

Getting in and staying there: Exclusion and inclusion in South African schools

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Abstract

The paper provides a reflective account of the research carried out in South African schools focusing on physical access and learning. The paper argues that while physical access is not a major education problem in South Africa, meaningful learning remains an elusive goal for many, particularly the marginalised and the poor, notwithstanding the numerous education policies enacted since 1994. It argues further that there are many reasons for this, including how learners are taught, the bifurcated class-divided nature of South African schooling and the lack of crucial and active parental involvement in schooling. Against this backdrop the paper reviews numerous policies and strategies advocated in the South African context for restructuring the education system. It argues that whilst they are persuasive and appealing, they fall short in providing a holistic and coherent approach to education transformation. The paper concludes that what is needed is a far more explicit, proactive and equity-driven approach that prioritises the neediest and the most marginalised.

Key words: exclusion, policy, inclusion, meaningful learning, quality, access

Introduction

With only three years remaining before the 2015 target date for meeting Education for All (EFA) goals, the issue of education quality remains a key challenge in South African development. Achieving physical access to a cycle of basic education is necessary but insufficient; a quality education also implies meaningful learning and progression to secondary and higher levels of education. In 2000, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, the South African government – along with 166 other govern-

ments, international agencies and civil society organisations – committed itself to improving all aspects of the quality of education. The Forum noted:

Quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults. A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living. Evidence over the past decade has shown that efforts to expand enrolment must be accompanied by attempts to enhance educational quality if children are to be attracted to school, stay there and achieve meaningful learning outcomes (World Education Forum 2000: n.p.).

The main question addressed in this article is why it is that, 10 years after Dakar, 20 years after Jomtien and almost 20 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, good-quality basic education is still out of the reach of so many South African learners. Why are there still some learners who never enter school and, of those who do, why do they learn so little, and why do so many drop out even after having persevered for nine or more years? Through close and detailed analyses of the macro and micro-contexts of 14 schools across two districts of two provinces, the CREATE research (Motala, Dieltiens & Sayed 2012) shone several spotlights on why meaningful access to education remains as elusive a goal today as it was when a new order dawned in 1994.

The CREATE research found that, notwithstanding high enrolment rates in basic education in South Africa, the majority of black learners continue to be marginalised in many respects. Having for the most part access to education only in poorly resourced learning environments, the simple reality is that for the majority of black learners in South Africa meaningful learning remains an elusive goal. Education choice and quality remain the preserve of the middle class, and what exists is a bifurcated education system.

Policy context

The new, democratic government that came into being in South Africa in 1994 has shown its commitment to EFA by, in part, producing numerous policy documents intended to ensure equitable access for all to meaningful learning opportunities. In the post-apartheid era, South Africa has seen a proliferation of educational policies. Between 1994 and 2011 approximately seven White Papers, three Green Papers, 26 Bills (of which 17 were amendment Bills), 37 Acts (of which 46 were amendments of existing laws), 11 sets of regulations, 59 government notices and 29 calls for comments blanketed the education sector from basic to higher education (Sayed and Kanjee, forthcoming).

Under the first democratically elected Minister of Education, Sibusiso Bhengu (1994-1999), policy focused on developing frameworks to address the historical inequalities of apartheid, at the same time creating a broad-based vision for a new South African education system. While aiming to improve access to education for all

South Africans, somewhat paradoxically the government also permitted the former Model C (formerly white) schools to charge tuition fees, a decision described by many as the semi-privatisation of education (Sayed 1997; Sayed & Soudien 2004). The justification given, that such user fees would both make it possible for these schools to maintain quality (and thereby in theory decrease chances of a feared white flight to private schools) and allow scarce state resources to be directed instead to enhance equity, was challenged by many on the grounds that user fees would in fact increase inter-school inequalities.

The second period, overseen by Minister Kader Asmal (1999-2004), broadened the scope of policy activity to include areas not previously tackled, although equality and social justice issues remained priority areas of concern. The fifth and sixth Education White Papers appeared during this period, the fifth targeting early childhood education and the sixth mooted the creation of an inclusive education and training system to meet the needs of learners with special needs. While this more expansive policy focus clearly demonstrated a leaning towards addressing the access and other educational needs of some of the most marginalised groups, progress towards meeting these objectives has been excruciatingly slow.

The third period, under Minister Naledi Pandor (2004-2008), was characterised by a distinct departure from previous policy efforts, which, to some extent necessarily, had emphasised educational access rather than quality. In response to widespread under-performance in basic literacy and numeracy at the GET level, the Foundations for Learning Campaign (2008-2011) showed a strong government commitment to a back-to-basics approach (DoE 2008). This initiative identified literacy and numeracy learning targets for schools offering the Foundation Phase, and included prescriptive guidelines on the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills, with the aim of better equipping students for both the later years of schooling and potential post-school training and employment opportunities.

Since 2009, a fourth phase has been underway, with new policies emerging and significant changes made to how the education system is managed on a national level. The national Department of Education has been reorganised into two departments: the Department of Basic Education (DBE), headed by former Gauteng Executive Council Member for Education, Angie Motshekga, with responsibility for primary and secondary education as well as early childhood development centres; and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), under Blade Nzimande, which oversees technical and vocational training, adult education and tertiary education.

During this fourth phase, six main trends can be identified amidst the flurry of education policy documents appearing since 2008. First, the back-to-basics approach of the previous phase continues unabated. Accompanying and reinforcing this approach is, second, *Action Plan 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025*. Echoing the earlier Tirisano ('working together') campaign launched by Kader Asmal,

Action Plan 2014 spearheads national strategic priorities and is the first long-term vision of education produced in recent years (DBE 2010). Of its 13 output goals, three focus explicitly on access: one deals with ensuring enrolment in schooling until age 15, another targets access to Early Childhood Development and the third does the same for further education and training. The remaining goals focus on improving numeracy and literacy, in a clear response to ongoing poor learner performance on the national Grade Three and Grade Six assessments and in the regional SACMEQ and international TIMSS and PIRLS surveys. There is also a strong focus on regular testing, in the form of Annual National Assessments (ANAs), which test the quality of language and mathematics learning in all public and government-subsidised independent schools.

Third, the outcomes-based education (OBE) system, which had been introduced incrementally since the late 1990s, has come under critical scrutiny. In 2009, the outcomes-based Revised National Curriculum Statement was itself revised after being reviewed by a Ministerial Committee, and a new curriculum document, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS), came into effect in January 2011, signalling the end of a 14-year attempt to focus teaching and learning primarily around outcomes rather than (for example) processes or inputs.

Fourth, policy has begun to give greater credence to the notion of teachers as agents of change. The National Teacher Development Summit in 2009 was an important catalyst for change in this regard, with the resulting Summit Declaration expressing commitment to the development of a coordinated national teacher development plan. On 5 April 2011 the two national Departments of Education jointly launched the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, the main purpose of which is to improve and accelerate both initial teacher education and continuing professional teacher development, with training for CAPS a specific priority.

Fifth, the separation of basic education and higher education at the national departmental level has allowed for a much more intense policy focus on skills development. This was manifested in the publication of the National Skills Development Strategy III 2011-2016 and the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training. This more dedicated focus also saw the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) transferred from the Department of Labour to the Department of Higher Education, by way of Presidential Proclamation 56 of 2009 (President of SA 2009), a move intended to improve coherence across the university and college systems (DoE 2010).

Sixth, in the past few years a number of amendments have been made to the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSF), allowing for an expansion in the number of no-fee schools and the widening of school feeding schemes. The most recent NNSF amendment came in 2011, allowing schools to apply to the head of department

for compensation for fee exemptions each year, based on a formula determined by the DBE. This is a clear pro-poor development, though even more substantial adjustments will be required if current inequities are to be fully addressed.

Yet despite the plethora of education policy documents, plans, strategies and interventions, the third decade of democracy in South Africa is about to dawn amidst clear evidence at a national, regional and international level that the majority of South African learners are far from mastering the basic and minimum competencies required of them by the curriculum. Among these learners it is the poorest and the most marginalised who are especially endangered by the poor quality of the education to which they currently have access. In the national Department of Education's systemic evaluation of Grade 6 in 2005, learners obtained a national mean score of 38 per cent in the language of learning and teaching, 27 per cent in mathematics, and 41 per cent in natural science (DoE 2005). Six years later, the results of the 2012 Annual National Assessments show some improvement in the Foundation Phase, but alarmingly poor results in the Intermediate and Senior Phases (M&G 2012). Compared with learners internationally, including those in many other African countries, South Africans often score lowest (Strauss & Burger 2000; HSRC 2004). South Africa also has the highest levels of between-school inequalities of performance in both mathematics and reading, in comparison with regional counterparts like Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (Van den Berg 2005). Some of the reasons for this dismal state of affairs have been identified by the CREATE research, and it is on these findings that the next section focuses.

Key research findings

Beyond physical access

Unlike children in many other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, almost all South African children have physical access to a school. Very few South African children fail to enrol in a school, their daily attendance is relatively high, repetition rates are relatively low and dropout is rare, at least during primary school (Meny-Gibert & Russell 2012). These findings corroborate other recent research, highlighting universal access to education up to Grade 9 (Children's Institute 2008; DoE 2010). Nonetheless, it is disturbing that at least 2% of all learners never enter a public school, and these learners are the most marginalised of all, often suffering from disabilities, deep poverty and/or lack of access to social grants.

The persistence of racism, sexism, bullying and corporal punishment does not make schools very inviting places, nor does teachers' use of demeaning and vulgar language encourage learners to study harder, let alone contemplate becoming teachers themselves. Yet practices in some schools and by some teachers still hold out hope that, through them, learners will obtain access to a better world. Paradoxically, there are also instances in which teachers dig into their own wallets or lunch boxes in order

to support needy learners – even while holding a cane. In general, the poor state of school infrastructure – from the shortage of classrooms to a lack of sanitation and playgrounds – detracts from a healthy and positive learning environment. Schools appear to physically reflect their surroundings and the communities in which they are located, often being as under-resourced and dilapidated as their poverty-stricken environs (or as richly endowed and well maintained as their wealthy neighbourhoods) (Dieltiens, Letsatsi & Ngwenya 2012). While a better physical environment on its own doesn't necessarily guarantee better performance, it may be important in its own right, because learners have a right to attend schools where the toilets are clean, where the windows are not broken and where they have chairs to sit on.

While gender parity has been largely achieved and appears to be maintained in terms of enrolments and attendance, this masks substantial gender bias in the schooling system, in terms of boys' retention beyond basic education into the Further Education and Training phase, and in terms of the broader social context of sexual harassment and the absence of safe spaces, especially for girl learners (Dieltiens & Ngwenya 2010; Motala & Dieltiens 2008). Boys tend to flow through the system at a slower pace, and are more likely to repeat, than girls, while more girls than boys make it to the end of matric, but do not excel academically as much as boys do. This pattern is especially clear in poorer provinces, such as the Eastern Cape.

Problems of progression, repetition and dropout

Though repetition and dropout rates in primary schooling (Grades 1 to 7), estimated at around 4%, may be considered low, in 2007 figures this translates into almost half a million learners. Of particular concern is the fact that most of those repeating or dropping out are the poorest and the most marginalised. More significantly, repetition is low partly because, owing to the system of automatic promotion, it is being deferred to later years, to secondary and especially senior secondary schooling, where assessment becomes increasingly summative. It is clear that repetition is not being sufficiently or adequately utilised as a remediation mechanism.

CREATE research found that, in the Ekurhuleni South district of Gauteng, repetition was highest in Grade 1 and then declined until increasing again at secondary school level, while in the Dutywa district in the Eastern Cape the proportion of repeaters was more constant in each grade, with a similarly significant increase at secondary school level. A likely explanation for these patterns is that the official policy of one repetition per phase is able to ensure that only a few children in the Foundation Phase are outside grade age parameters, but thereafter, with repetition being deferred, increasing numbers of learners fall behind age-grade norms (Motala, Dieltiens & Sayed 2009; Shindler 2012). This not only delays resolution of the problem, but also compounds it, given that these underprepared learners must now face even more complex learning requirements. Thus the issue is not that children are repeating, but that they are not

repeating. Only 46% of learners who started Grade 1 in 1997 made it through to Grade 12 by 2009 (DoE 2010).

Competition for space in secondary schools perceived to be of better quality may contribute to some learners in Gauteng dropping out after Grade 7. Across the Eastern Cape, however, where 44% of schools are combined schools (offering Grades 1 to 9), there is no physical transition between schools and hence no dropout problem between Grades 7 and 8; instead, the problem in these instances is primarily between Grades 9 and 10. While access up to the end of Grade 9 (or two years into secondary school) remains high, dropout escalates markedly thereafter. CREATE fieldworkers searching for dropouts mainly encountered older teenagers who had completed Grade 9. Learners often relocated without transfer cards, bringing into question the statistics schools provide on dropouts. Pregnancy was the reason given most often for girls dropping out in the first two years of secondary school. The biggest dropout period in the South African schooling system is thus unequivocally from Grade 10 to Grade 12 (DoE 2008; Meny-Gibert and Russell 2012).

Age-inappropriate enrolments

Low net enrolment rates suggest that too many learners are not in the correct grade for their age. These learners are most likely to be over-age, except in Grade 1, where underage learners are more of a concern. The ongoing enrolment of underage learners in Grade 1 might even be considered to be a form of preschool provision for the poor and marginalised.

The CREATE research found that the two case-study secondary schools in Ekurhuleni South in Gauteng had, in 2006, a higher proportion of over-aged learners than the case-study primary schools in the same district, even though in two of the primary schools half or more of the children in Grade 7 were over-age. Ironically, one of these primary schools was also one of the best-performing schools in the numeracy test (Pereira & Du Toit 2012): one amongst many possible reasons for this could be the tendency for teachers to repeat frequently work done in earlier grades, rather than focusing on the required curriculum (Venkat 2012). In contrast, in the schools in Dutywa, in the Eastern Cape, figures for over-age children appeared to be under-reported, with researchers finding large discrepancies between official records and their own headcounts. Moreover, one of these schools, where researchers identified a third of all learners as over-age, was one of the poorer performers in the numeracy test (Pereira & Du Toit 2012).

The absence of meaningful learning in classrooms

An absence of meaningful learning and an accumulation of cognitive deficits as learners progress haltingly through basic education remain everyday realities for the poor. In the CREATE numeracy tests, learners performed way below the levels

expected of them (Pereira & Du Toit 2012). Prior learning for the majority of learners was poor, i.e. they were not at the expected level for their grade, and the specific numeracy outcomes that required deeper analytical skills were poor.

The CREATE research found that there is very little actual teaching and learning taking place: lessons often start late, much time is spent maintaining order, teachers do most of the talking, and learners are passive and contribute little (Dieltiens, Letsatsi & Ngwenya 2012). This confirms earlier research which found that many teachers come to school late, leave early and spend only some 46% of their time teaching during a 35-hour week, with most of the rest of their time at school spent on administrative tasks (HSRC 2005; Taylor et al 2010). Many Foundation Phase teachers are unable to teach learners adequately how to read and write (Taylor et al 2010).

The absence of written work in classrooms was striking, rote learning and chorusing of lessons were common, and coverage of the curriculum was very uneven (Dieltiens, Letsatsi & Ngwenya 2012). The use of workbooks in the Eastern Cape varied widely between schools, and there were significant differences in the breadth of coverage across Learning Outcomes (LOs) and in how specific content is covered. Findings suggest that more attention needs to be paid to investigating the differences within and between schools in terms of opportunities to learn and how these may play themselves out in terms of learners' performance (Venkat 2012).

School choice, parental voice and education quality

Education policy creates a semblance of choice in that the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) allows parents to enrol learners in whichever school they choose (the 'soft-zoning' policy). However, the reality is that choice is restricted by competition for places in the relatively fewer number of secondary schools than primary schools in most areas, as well as, in general, for places in schools formerly reserved for white learners. Moreover, it is evident that it is largely the middle class that has sufficient choice of schools, given the persistence of residential settlements that still largely reflect apartheid geography: the black middle class is moving rapidly into the wealthier, previously white suburbs, where many of the better-quality schools are located, but the poor remain trapped in distant and under-resourced areas with access mostly to only poorer quality schools. The soft zoning policy thus reproduces rather than mitigates the geography of residential settlements.

Schools' official Languages of Learning and Teaching also limit parents' choice of schools, forcing some learners to travel long distances to schools that teach in their language. Inadequate mastery of the Language of Learning and Teaching is a major factor in the abysmally low levels of learner achievement; yet many parents prefer (with their children's concurrence) to have their children taught in the second language of English by teachers who are themselves second-language speakers of English

(Alexander 2010; Lafon 2009; Motala & Dieltiens 2008). The majority of poor parents are not able to exercise choice in schooling, having to send their children to schools in close proximity to their places of residence. However, for those parents who can afford higher fees and/or higher costs of transport, proximity is likely to be far less of a factor than it is for other parents, and schools' perceived quality much more of a factor (Luxomo & Motala 2012).

Home support for learning reflects the racially divided and class-stratified nature of South African society, with poorer parents lacking the time and the cultural capital to support their children's education adequately, and middle class parents more likely than poorer parents to encourage learning and to send their children to higher performing schools. Many parents' and caregivers' voices are not sufficiently heard at school level, no matter whether they believe they 'own' their school or adopt a more detached view of the school their children attend. Nevertheless, for all parents, care, discipline, and the quality of teaching are high on the list of educational priorities. Despite their general lack of participation in school affairs and their low levels of involvement in their children's learning, parents highly value school-going, to the extent of making the best of what they have, or keeping their child in a school they do not like but which is better than no school at all (Luxomo & Motala 2012; Motala & Deacon 2011).

Not least, the findings of the CREATE research suggest that there are two distinct systems of education quality in South Africa: one is that of fee-charging schools, most of which were formerly reserved for white learners, and the other is that of no-fee schools, almost all former black African schools, located in the poorer communities. The persistence of fee-charging schools alongside no-fee schools also helps to sustain a class-differentiated education system, and the recent extension of no-fee schooling to approximately 60% of schools has arguably reduced the five-quintile system to a two-tier system. The no-fee schools policy may have had important positive effects in terms of creating greater access by poorer learners to schools, but such improved access has not necessarily been access of better quality (Sayed & Motala 2012).

Improving education quality in South Africa: Strategies and plans

The CREATE findings highlighted above suggest a crisis of quality rather than access. To this end, there has in recent times been a flurry of 'roadmaps' or strategies and plans intended to address the situation. These include the Development Bank of Southern Africa Coordinated Road Map Process in 2010, the National Planning Commission Report in 2011, and the 2014 Action Plan mentioned above. In the light of the CREATE findings and other research, four broad education turn-around strategies can be identified (see also Sayed and Kanjee, forthcoming).

The first is government's reinforced 'back-to-basics' approach. Citing national, regional and international achievement data, proponents of this approach argue that the many post-apartheid innovations and changes have destabilised the education

system, by introducing interventions neither well suited to the poor nor within the current capacity and capability of teachers. This approach, manifest in policies such as the Foundations for Learning Campaign, resonates with an international educational trend towards getting the fundamentals right, such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in the United Kingdom. The trend calls for curricula to be so stripped down to the essentials as to be (almost) teacher-proof, and for drilling learners in fundamentals; but while it may result in modest and temporary gains it is unlikely to bring about a deep-seated transformation of teaching and learning. At the very least, it ignores the fact that the cultural and social capital possessed by the middle class provides them in advance with clear advantages over the poor when it comes to accessing and benefiting from education. Rather than such inherently biased and narrowly utilitarian approaches to education, what the poor need instead are varied and challenging curricula and forms of pedagogy that suit their particular contexts and circumstances.

The second strategy argues that it is not policy that is the problem, but the lack of effective monitoring and supervision of schools and teachers. The demise of the inspectorate in the waning years of apartheid and the school and teacher evaluation vacuum created by this are considered to be an obstacle to quality, in that there are few ways of identifying and sanctioning poor teachers and schools. Efforts to address this include instituting special measures in underperforming schools and signing performance contracts with senior education officials that reflect a 'what gets measured, gets done' approach. For example, on 29 October 2010 the Minister of Basic Education, together with the Ministers of Home Affairs, Communications, Health, Public Service and Administration, Science and Technology, and Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities, as well as the Education Members of the nine provincial Executive Councils, signed a Basic Education Delivery Agreement committing themselves to improving the quality of teaching and learning, undertaking regular assessment to track progress, ensuring a credible, outcomes-focused planning and accountability system, and improving Early Childhood Development. The key issue, however, is whether what is done is what is valuable and desirable in relation to good quality education. Such an approach also tends to see the teacher unions as stumbling blocks to effective schools and as resisting teacher appraisal. In line with global managerialist discourse, problems of education quality are reduced in part to management shortcomings; consequently, the solutions proposed are also management-centric, in the form of additional training of principals, varied new approaches to management, and dedicated leadership institutes.

A third approach argues that the resolution of educational problems in South Africa might instead be found in effecting changes to the governance of the system. This includes reshaping and reorganising ministries, redefining powers and relationships between national and provincial education authorities, and creating new bodies. The approach has much persuasive policy appeal, as structural changes often give the

appearance of movement, reform and innovation, and it is not surprising that they are especially prevalent in the run-up to elections. However, the assumption that structural changes have a direct and meaningful impact on what happens in the classroom is contestable; in reality, revitalised governance procedures may be necessary but not sufficient to address the situation.

Fourth and finally, it could be said that South Africa's educational failings are neither technocratic nor managerial, but instead political, associated with a 'loss of innocence' (Sayed 2002) as the once-idealistic and still newly democratic country comes to recognise that apartheid's legacies remain deeply entrenched. The heady days of People's Education are long past, and since then there has been a slow but inexorable decline of popular participation in educational issues; civil society organisations have been demobilised; direct parental participation in their children's education has been transformed into a discourse of governors and governance; activists have mutated into technocratic bureaucrats, while many critics have fallen silent; teacher unions and the government are simultaneously in alliance and at an impasse; and the anomie at some provincial education departments stands in the way of change. Proposals to address this situation call for widespread community mobilisation and the re-establishment of organisations that debate education, develop solutions and agree on binding behaviour. The approach recognises that popular participation in educational transformation depends as much, if not more, on seeking consent and extending legitimacy as on policies and planning.

Each of these solutions engages with one or more of the key problems identified in the CREATE research. However, remedying the situation will take more than just teaching the basics, improving monitoring and evaluation, making structural changes or extending popular participation. What is needed in addition is a focus on values, an insistence that equality and social justice must drive educational reform, and a move away from the pessimism and blame that are especially apparent whenever a new set of poor learner achievement results are announced. While there is much to bemoan, what is needed are proactive strategies to overcome failure, and for this mutual trust and binding behaviour among all actors are required. As the popular participation approach indicates, whatever solutions and approaches are offered must have widespread legitimacy, support and participation and cannot be left to technocrats and managers. More and more plans are not what are needed, because one cannot infer from the fact that if one can name, quantify and measure something, effective action is certain to follow. What is measured or done is not always meaningful; and what is meaningful is not necessarily easy to assess or achieve.

Conclusion

The experience of apartheid education requires a view of educational access that is much more than just physical access to schooling. Under apartheid, most black

African, coloured and Indian South Africans did have access to schooling, but it was an access based on separation and inequality. In post-apartheid South Africa, access may be near universal, but for many it is an access that is not meaningful. Assessing educational access thus involves more than counting how many learners of school-going age are in school at any particular time; it requires ensuring that these learners also successfully complete their schooling, having benefited from good-quality teaching and learning.

As the CREATE research (Motala, Dieltiens & Sayed 2012) shows, finding a place in a school is both constitutionally guaranteed and practically certain in South Africa, for enrolment is high; yet not everyone succeeds in finding a place or in making the most out of doing so. While there are many learners who, worryingly, never enter school, or drop out of school, even the vast majority of school-age children who do find places have few options regarding what kind of place they find and whether they gain access to meaningful learning. Many of these learners, who are often amongst the most marginalised children in South Africa, may be in class, but they are not learning much; they have a place in a school, but they are not keeping pace. Without an environment conducive to learning – here understood as ranging from school infrastructure and ethos through classroom amenities to the quality of teaching – many fall off the pace entirely, never to regain it, while many more trail behind without achieving a great deal.

While there are no shortages of policy proposals to improve education quality, it is important to build on processes that already exist, even if in some cases they are weak in form or substance. Moreover, it is of immense significance that, despite the poor quality of education on offer, school-going in South Africa remains highly valued, even among the poorest of the poor. Such pre-existing practices and perceptions need to be used as points of intervention for ensuring meaningful learning, by revitalising them and making the policy agenda geared towards EFA more inclusive, feasible and achievable. For this to occur, continued coordinated policy planning and effective implementation (and a narrowing of the gap between the two), concerted attention to the nature of teaching and learning in the classroom, and improved support for and development of teachers will remain necessary; but most fundamentally, a much more explicit, proactive and equity-driven approach is needed, one that prioritises the neediest and the most marginalised and works towards contextually specific and indigenous understandings and approaches to education change and reform.

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