

# Education

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## Back to the real basics

Education cannot progress if we do not pay more attention to elementary skills

COMMENT  
Nic Spaull

South Africa today is in a precarious position because of its growing divide between the lofty goals of eloquent policy and the practical realities of on-the-ground implementation.

Nowhere in the government is this more prominent than in education. One need not go far before finding an inspiring policy document expounding the importance of critical thinking and abstract problem solving, yet 27% of grade six South African pupils cannot read a short and simple text and extract meaning — that is to say, they are functionally illiterate and this after six years of formal, full-time schooling.

The comparable figure in Botswana is 11%. How long will it take before we get clarity on this and numerous other similar divides and realise that the emperor has no clothes on?

I was particularly struck by this recently when a colleague was discussing the e-education white paper of 2004. It states that every South African pupil will be capable in information and communication technology and use this technology “confidently and creatively to help develop the skills and knowledge they need to achieve personal goals and to be full participants in the global community by 2013”.

Wonderful stuff. And yet, in 2010, less than 30% of schools in the country and only 6% of classrooms had access to the internet. One wonders how many of these confident and creative paragons of technology we will have by 2013?

The problem with these Utopian policies is that they absorb time, energy and money that could otherwise be used to solve the fundamental problems plaguing South African primary education. We need to get back to basics and focus on the solid acquisition of core skills.

Amartya Sen, a Nobel economics prize-winner, uses the Japanese experience in the mid-19th century as a classic example of the relentless focus on basic education. The country's fundamental code of education was issued in 1872 and stated that there must be “no community with an illiterate family or a family with an illiterate person”.

By 1913 the country was almost entirely literate, publishing more books than the United Kingdom and more than twice as many as the United States, even though it was much poorer than both of them.

Part of the reason why South Africa struggles to focus on getting the basics right is that we are not quite sure whether we are a developing country or a developed country; we seem to have the characteristics of both.

Under apartheid a small, racially homogenous group of people enjoyed a standard of living similar to developed world countries, whereas the majority of the population lived in poverty comparable to



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

many poor African countries.

In the post-apartheid era, a larger minority of people, no longer racially homogenous, continues to enjoy that developed world lifestyle while the majority of South Africans experience service delivery not dissimilar to developing world countries.

Consequently, we set policy goals at developed world level but, loosely speaking, implement them in a developing world way, if at all. This schizophrenic reality is but another manifestation of the deep-seated inequality plaguing our country.

Two recent developments indicate that the department of basic education now seems to be aware of the need to focus on the fundamentals. Firstly, the department has committed itself to providing a workbook for every primary school child for mathematics and language. Secondly, it has implemented a national standardised testing system at the primary grades, the annual national assessments.

Both these initiatives represent a huge leap forward for South African education. These workbooks help teachers to cover the curriculum

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and manage teaching time in addition to providing high-quality learning materials at relatively low cost. The national assessments perform the important role of providing parents, schools and the department with some indication of what primary school pupils actually know.

Because there was little monitoring of school assessment before these appraisals, a school could be setting grade four-level tests in grade six, genuinely thinking that this was the appropriate standard for that grade.

In many instances parents are also completely unaware of their children's underperformance (relative to the curriculum) because they keep passing each grade — something that, in reality, is a poor indication of real learning in many schools.

The national assessments go a long way towards remedying this situation. Given that they are marked by teachers themselves, the next step is for them to be marked by an external body (as Umalusi, the quality assurance body, does for matric).

In keeping with the above, we should give praise where praise is due. The department of basic education has taken a number of key steps towards improving the quality of basic education in South Africa and for this it should be applauded. The dividends of these policies are likely to be large and the benefits disproportionately in favour of the poor.

But ultimately judgment is not based on policy — it is based on the successful implementation of policy. The *Mail & Guardian* has highlighted, several times, the patchy

and often atrocious record of delivery of the workbooks to schools. Is anyone held responsible for this situation? This points to another enormous lack in South African education: accountability, but that is another topic for another day.

The policy implications arising from my discussion here are clear: focus on getting the basics right. We need to get five brass-tacks principles in place:

- Set clear and succinct goals that everyone must follow. For example, “Every child will read and write by the age of eight”;

- Continually measure what children actually know — schools are institutions of learning and many elements of learning are measurable;

- Set credible targets for improvement and monitor pupils and school performance;

- Get all schools to minimum quality standards in both basic infrastructure (water, electricity, desks and so on) and in educational performance (numeracy and literacy milestones by certain grades); and

- Provide feedback to parents on the performance of their children in standardised national assessments, such as an externally evaluated annual national assessment. It would be unthinkable to suggest that the matric results be withheld from pupils and parents, so why should it be so different for primary schools?

Instead of churning out new policy documents specifying the latest desires of the government, let us rather focus on the practical ways of helping every school in South Africa

to offer a quality basic education.

Yes, we need computer-literate children and, yes, we need a curriculum that instils democratic values, respect for others and all the other wonderful things on the wish list, but our first responsibility to every child in South Africa is to provide them with the opportunity to learn how to read, write and compute at an adequate level by the end of primary school.

Unfortunately, every survey we have indicates that we are not achieving this elementary goal. Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.

Nicholas Spaull is a PhD student in the economics department at Stellenbosch University. This article is based on some of his recent research on primary school performance in Southern Africa and especially South Africa. It can be found at [nicspaull.com/research](http://nicspaull.com/research)

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#### Editor

David Macfarlane  
[davidm@mg.co.za](mailto:davidm@mg.co.za)

#### Reporter

Bongani Nkosi  
[bonganin@mg.co.za](mailto:bonganin@mg.co.za)

#### Reporter and webmaster

Victoria John  
[victoriaj@mg.co.za](mailto:victoriaj@mg.co.za)