

Building Education Beyond Crisis

**By Graeme Bloch, Education Policy Analyst,
Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA)**

graemeb@dbsa.org

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1. Introduction : The Nature of Crisis

It is perhaps becoming common cause in South Africa that education is in crisis, though the term itself obviously opens a debate. Ten years beyond the advent of democracy, the schooling system has failed to meet its promise. Opportunities dissolve before the eyes of South Africa’s children just as they should expect to be grasping a future of hope and possibility (see for example, Soudien 2005, Jansen 2005, Chisholm 2004).

A number of commentators used the word “crisis” in reference to the state of schooling and education, with one penchantly calling the situation “beyond crisis”.

This is not to say that things are disintegrating, or totally chaotic and disorderly. Indeed, the 2005 matriculation results and whole associated operation, show an ability, experience and capacity to deliver to high standard in a very complex delivery process.

Rather the term ‘crisis’ underlines that in terms of the challenges faced by the country, education is failing to make the grade.

While there is a feeling that the new Education Minister has begun to acknowledge the scale of the problems and to develop more sustained and focused solutions with a longer-term perspective, there are indeed a series of hard questions that need to be asked.

The point of such propositions is not to needlessly generalise or to lay blame, or merely to highlight the complexity of change. Minister Pandor herself has publicly identified many of the key points of weakness. In a low key but directed way, she and her staff in the Department under the new Director General Duncan Hindle, have set about a consolidation and re-focusing of official energies.

They have turned the spotlight on the need for stabilisation and the hard graft to focus on core areas of intervention that may make a difference, that will bring long-term gains and that will have wider spin-off effects in moving towards quality education for all. Many departmental programs exist that address the problems listed.

Enhancing the understanding of problem areas, however, to identify strengths and possibilities, and to determine interventions that are creative and innovative at the same time will surely enhance the efforts of the Department to improve education at all levels.

It can be said that in terms of a number of key indicators, the education system is failing to make the grade. This finds expression in relatively poor outcomes. Basic reading scores, and maths and science literacy, are consistently amongst the world's worst, including much of Africa. Recent scores showed that only 20% of 6th-graders could do maths at the appropriate grade levels (average score 27%) and only 40% in language of instruction (average score 38%) (IOL 12/12/2005).

But more alarming are the disparities amongst schools. In one 2001 study, where 65% of children in model C (ex-white) schools saw appropriate scores at 6th grade level, the figure for ex-DET (black) schools was only 0,1%. This is confirmed recently where the average score for 6th grade maths in the lowest fee-paying schools (under R100) where some 72% of children are located, was 22%. Only some 5% of students do higher grade maths and science for matric while the matric exemption rate is static or falling at 17%.

In general, probably some 50% of learners do not even make it through the school system and drop out before completion, with one recent study claiming only 32% of 2003 grade 10s actually passed (Business Day 11/01/2006).

Surveys talk about an overwhelming sense of sadness amongst the young unemployed, and circles of doom that reinforce their marginalization and lack of hope.

Where students should expect opportunities and assistance, they find their hopes and dreams crumbling before their eyes, and face obstacles rather than ladders to progress and self-esteem.

This reflects the reality that education is failing some 80% of school-age children, who find themselves trapped in sinkholes of unemployment and poverty rather than on tracks to autonomy and possibility. At their worst, many township and rural schools have been described as sinkholes, where children are 'warehoused' rather than educated.

Education is contributing to marginalisation and inequity rather than social advance and cohesion for many, especially the poor and rural.

In the context of a wide range of social hinge points – unmet democratic expectations; availability of resources; social and class divisions; dissatisfaction with the pace and quality of delivery – such failure of education could spell disaster for South Africa.

2. The Importance of Skills.

Education and skills training are indeed seen by government as pillars of the developmental state in at least two spheres, in terms of developing and growing the economy, and in relation to social cohesion (Soudien, 2005).

The recent 2006 Budget Review argues “A core priority is to strengthen education and improve performance on the labour market. Investing in people and ensuring that skills development complements employment creation are critical platforms on which to build future prosperity.” (102)

The same report notes that “highly uneven education and training systems” are one of the barriers to growth (Treasury 2006, 102).

Treasury further argues that :

“The uneven quality of schooling, weaknesses in education administration, differentiated qualifications and salaries of teachers, and inadequacies in skills development have to be addressed as part of South Africa’s strategy for sustained growth and poverty reduction” (106).

Indeed, in relation to the economy, the reality is that the current restricted skills production is likely to impact negatively. This is a clear bottleneck on attempts to grow at 6%, to enhance infrastructure development or to ensure sustainable growth, especially in a way that addresses the poverty imperative.

South Africa is a country on the brink of expanded growth – and the current production of high level skills is insufficient to meet the stresses and demands.

Furthermore, in a country with great expectations of equity, education is failing to make the grade in a way that particularly impacts on poor, rural and township schools. It could be argued that for 60 to 80% of children, education reinforces

marginalization, condemning them to a second economy of unemployment and survival.

There is an urgent pressure to find new spaces to engage the harsh realities and unexpected complexities of change in brave new South Africa. These interventions need to be based on careful analysis and understanding of the key issues.

Many of the complexities lie deep in the inheritance from apartheid education.

Below, the background and main features of education in South Africa are considered.

3. Background and History: Apartheid's Inheritance

Three aspects of the inheritance from apartheid education are important.

Firstly, the roots of the current system and its many systemic weaknesses, lie in the faulty, destructive pedagogic and ideological processes of Bantu Education and its sibling, *Christelike Nasionale Onderwys* (CNO). This left a legacy of inequality, poor physical and human infrastructure, and a racially divided and contested system. While there was an increasing massification at both the secondary and even higher education levels after the 1976 uprisings, this was tied to severely constrained political, social and economic opportunities for blacks.

Secondly, opposition to education impositions also led to a deep tradition of education struggles and the building of alternatives. Much has been written on the negative effects of school boycotts and the impacts on the culture of learning and teaching in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also important to stress a strain of thinking that placed high value on education and its outcomes and often developed a more utopian and aspirational set of alternatives. The high-point of these was captured in the People's Education movement under the banner of the NECC, later translated into the NEPI (National Education Policy Initiative) processes that tried to give more policy flesh as South Africa entered the transition period of democratic government.

A third historical point relates to the international context and the transition period of the 1990s with its political and technical compromises. The sweep of globalisation and end of the Cold War foreclosed many policy options. Implications ranged from fiscal limitations to marketised solutions that put pressure on the role of the state.

The growth of global knowledge-based economies underlined the need for strategies to foreground high-level skills competitive on the global stage. At the same time, the effects of globalisation are often to marginalise and degrade

lower-level skills and occupations as economic sectors collapse under the competitive pressures of low-wage economies such as China. Marginalisation and high levels of unemployment in South Africa are captured in the shorthand notation of the second economy with its many poverty traps.

The effects of these processes are uneven and varied. As Kraak argues:

“The concept of a national economy is often read in simplistic terms as a single monolithic entity...Such a monolithic view masks several (multi-layered) processes of economic differentiation and segmentation. ...There are three skills bands associated with three differentiated economic sectors that are structurally separated by their varying production regimes, technology needs, product markets and skills utilization...referred to as the high, intermediate and low skills bands.” (Kraak, 2004, 65)

The changed global context, overlaid on the inflexibility and inefficiencies of apartheid education, spelt difficulties indeed for any transition and the emergence of sustainable and developmental education options.

Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity of education. Everybody who has been to school thinks they have the solution. Yet education is deeply embedded in history, the social and economic past and present. It means that solutions cannot be simple; and it also implies that there are very few quick fixes. Unravelling this puzzle, will take much work, thinking, organizing, and great effort to build consensus and direction around core priorities.

Further, it is clear that many of the problems are hardly of schooling's making. Thus, malnutrition, hunger, poverty, AIDS, child abuse, criminal gangs, lack of books or people to assist at home, all impact on what happens in the classroom, and are all areas that may be difficult terrains for decisive intervention by (educational) authorities, certainly acting in isolation.

4. History: Achievements of Democracy

In this context, it is absolutely true to say that here have been significant achievements in turning around apartheid education in the first ten years of democracy.

Not least, is a consequence of primary education being made compulsory: the MDGs for education have already been achieved in South Africa. Both levels of universal primary education and the gender balance in schools go beyond the requirements and targets set to be achieved by 2015.

Further achievements include the amalgamation and unification of the various apartheid education systems and Bantustan establishments into a single national Department responsible for broad policy and the provincial establishments

responsible for delivery. The SA Schools Act of 1996 laid the basis for a non-racial approach to education with common norms and standards for all. There were strides towards equalizing expenditure across the racial divides as well as dealing with issues such as size of classes, access to teachers and course materials, and so on. This has been followed by a raft of policy papers, reports, legislation, implementation directives and institutional development that show progress across many branches of education from higher to vocational.

Within the fiscal landscape – and despite the strictures of GEAR - there has been a massive emphasis and priority on the education budget with some 6% of GDP and approx 21% of the national budget being allocated at its height (although qualified below). There were 26 845 ordinary schools in 2003, with some 12 038 922 learners and 362 598 educators (DoE 2005) and a budget of some R65bn.

The syllabus has had to be re-designed and re-written for the democratic scenario, underlaid by the progressivist assumptions of OBE (Outcomes Based Education) with its learner-based and critical teaching strategies as laid out in Curriculum 2005. At the outcomes levels, a strong focus by the second Minister of Education Kader Asmal saw matric results improved from a poor 58% pass in 1994 and worse 47,4% in 1997 to 73,3% in 2003.

Looking at the Senior Certificate results in 1994, 495 408 wrote, rising to 552 384 in 1998. 88 497 attained exemption (18%) in 1994 dropping to a low of 63 725 or 12% in 1999. In 2003, out of 440 096 who wrote the exam, 26,7% failed, 54,6% passed without endorsement and 82 010 or 18,6% with endorsement..

Some 508 363 learners wrote in 2005, up from 495 408 in 1994. A moderate increase of numbers passed, up to 347 184 from 287 343 in 1994, and 16 500 more than in 2004 despite a slightly lower pass rate at 68,3%. Numbers passing maths and science on higher grade improved marginally. A disappointment has been the falling rate of matric exemptions, at just around 17%. While 82 010 attained endorsement in 2003, 85 117 in 2004 and 86 531 in 2005, this is still fewer than the 88 497 in 1994.

There have been dramatic institutional changes in the Higher Education and FET College landscape. 120 Colleges of Education (teacher training) have been merged into university education departments in an attempt to improve quality and critical approaches. In addition, the Higher Education scene has seen 36 institutions merged into 21 universities and universities of technology, and some 150 FET colleges reduced to 50 through the 1998 FET Act.

Black student enrolment at universities and technikons grew from 191 000 in 1993 to 343 000 in 1999 (81%) to 449 000 in 2003 (including distance 717 793). Black students made up 59% of university headcount in 1999 and 64% in 2003, the figure being 86% for technikons. 53% were women.(Jansen 2004, 330; DoE 2005). The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has expanded to a

R985m scheme in 2004 from R70m in 1994, with some 114 000 beneficiaries (28 000 in 1994).

What these figures show is that, despite massive challenges of transformation, there is clearly a positive continuity in the school and wider education system. There are important levels of stabilization and delivery and there is a cohort of students who are managing to attain high levels of achievement.

5. Analysing the problems

These gains, unfortunately, need to be offset against significant problems. The problems become more important in the context of the searing competitive demands of global competition, and the local context of deep inequalities and poverty traps faced especially by poor and rural citizens in the second economy.

If there is one phrase that summarizes the failings of the education system, it is “poor quality”. In failing to achieve quality delivery, the education system is working only for a proportion of the learners who are able to access the relevant institutions. For a majority, lack of quality education dooms them to marginalisation and exclusion from the schools, universities and colleges that should give them access to a better life. Put harshly and in a pointed form, education tends to reinforce the social and economic marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable in South Africa, and reinforces their position at the survival end of the second economy with few prospects for movement or further development.

Some of the core concerns on the supply side of the education landscape include:

5.1 Poor teacher support

If what goes on in the classroom is the key to learning, it is at this level that there have been the greatest failures. Teachers have suffered the most from the effects of policy overload and the failure to ask crucial micro-level questions as to what could enhance classroom success. Many skilled teachers were lost during an ill-advised ‘retrenchment’ process.

Teacher morale is generally low with flight overseas or to other professions - over half express the desire to leave and relations with the departments are often antagonistic. It is clear that the move of teacher training to universities has had the paradoxical effect of making it less accessible to poor students, while teaching has become a less than desirable occupation for bright students seeking opportunities in the new South Africa.

Some of these conditions are embedded in the sociology of apartheid teachers . For many years teaching (and nursing and social work) was the only aspiration and opportunity for “middle-class” blacks. Today, some teachers have ‘escaped’

into bureaucracies, into new jobs or running their own companies – is it surprising that many of those left behind feel resentment or dis-ease? New opportunities for young blacks now mean the brightest and best aspire to a wider world, and again are reluctant to join the ranks of low-paid educators in uninspiring situations with unsure prospects. Some 80% of teacher trainees are white, some two thirds are women – a demographic with stark implications for township schools and mother tongue teaching.

5.2 Curriculum complexity

The complexity of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) as embodied in Curriculum 2005 has been a disaster for teachers, requiring levels of skill and experience that only exist among the best teachers, as well as access to resources not easily available, say in rural contexts. The complex qualifications-based SAQA system has not even been piloted in more settled educational contexts and was in hindsight hopelessly idealistic as even the key progenitors have noted. The work-based SETA system has struggled to find its feet and been criticized for being needlessly bureaucratic and difficult. Many of these difficulties have been recognized in the different way the DoE has introduced revised versions of curriculum for the new FET Certificate (senior school), with widespread pre-publicity and attention to teacher support and appropriate materials.

5.3 Disjunctures and mismanagement

Not only are there key policy slippages, for example between the education and training (labour) systems, or between the various branches of the Department of Education, but the very structure of the relationship between national (policy) department and provincial (delivery) departments leads to highly unequal and inconsistent outcomes. At provincial and district level, while there have been many improvements (e.g. security and marking of scripts; delivery of textbooks) there are also woeful tales of mismanagement and maladministration as well as simply poor levels of support infrastructure to schools. Rural provinces such as Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape and KZN continue to be sites for educational disadvantage of their learners. Even money set aside for capital improvements is unspent, with some R2bn of R12bn unspent in 2003/4.

Furthermore, the system of block grants to provinces has seen a declining education spend overall, reducing to low-points of some 4,7% of GDP from a high of over 6%.

The higher education system has found itself squeezed by new demands and a student body neither academically nor financially well-endowed. It has had to make do with unsatisfactory resources and inconsistent and short-termist financing.

Then, there have been 'policy breaches'. While Minister Bengu's priorities were restructuring and de-racialising, can he really be blamed for the progressivist optimism that saw the introduction of OBE (Outcomes Based Education) and its massive failures amongst poorly resourced schools and teachers? Similarly, Minister Asmal's focus on matric results and high-profile victories, while driven to raise morale, failed to bed down the long-term pathways that were required. His straight-talking perhaps only heightened the tendency of relations with the teacher unions to become conflict-based labour relations rather than a process of mutual professional development.

5.4 Governance and leadership

Systems of school governance were based on many of the idealistic assumptions of the people's education movement that stressed the importance of community mobilization and involvement in education issues. The hoped for momentum has not transpired. Indeed, while the Schools Governing Bodies (SGBs) of many of the Model C (old white) schools have been able to raise substantial private funds and skills to improve education provision, there have been accusations that in some cases this has involved maintenance of privilege and restricted access. On the other hand, in poorer communities, SGBs have sometimes been a source of localized power politics and resource control. The DoE has also re-visited the question of the powers of principals in this environment in a bid to focus on issues of effective school leadership.

Some of the more worrying outcomes of the weaknesses listed above include:

5.5 Two systems

While formerly white Model-C schools produce uniformly better results, rural and township schools overwhelmingly survive through sheer will and the force of good and committed teachers. Hours on the job are substantially less in 'second-economy' schools. Over half of the cohort that starts school never gets to the end, with Grade 9 being a major point of drop out. Evidence has shown that enhancing resource inputs, surprisingly, seems to have little effect on outcomes in poorer schools. It is not (only) money or even physical infrastructure that is important, but how the education process is ordered, managed and translated into classroom practice. The result for those in such hostile and bleak environments, has often been teacher brain drain and student flight or desertion from township schools where possible. Only a small number of black students acquire an education of any meaningful quality - there is a huge gap between the top quintile of learners and the rest. Poor schools effectively play a warehousing function or have become 'sinkholes', with some notable exceptions. In short, rural and poor schools effectively form a second system of education, trapping participants behind the massive blocks of the second economy.

5.6 Skills backlogs

Comparative scores for maths, numeracy and literacy are consistently among the worst in the world. While skills at the top end may be cutting-edge, there is just not the broad base to ensure adequate responsiveness to the changing pressures of globalisation and the knowledge economy.

Recent national tests showed that while some 65% of 6th-grade learners in model C schools performed at 6th grade level (not great), this figure was some 3% in ex-DEC schools and a frightening 0,1% in ex-DET schools.

Recent scores showed that only 20% of 6th-graders could do maths at the appropriate grade levels (average score 27%) and only 40% in language of instruction (average score 38%) (IOL 12/12/2005). The average score for 6th grade maths in the lowest fee-paying schools (under R100) where some 72% of children are located, was 22%. Only some 5% of students do higher grade maths and science for matric while the matric exemption rate is static or falling at 17%.

Numbers matriculating are no greater than in 1994, with similarly poor higher grade maths and university-exemption passes. Most learners are simply being warehoused rather than taught. These issues impact at the higher education level, where poor school results mean poor university preparation, high dropout rates and the 'revolving-door' syndrome. Where poor students do gain access beyond high-school, they struggle for academic support and adequate financing when costs such as residence and materials are included. Paradoxically, the narrow funnel that so successfully filters access, ensures great pressures to secure admission to one of the few avenues for progress.

Further, the structure of researchers in the Science and Technology fields, including human sciences, is becoming increasingly old and remains largely white. While younger black graduates choose other lucrative professions over academia, research and teaching, there are worrying implications for both pure and applied research in the future.

5.7 Unemployment

These systemic problems are compounded by the high levels of unemployment, in particular amongst youth. Where educational effort is not seen to lead to improved life prospects, where even access to further education and training becomes a financial and educational battle with poor prospects, the value of education risks rapidly losing its cachet. This can be seen in the 'degrading' of matric results even as pass levels have improved. There is even a small level of graduate unemployment that points to the problems of the mismatch of skills with opportunities.

A range of 'external' factors may impact on education, from HIV/AIDS (infected teachers and learners, child-headed households) to poor nutrition and housing, to lack of facilities such as sportsfields or libraries.

6. What Is to be Done?

What is to be done in what is clearly a mixed picture, but one with decidedly bleak undertones?

It is clear that education is in trouble, whether one uses the word 'crisis' or not. The scale of marginalization and drop out is unacceptable. While even in England, the Audit Office found 25% of schools were not performing, while South Africa can proudly note the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for primary and gender enrolment, nonetheless the problems are indeed deep.

The first step is to engage with centres of excellence, the many places in the system where things are working. We need to find out why, and how, and put in place measures to enhance and support these best-practice resources.

Take the example of the Piet N Aphane High School, an Impumelelo Awards prizewinner: Piet N Aphane High School (Headmaster Mr MA Moloto) is situated in Magatle Village, near Lebowakgomo in rural Limpopo. This year it celebrates its tenth anniversary. Its slogan, "Hard work pays dividends", is reflected above all in two things.

Their matric results have improved from a dismal pass rate of 18 per cent in 1998 to 91 per cent in 2003. The pass rate is now in the high 80s. Through creative fundraising they have a science and biology lab, and will soon have a media centre and a home economics centre "which is today known as Technology Centre and permakitchen". A range of academic streams and active sports clubs complement a programme of visits that has taken learners as far afield as Robben Island, the Pretoria Police Museum and KwaZulu-Natal sugarfields "where we learnt a lot about science and biology". Students enter Olympiads and at least 6 are on school tertiary bursaries.

Yet, the main object of the school's pride is its vegetable gardens, and sites for perma-culture and agro-forestry. Not only do they supply and train surrounding schools, but the post office, police, clinics and others have benefited. Boreholes, "rain harvesting", and a whole environmental policy have enthused and mobilised the village.

In the school's own words, "(We congratulate you) for wanting to know more about what is happening in schools. Piet N Aphane never said that 'Manna will come from Heaven'. Piet N Aphane has had to be an early bird that caught the

fattest worm since 1994. And we don't have a community or SGB (School Governing Body) serving like an opposition party. However, we achieve all these through team work, hard work, as the motto of our school says, through sacrificing our time, e.g. coming to work even during the holidays and weekends; and over and above all conveying our efforts to the Celestial Surgeon (God)".

What happens at the school level and in the classroom is crucial. It is quite clear that concerted school leadership, discipline, and cooperation amongst the various stakeholders involved at school level, can make a significant difference even in the poorest schools. Tied to good leadership must also be a campaign to empower and encourage teachers to do what is necessary: from enhancing skills, district-level support, access to materials, to issues such as discipline and time-on-task.

Min. Pandor is right to stress the importance of resource conditions — or lack of them — in schools. It is not just collapsing classrooms or lack of toilets or electricity and telephones, but also issues such as libraries, laboratories and sportsfields, so that schools can begin to be whole places of social and individual development for communities and their children.

If the nation is to get that right it is absolutely crucial to mobilise a great society-wide consensus around educational goals and priorities. Neither the 'blame-game' nor ideological solutions will help. While many things can be fixed in the short-term, it will take a massive medium-term effort by all South Africans to rally around and intervene to find solutions.

The 'listening' stance of Pandor and her department is a good start, but it needs to be translated into decisive consultations, broad consensus, and firm prioritised action.

Perhaps it is time for some sort of get together, where South Africans can acknowledge the depth and nature of the problem, where they can listen and re-focus, and develop long-term plans that can help re-prioritise energies to produce the educational outcomes South Africa needs.

The future of the country and its children depends on making the education system work.

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Interview and Consultation Schedule

Date	Name	Title	Institution
April 29	Dr Geoff Abbott	Manager: Facilities Planning	CSIR
	Prof Jonathan Jansen	Dean: Faculty of Education	University of Pretoria
May 8	Ms Penny Vinjevold	Deputy Director General	Department of Education
May 19	Ms Gugu Ndebele	Chief Director: Open Learning (FET)	Department of Education
May 22	Prof T Auf der Heyde	Dean: Research	University of Johannesburg
May 23	Dr Anthon P Botha	Director	Techno Scene
June 21	Ms Luci Abrahams	Board Member	DBSA
	Prof Mary Metcalfe	Dean: School of Education	University of Witwatersrand
June 28	Ray Twyakadi	Education Policy Advisor	DFID
July 5	representatives	SA Ops	DBSA
July 6	Ms Shireen Motala	Director	Education Policy Unit (EPU) Wits
	Mr John Pampallis	Director	Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD)
July 7	Prof Linda Chisholm	Director: Child, Youth and Family Development	HSRC
July 8	Ms Pyushi Kotecha	Chief Executive	Higher Education South Africa (HESA)
July 11	Ms Tanya Scobie	Operations Manager, Health and Education	International Finance Corporation (IFC)
July 12	Firoz Y Patel	Acting DDG: Systems Planning	Department of Education
July 26	Duncan Hindle	Director General	Department of Education
August 11	Allan Taylor	Chief Executive Officer	National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)
	Prof Craine Soudien	Head, School of Education	UCT
	Prof Peter Kallaway	Faculty of Education	UWC
August 12	Prof Maureen Robinson	Dean, Faculty of Education	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
	Prof Joe Muller	Deputy Dean: Postgraduate, School of Humanities	UCT
September 27	Development Dialogue	Over 50 attendees, 20 organisations	Incl. Wits U, U Pretoria, UNISA, Joint Education Trust, DoE, SAQA, National Business Institute, British Council, Umalusi, NSFAS, Royal Netherlands Embassy, HSRC, HESA, Business Day, IEC, SACOB.

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