

18 June 2009, CAPE TOWN – South Africa has a high enrolment rate for grades 1 – 9, but simply being enrolled in school is not enough to ensure meaningful access to education, or meaningful learning outcomes.

This is one of the key issues highlighted in the *South African Child Gauge 2008/2009*, an annual review of the situation of children in the country, which was released today by the Children's Institute (CI), University of Cape Town (UCT).

Focusing on the theme of 'meaningful access to basic education', the publication reflects on a range of factors that can enable or hamper children's access to and progress through school.

Meaningful access to education, says the CI's Prof Shirley Pendlebury, requires among other things access to well-conceived text books and other learning materials; competent and prepared teachers who are able to use a range of appropriate classroom practices; a curriculum that builds a strong basis in the foundation phase; teaching facilities and resources such as laboratories and well-stocked libraries; and a safe and supportive environment.

"Ninety-six percent of children of compulsory school age are enrolled in school, yet poor national averages for language and mathematics in grades 3 and 6 show that most learners do not acquire the skills and understanding that give substance to the right to education."

According to the preliminary findings, grade 3 learners scored on average 36% for literacy and 35% for numeracy in the 2007 assessments. The situation for grade 6 learners is not any better: The national average for language of literacy teaching was 38%, and for mathematics only 27%.

The importance of developing a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy is highlighted in the *South African Child Gauge 2008/2009*. A Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study shows that the development of literacy is hampered by children not reading enough; and the lack of specific and good literacy instruction, linked to the qualification of teachers and the quality of their training. Dr Cas H Prinsloo of the HSRC explains that "children also experience difficulties when switching too abruptly from mother-tongue to a different language of learning and teaching". Children from poor homes and communities are disadvantaged by the lack of learning opportunities.

Paula Ensor, Professor of Education and Dean of Humanities at UCT, argues that a solid foundation in numeracy is just as critical for further learning. This can only be achieved if teachers understand how children learn number. However, the Count One Count All research project of UCT and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology found that

teachers often use inappropriate numeracy teaching strategies, and that learners do little independent written work.

When it comes to physical access to schools, the 2008/2009 issue of the *South African Child Gauge* presents some interesting research findings on who is not at school, why children are dropping out of school, and the enabling effect of funding and school fee policies.

An analysis of the 2007 Community Survey by the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), suggests that poverty and school fees are unlikely to be a sufficient explanation for why children are not in school. The study found that children out of school fall into five broad, but inter-related, categories: Children with disabilities; children with one or both parents dead or their whereabouts unknown; children not living with a relative; children in households eligible for social grants but who do not receive them; and children living on farms and in small towns in the Southern Cape or central Karoo. “It is not always the poorest provinces where the most children are out of school – we found that Gauteng, Northern and Western Cape provinces had the largest proportion of children out of school”, explains Prof Brahm Fleisch of Wits.

Similarly, research by the Education Policy Unit, also at Wits, found that absolute poverty does not directly contribute to absence from school, though it could cause late entry, and slow progress. Instead, relative poverty (how children experience their poverty in relation to others’) and social exclusion are key drivers of drop-out in grades 1 – 9. The poor quality of education is associated with the drop in attendance rates for grades 10 – 12, when children no longer see education as useful or worth staying in school for.

There is evidence however that the government’s no-fee schools policy goes some way in improving access to education. Research commissioned by the Alliance for Children’s Entitlement to Social Security has found that the policy has resulted in increased revenue for no-fee schools, and relieves the burden of school fees on poor caregivers. But Katharine Hall of the Children’s Institute says increased funding does not imply sufficient funding, or necessarily results in quality improvements: “Many schools still operate on a budget that does not allow for the delivery of quality education or the provision of school infrastructure that assists learning. More importantly, school funding excludes teacher salaries, which limits the impact on learner outcomes.”

An analysis of education budgets by the Institute of Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) found that the government’s moderation of expenses on teacher salaries has resulted in increased spending on infrastructure, textbooks and school funding, grade R and special needs schools. There is greater and more equal national and provincial spending on education, though it is not necessarily successful in addressing backlogs. IDASA’s Russell Wildeman says “these changes have helped create a more ‘balanced’ education budget, but little has been done to improve teacher salaries and overall working conditions until the introduction of Occupation Specific Dispensation for educators in 2008. It remains to be seen whether increased investment in educators will translate into improved educational outcomes for children.”

The right to basic education in South Africa is guaranteed by the Constitution. Yet rights on paper do not necessarily translate into rights on the ground, says Prof Pendlebury.

“Children’s right to education will only be realised when government meets the educational needs of all children in South Africa. The current failures of the education system are unacceptable and threaten to undermine the promise of democracy and freedom. A critical question is how the new Ministry of Basic Education is going to respond to these challenges. Ongoing dialogue and debate is needed to mobilise public support and ensure that the right to education is realised.”

The *South African Child Gauge* monitors the realisation of children’s rights and is published annually by the Children’s Institute, UCT. Key features include legislative developments affecting children; child-centred data tracking children’s access to social assistance, education, housing, health and other services; and a series of essays to inform, focus and sometimes direct national dialogue and debate. The 2008/2009 issue includes a poster-map of South Africa illustrating national and provincial trends in education, including government provisioning and learner outcomes.

The *South African Child Gauge 2008/2009* was released at a symposium on child rights, hosted jointly with the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. The publication is available for download on www.ci.org.za.

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For more information on findings in the *South African Child Gauge 2008/2009*:

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