



Research on Socio-Economic Policy

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Limited support for the foundation phase: A misallocation of district resources

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To realise improvements in the South African education system and overcome substantial inequalities in learning that exist, prioritisation must be given to improving the quality of foundation phase teaching and learning. If children are not able to master the basics of reading and numeracy in the early grades, they carry insurmountable learning gaps into higher grades and adulthood.² Yet, learning in primary schools, specifically in foundation phase grades, is not receiving the level of support it should from at least one important tier in the bureaucratic administration: the district. This policy brief uses School Monitoring Survey (SMS) data from 2011, a nationally representative survey of schools, as evidence of how less district support is being targeted at lower grades compared with higher grade levels, particularly grades 10 to 12 or otherwise referred to as the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. Targeting more district support at higher grades is a misallocation of resources in a system where children are failing to master even the most basic literacy and numeracy skills. It is too late to intervene with support in senior grades in preparation for a matriculation examination. Interventions must start in the earliest grades.

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² Spaull, N., & Kotze, J. (2015, March). Starting behind and staying behind in South Africa: The case of insurmountable learning deficits in mathematics. *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 41, pp. 12–24.

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1. The education system has over-prioritised the FET phase level

Currently incentives faced by the education system in directing both financial and human resources are in the direction of higher grades. The main reason for this is that the only school examination or test that is verified by an independent body (Umalusi) and is relatively trusted as a reliable measure of school performance is the matriculation examination or National Senior Certificate (NSC). NSC results are highly publicised and are clearly communicated at the provincial, district and school level. This encourages higher levels of both external and internal accountability for school performance but only at the FET phase level.³ After interviewing a number of senior district officials across 8 of 9 provinces in early 2016, it was acknowledged that in strategic efforts to achieve higher school district results in the NSC, they were typically prioritising their support for secondary schools over primary schools. Data reflects this prioritisation.

The School Monitoring Survey 2011 asked over 2000 school principals about the intensity of district visits to their schools, who visits their schools from the district office and what types of activities are carried out during these visits. The reliability of principal reports are verified using nearly 15,000 teacher responses⁴ on their personal experience of subject advisor visits.

2. School principals in primary schools report fewer visits by district officials

Compared to secondary school principals, primary school principals are less likely to report that 12 or more visits by district officials for monitoring or support purposes were conducted during 2011 (the year of the survey). About 27% of learners in primary schools had principals that reported that the school was visited 12 or more times during 2011 compared with 39% of learners in secondary schools.⁵ Primary schools are less likely to be visited by district managers, circuit managers, ICT or e-learning officials and importantly subject or curriculum advisors as reflected in Table 1.

TABLE 1: The percentage of learners with a principal that says the school was visited by the following district official in 2011

	Primary or intermediate schools		Secondary schools	
	%	Std. error	%	Std. error
District director	13.3*	1.3	29.9	2.4
Circuit manager	76.8*	1.5	83.1	2.0
Curriculum/ subject advisor, including the assessment coordinator	83.8*	1.3	93.5	1.3
ICT or e-learning official	39.5*	1.7	45.8	2.5
Psychologists, therapists, district-based support team, health officials, inclusive education specialist.	56.7*	1.8	44.6	2.6
Number of schools in calculation	1 199		487	

Source: School Monitoring Survey 2011, principal questionnaire.

Notes: Learner weighted schools. *Primary school estimate is statistically significantly different from the secondary school estimate using a 95% confidence interval.

Of the 1 199 schools in the primary/intermediate school group only 24 are intermediate schools. Statistics for combined schools are not shown.

3 Van Der Berg, S. (2015). What the Annual National Assessments tell us about learning deficits over the education system and school career. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, vol. 5(2), pp. 28–43.

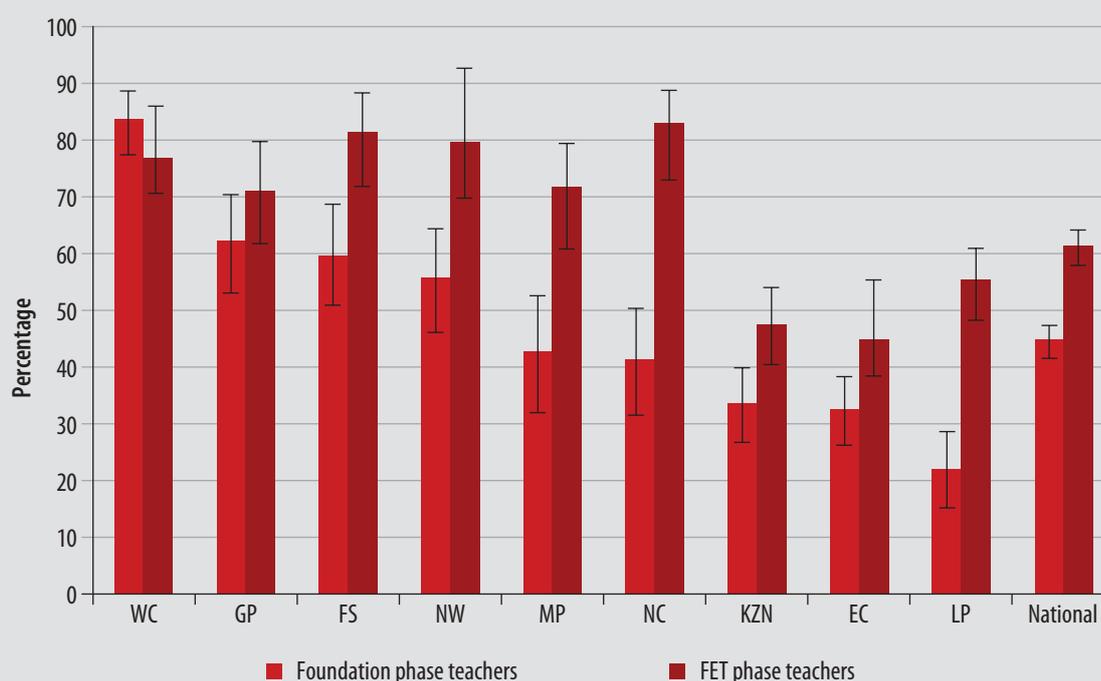
4 The more recent Annual National Assessments which test earlier grades have not enough momentum and trust as a reliable examination where tests are marked by teachers within the same school, marking is not verified by an independent organisation and tests are not comparable across years. Union opposition to their implementation and validity has further damaged the credibility of the tests.

3. Four areas of lower district support for primary schools

The School Monitoring Survey (SMS) data confirms that fewer district visits to primary schools compared with secondary schools has four important implications for primary schools as reported by principals and teachers:

- i) Less monitoring and support of the principal, school management team (SMT) and governance structures;
- ii) Less monitoring of the management of learner teacher support materials (LTSM);
- iii) Less monitoring and support of learner assessment;
- iv) Less monitoring and support of teachers in executing and developing in their teaching functions.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of foundation phase and FET phase teachers sampled in SMS that report they were visited by a subject/curriculum advisor during 2011



Source: School Monitoring Survey 2011. Educator questionnaire.

Notes: Educator-school weighted estimates. FET phase teachers, 4 128 in total, self-identified that they taught grades 10 to 12. Foundation phase teachers, 3 102 in total, self-identified that they taught grades 1 to 3. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals about the average estimate.

What is most concerning is that principals in primary (or intermediate schools) are less likely to report that district officials have supported educators with their teaching. 84% of learners in primary (or intermediate) schools compared with 94% of learners in secondary schools have principals that reported that the school was visited by a subject advisor or curriculum coordinator. But principal reports of subject advisor visits are overly optimistic and disguise the reality that many subject advisors do not actually enter the classroom, even though they may visit a school. Among the sample of 4 128 foundation teachers interviewed in the SMS 2011, only 45% identified that they had personally been visited by a subject or curriculum advisor during the course of 2011. Among the 3 102 teachers interviewed at the FET phase this figure was higher at 61%.

5 As part of the School Monitoring Survey of 2011, 10 teachers were selected randomly within a school, or in the case of there being 10 or fewer educators all teachers were selected. Each teacher was asked to complete a 5 page questionnaire dealing with professional development and support provided by districts. In total 15,252 teachers were surveyed although only 15,004 reported information on subject advisor visits.

6 Learner weighted school estimates are shown to weight schools correctly by their size. If primary schools are typically smaller in size in terms of enrolment than secondary schools this will distort estimates by phase level.

With the exception of Gauteng and the Western Cape, foundation phase teachers are significantly less likely than FET phase teachers to be visited by a subject advisor in all other 7 provinces as reflected in Figure 1. The gap in visits is particularly pronounced in the Northern Cape. It is important to qualify, however, that while nationally subject advisor visits to individual teachers are less common at the foundation phase compared with the FET phase, the visits to foundation phase teachers that *do occur* may be of better quality. The 45% of foundation phase teachers in the sample who were visited by subject advisors, were more likely than their peers at the FET phase to report that these visits involved the subject advisor checking their teaching, supporting them on classroom management, giving advice on how to improve their teaching and subject content knowledge, monitoring the pace of curriculum implementation and providing guidance on the use of learner and teacher support materials (LTSMs).

4. What must be done?

The evidence presented provides a strong case for how more strategic direction is required at the level of districts to reprioritise the importance of early grade learning. I propose four actions that can be taken to address this:

1. Reliable testing at the primary level through improved Annual National Assessments (ANAs)

The ANAs introduced in 2011 were an important step forward in the system in raising awareness about basic literacy and numeracy levels in earlier grades, helping teachers identify learning gaps amongst students and providing metrics to districts and provinces which could help direct support to under-performing primary schools. An improved ANA must be reinstated with psychometrically valid tests that are comparable from year to year in terms of the difficulty level of the tests.

2. Re-education for district officials on the importance of early grade learning

Districts officials have been conditioned to prioritise matriculation performance and therefore FET phase support. They require training on why early grade learning is critical to future education performance of districts, and the system as a whole, to challenge any existing beliefs that the FET phase matters more than lower grades.

3. Request an audit of the capacity of districts to support foundation phase learning

Interviews with district officials identified that there are severe shortages of subject advisors in many districts and circuits. But there is little quantitative evidence to confirm the extent of these shortages. At the foundation phase level, a particular concern is that subject advisors are not specialists in a specific subject area such as reading, numeracy or life skills but provide generic support for all three of these areas. An audit is required of the current capacity of districts in terms of both resources and delegations to execute their school support functions, particularly at the foundation phase.

4. Expert subject advisors in foundation phase subjects deployed to districts

After a clear district capacity audit, sufficient numbers of expert subject advisors at the foundation phase need to be deployed to districts. In particular, expert subject advisors are required in the area of reading to equip teachers with rudimentary skills to teach reading in the foundation phase.