focus on teaching, learning and providing better resources. Already, the department is responding to difficulties picked up in information systems and delivery, and in improving the content and presentation. The intended evaluation of the workbooks will no doubt generate important suggestions on how to improve their development, distribution and use.

Intended furniture and infrastructure improvements are now not only part of a national departmental initiative running alongside additional provincial infrastructure budgets, they are also a priority for the government as a whole, as Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan spelt out in his medium-term budget policy statement in October 2011. The backlogs are enormous and hugely varied, and the process requires careful planning for effective delivery. The Development Bank of Southern Africa has been appointed to improve existing structures, while the implementing agents for basic services are the Mvula Trust, the Independent Development Trust and Eskom. Their work should result in infrastructure maintenance and upgrades to schools, including windows, water, electricity, libraries and laboratories, as well as the replacement of mud structures and the building of new schools to keep pace with demand.

Accountability

Accountability in the system is being improved through a refocus on teaching and learning in the classroom and through the institutionalisation of performance contracts with managers across the system. In order to ensure that principals are indeed the instructional leaders they should be, new appointment procedures are in the process of being developed. The NPC plan proposes that only qualified people are appointed in school (and that there is no undue political or union interference), more teachers are trained and better trained, and test scores are used as accountability measures (Manuel 2011). Since 2010, principals and teachers have no longer been permitted to hold political office. The emphasis is firmly on ensuring that principals and teachers commit to their core task of instructional leadership. A bill for the formal establishment of the National Education and Evaluation Development Unit as a statutory body is scheduled for tabling in Parliament soon.

Conclusion

The achievements of the post-apartheid government in education are largely obliterated by persistently vast socio-economic inequalities, as well as inequalities in learning outcomes and the exceptionally weak literacy and numeracy results of learners in poor communities. The approach in basic education is informed, on the one hand, by the view that schools can make a difference in poor communities if they function as schools should, with all the essentials of good leadership, management, teaching, resourcing and support in place, and, on the other hand, by the performance and outcomes-oriented approach of the government as a whole. National targets have been set for improving learner performance, broken down at provincial and then individual school level, assessments have been conducted to identify weaknesses and areas for intervention, and strategies and activities have been designed with appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes to check progress.

Target-setting and performance-monitoring are common international tools, best known in the UNESCO Education For

All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initiatives. These have had both strengths and limitations as strategies for intervention: while few analysts question the good that targets can do, there is now considerable knowledge about why and how they are not always achieved. In South Africa, many risks (including those relating to capacity, participation, agency and accountability) confront the implementation of all new activities.

Nonetheless, one of the greatest achievements in the last few years has been the mobilisation and rallying of significant sectors in society to a recognition of the depth and breadth of the challenge. The government, as one of these sectors, has acknowledged that there is a problem and has made a concerted effort to focus the work of everyone in the sector on improving literacy and numeracy. There is a plan that is being implemented and assessed. Pitfalls, weaknesses and unintended consequences there certainly are, but at least the building blocks are in place and there seems to be broad agreement on the overall direction being taken.