

# 'Africa Don't Need

Although Africa has improved access to primary education significantly in the last few decades, too many children on the continent are still facing educational environments that are unacceptable.

A generation ago, access to primary school in Africa and the chance to learn how to read, write and work with numbers were something of a luxury. In 1998, only 58% of children in Africa enrolled for primary school. Thankfully, the tide of despair and illiteracy has shifted in the last few decades. Significant strides – but not yet success – have been made in achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of ensuring universal primary education.

In 2008, 76% of African children were able to enrol in primary schools, with the number continuing to climb. In South Africa, around 99% of children enrol for primary school and 95% of them make it past Grade 6.

However, challenges persist. In some African countries – despite progress – enrolment levels are unacceptably low and dropout rates are too high. Even in countries that are able to get their children to school, and keep them there, learning isn't a forgone conclusion, according to research

---

South Africa seems to be doing well when it comes to getting children to enrol in school, and it is having some success in keeping them in primary school, but the challenge seems to be in getting learning to take place.

---

conducted at Stellenbosch University by Dr Nicholas Spaull and Dr Stephen Taylor.

Of the 95% of South African children who complete Grade 6, only 73% were found to be literate, while only 60% were found to be numerate.

South Africa seems to be doing well when it comes to getting children to enrol in school, and it is having some

# No Broken Education'

by Leigh Schaller

success in keeping them in primary school, but the challenge seems to be in getting learning to take place once the children are in schools.

The study found that South Africa is not alone in its struggle to ensure quality education. In Zambia, 56% of children who complete Grade 6 are literate, while only a third pass numeracy tests.

Tanzania experiences a different problem. Fifteen percent of its children never start primary school and a further 11% drop out before reaching Grade 6. However, those who remain tend to learn something, with 97% of them being literate and 87% numerate.

Swaziland achieves near universal access, with 98% of its children going to school. Sadly, 11% of children drop out before finishing Grade 6, and 1% of those who finish Grade 6 are functionally illiterate and 8% are functionally innumerate.

The progress made towards achieving the MDG is a good start, according to Graeme Bloch, an education specialist, but we still have a long way to go. Graeme believes, though, that we should keep in mind the low base that South Africa is working from. "Verwoerd didn't want black children to learn maths. And look now."

To its credit, the South African government has ploughed money into improving this low base by spending more than 6% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education, according to the World Bank. However, the cash has not been able to buy quality education.

"I think what this research shows is that we need to be thinking more about how resources are spent and what they are achieving rather than just how much we are spending," says Dr Spaul, co-author of the Stellenbosch paper and a postdoctoral fellow in the economics department at Stellenbosch University.

"There are a number of reasons why increased resources may not translate into improved outcomes. In many instances, this is owing to a lack of accountability; in other words, that there are few, if any, consequences for non-performance," says Nicholas.

"Non-performance may mean textbooks that are not delivered, teachers that are not in school or even teachers that are in school, but that are not teaching," says Nicholas, who notes a 2009 study conducted in 58 schools

in the North West province which found that teachers did not get to teach 60% of the lessons they had been scheduled to teach.

Graeme believes, though, that we are undervaluing our teachers. And perhaps there is a risk of seeing underperforming educators as villains instead of essential members in an imperfect but vital system.

This belief underwrites the philosophy of Partners for Possibility, an organisation that tries to improve the approach and attitude of school principals, teachers, parents and learners by partnering with them.

The organisation has worked with 279 schools in South Africa, with the aim being to assist principals by equipping them with skills.

"Educators are victims of a system that requires a great deal of administrative and paper work, but they work in environments where there are a lot of socio-economic factors that impact the schools and the ability of the learners to actually learn. Many of them are also simply not equipped to deal with all the new technological requirements and demands that the environment is making on them," says Merlinda Abrahams, stakeholder engagement consultant at Partners for Possibility.

In order to improve learning in South Africa and Africa, Graeme believes that more focus should be placed on early childhood development, a view that science supports with studies showing a link between early childhood development and an increase in school completion rates.

Less than 20% of African children have access to an early childhood development programme, the lowest percentage in the world. Currently, the South Africa government aims to ensure that all children have greater access to early childhood development.

It's sometimes easy to look at the despair-inducing education statistics on Africa and believe that there is no hope. Yet, the progress made and the people inside government, schools, NGOs and academia that refuse to be numbed into despair and who carry on identifying areas that need improvement mean that there is a very good chance that a generation or two from now someone will be writing about how Africa overcame its education problem. □