

# Lack of accountability hitting pupils hard

Leanne Jansen

THAT SA has a higher proportion of functionally illiterate Grade 6 pupils than Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana has much to do with a basic lack of accountability, a Western Cape economist says.

Nic Spaull, from Stellenbosch University, last week released research that reaffirms that staggering numbers of South African pupils are not able to master fundamental literacy and numeracy skills.

In addition, Spaull found that fewer South African Grade 6 pupils had access to their own textbook than Mozambican children – despite the former spending fifteen times more money per child

(R9 745) than its neighbour does (R630).

The study also reveals that the average South African primary school teacher is absent 19.6 days a year and that 67 per cent of schools reported having to regularly deal with unjustified teacher absenteeism.

Spaull based his research on the 2007 SACMEQ III Grade 6 reading, maths and health survey, but believes that the findings still hold true.

The 2007 survey tested the literacy and numeracy skills of pupils in 14 African countries, and Spaull analysed and compared test results for four of them: SA, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique.

Asked why SA was not getting value for money in the

form of positive education outcomes, Spaull said it boiled down to poor accountability on the part of the Department of Basic Education and its teachers.

## Predicament

Other experts have pointed to unionised South African teachers as one of the major factors contributing to the predicament.

“One of (the department’s) latest initiatives – providing workbooks to all primary school children – is a case in point.

“The workbooks will do a great deal to help children in all schools. And yet recent estimates indicate that only 30 per-

cent of the workbooks actually reach the schools... What are the consequences for the individuals who were responsible for delivering these workbooks?” Spaull asked.

“Accountability also extends to teaching – who is held accountable when pupils do not learn what they are supposed to learn? Is it the principal? The teacher?”

Edith Dempster, a senior education lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said that Spaull’s study was confirmation that a lot more hard work was needed to improve education in SA.

“Looking for reasons why our kids are struggling so much, teacher absenteeism is a cause for concern. It’s one

thing having a textbook, but the kids need to have a teacher to mediate the textbook.”

Paul Colditz from the Federation of Governing Bodies of SA Schools agreed with Dempster. Colditz said that key to understanding what was wrong with South Africa’s education system was its teachers.

“The difference between us and our neighbouring countries... is a highly politicised and unionised teaching ‘profession’ – probably also the highest politicised and unionised in the world.

“Where teachers regard teaching as a vocation... there is success in terms of outcomes. Where teachers merely regard themselves as workers, there is failure,” Colditz said.