

Schooling and skills development crisis

What can labour do?

For transformation to take place in South African education a number of things should be done. These include addressing historical inequalities, having a stable curriculum, and developing language policies that take into account the country's social and economic context, writes **Kaizer Makole**.

The higher level of development enables children to transcend the immediate, to test abstract actions before they are employed. This permits them to consider the consequences of their actions before performing them. But most of all, languages serve as a means of social interaction between people, allowing the basis of a new and superior form of activity in children, distinguishing them from animal,' writes Vygotsky.

In the educational context, language is important for comprehension and making use of knowledge. In the last 30 years, a number of educational researchers began emphasising the role of language learning, particularly the role of talk in the classroom. However, in the South African public schooling system, the opposite is the norm.

At the beginning of each year, the public is confronted with the disappointing Grade 12 results for African pupils. This also results in many learners who use indigenous African languages and have passed, being denied access to pursue their studies in higher education institutions as the language criteria for admission to higher education work against them.

Why do the country's public schools fail to get good results that open opportunities for skills development? How then will the African National Congress's 'better life for all', be achieved?

To deal with the challenges facing public schools efforts are being made to improve teaching through viable professional development, especially in townships and rural areas. Challenges of teacher supply and demand, the failures in education that results in poor performance for South African schools, and the role of skills development in overcoming social disadvantages are some of the critical issues.

As one of the key players in education the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), the largest union in

the education sector, is involved in building the capacity of its members to become better cadres for socialist transformation through educational development.

ANALYSIS OF MATRIC RESULTS

The total number of matric candidates dropped from 537 543 in 2010 to 496 090 in 2011. This is a drop of 41 453 or 8%. This overshadows the 2, 4% increase in the overall pass-rate. One of the reasons for this decrease in learner numbers is the obsession with the overall pass-rate. This is caused by a national thinking and schools culture which discourages weaker students from writing examinations.

According to Equal Education, 923 463 learners began Grade 1 in 2000 but only 496 090 wrote matric in 2011. Therefore, nearly half of the learners dropped out of school along the way. This is against the spirit of the Freedom Charter, which states that 'the door of learning and culture shall be opened for all'.

Moreover, the total number of matric candidates that passed mathematics dropped from 124 749 in 2010 to 104 033 in 2011. This is a decline of 20 716 or 17%. The reality is that only one in five of all matriculants passed mathematics which is a crucial skill and gateway to science, engineering and many other important parts of the economy.

It is important to note that the worrying trend of inequality between township and former Model C schools is still being perpetuated in public schooling because of the lack of good professional development training for teachers, lack of science, computer and language laboratories to perform experiments and projects. Historically disadvantaged poor families cannot afford good schools.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GAP

A training-needs analysis research project commissioned by Sadtu concluded that South Africa was in the habit of changing its education policies and curriculum now and then. However, teachers were not properly trained to implement or adapt to the changes. The study argued that although the country has gone a long way to improve the education system a lot still needs to be done.

This conclusion is supported by Villegas-Reimers and Phiri who agree that the South African educational system has undergone dramatic changes in the past decade, thereby impacting heavily on the roles and work of teachers in the classroom. According to Villegas-Reimers, educational reforms and teacher professional development are related and must go hand in hand for either or both to work well. Therefore, reforms without teacher development or vice-versa are a recipe for disaster, and South Africa is learning this the hard way.

Some of the challenges are lack of sound professional development training via in-service training for teachers with more than 20 years' experience. Most township and rural school teachers were trained at former colleges of education that have since closed and therefore were never supported through a viable in-service training programme.

Teachers experienced challenges in languages of learning and crowded classes. Learners from poor families, where books were scarce and parental involvement limited, also needed special attention. Learner discipline continued to be a challenge in the absence of parents some of whom died from HIV and AIDS whilst others migrated to cities in search of employment opportunities. As a result, learners lacked role models and mentors. However, the most important challenge is the lack of support from district departments of education to schools whose enrolments have shot up. Some of these schools' results dropped because of this as shown in Figure 2 on a township school in Mpumalanga.

Figure 1: Institution of teacher training

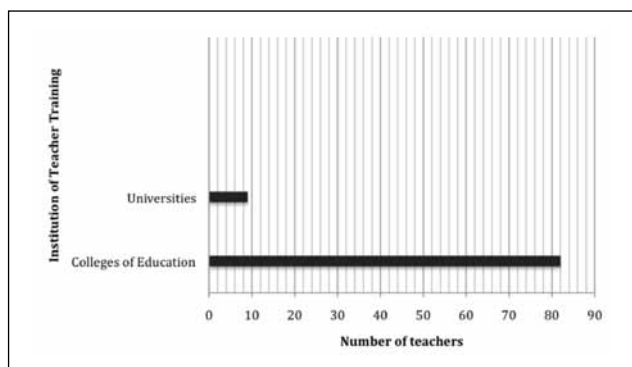
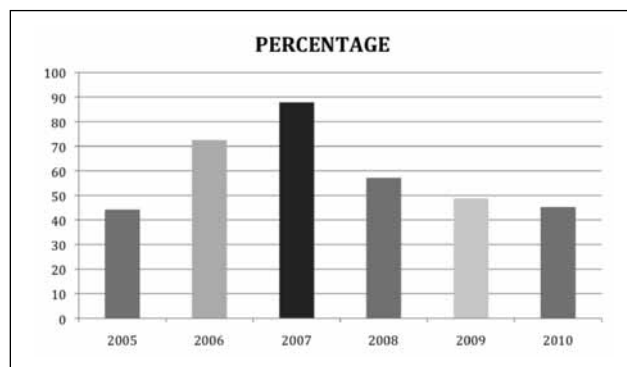


Figure 1 shows that 93% of the participants in the study were trained at colleges of education as opposed to 7% who studied at universities. This is because before democracy, most African teachers, especially from the former homelands had more access to teaching courses at teachers' training colleges as opposed to universities. However, when these colleges closed after 1994, teachers were unable to undergo professional development training nearer their homes.

Figure 2: Performance of a Secondary School in the National Schools Certificate examination from 2005 to 2010



This school used to be a jewel of excellent performance in 2006 (73%) and 2007 (88%). When the school admitted a larger number of learners from other areas, especially farming communities, it didn't cope. Class sizes increased resulting in overcrowded classrooms. Language comprehension became an issue because the majority of learners from farming communities were not good in English.

Currently, the school is performing between 48% (2009) and 45% (2010). The question that begs an answer is why learners in Afrikaans-speaking communities are allowed to write matric exams in Afrikaans, whereas for African-speaking learners, it is viewed as reducing the standard and quality of education? Doesn't language comprehension lead to better learning? Do we really have a language policy in South Africa?

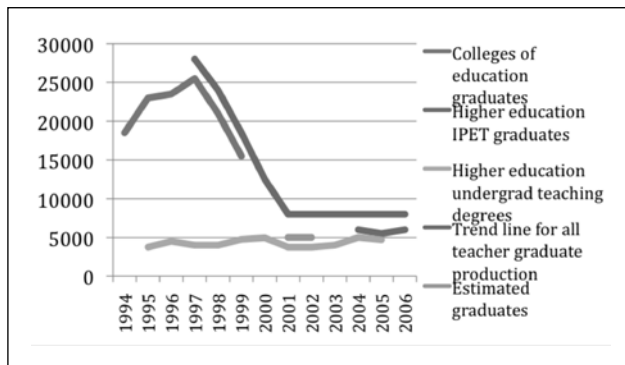
TEACHER SUPPLY AND DEMAND

One of the greatest tragedies in the South African education system is the shortage of teachers and ensuring that all learners are enrolled to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Teachers are blamed for all the wrong things that take place in public schools and, consequently, learners are discouraged from taking teaching as a profession.

The figures indicate that by 2018, 239 880 teachers will have retired. South Africa is producing less than 10 000 graduate teachers needed annually. This shortage affects skills development. Rural provinces will be worst affected as the small number of teachers who

graduate from universities migrate to other countries or to urban areas because of better working conditions. This is what Sadtu is trying to address by fighting for better working conditions as teaching is becoming a scarce skill that will impact negatively on the country's development.

Figure 3: Teacher training 1994 to 2006



Source: Patterson and Arends (2008)

Figure 3 tells us that there has been a steady decline in the training of teachers. Since colleges of education were closed in 1999, South Africa has been losing between 10 000 and 20 000 teachers annually. From 1999 to 2011, the country lost 180 000 teachers that could have offset teacher-learner ratios in both township and rural schools. What can also be deduced is that blaming and shaming school teachers will do nothing to attract capable and skilled teachers into the profession, as teaching is regarded as a thankless job.

Teachers are part of a system of education that has been marked by deep wounds of the past and they need both community and government support. Teachers should be given incentives to stay in the profession and guide learners to join them in the profession. This does not mean encouraging teachers to act irresponsibly.

However, fighting for better conditions of service is one of the major objectives of our union. This will reduce the migration of teachers to the Global North and Middle Eastern countries in search of better salaries. Teachers also want to be appreciated for their professional knowledge and call of duty. Sadtu encourages teachers to stay in the profession and to value their work.

POLICY FAILURES

Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission stated the obvious when it wrote: 'The quality of education for poor black South Africans is substandard.' The simple truth is that the quality of education for most learners is substandard, and if left unchanged 'most' will soon be 'all'. This can be attributed to ill-judged experiments

with curriculum changes and the disastrous implementation of the outcomes-based education (OBE) policy.

Respected analysts will tell you that policy does not always mean best practices. There was no proper analysis as to how OBE could be implemented in sensible and well-thought out plans that took into account South Africa's socio-economic context, languages, culture and practices. Copying policies from the Global North and imposing them on the Global South does not always yield best results, as has been discovered by the World Bank's structural adjustment policies in Africa as opposed to development that took place in South-East Asia, where development was informed by cultural traditions and practices.

South Africans must understand that teachers must be treated as professionals and affected by decisions from the top via too many policy changes. Special attention should be paid to contextual challenges, especially in townships and rural areas, before any policy changes are imposed.

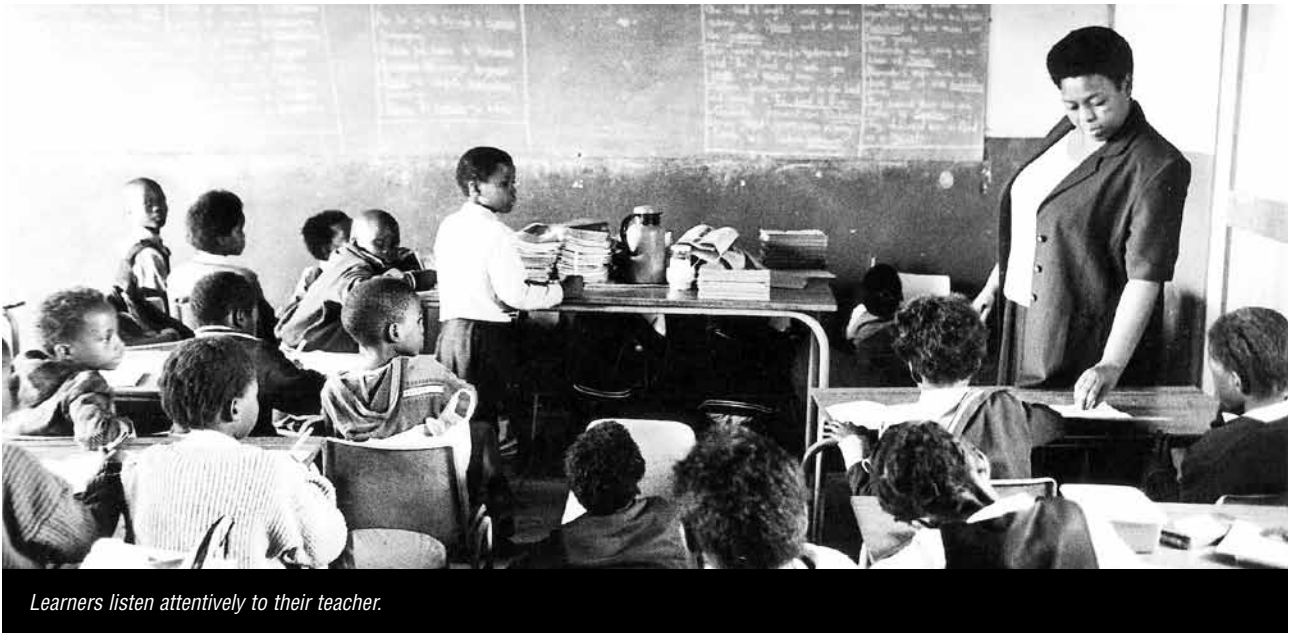
The country faces a unique challenge of an unequal school system that promotes inequality. Shalem argues that the work of teachers in well-resourced and rich schools differ from those in impoverished township and rural schools. Quality teaching and learning goes beyond teachers being in the classroom on time and teaching. Children should also be in class, on time, learning and being respectful to their teachers and to each other, and also doing their homework.

There are other external factors that have a bearing on the quality of teaching and learning. These include the socio-economic status of learners, failure of government to provide teaching materials and lack of parental involvement. Shalem also states that the common view that failure at schools is caused by teachers' inefficiency is not true as poverty and inequality affected a child's learning together with market conditions, bureaucracy of teachers' work and radical curricula.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Some countries have achieved the goal of universal primary education and others are moving closer. This builds a pipeline for young people to pursue further education and training, thus improving their chances of employment and higher earnings. South Africa should therefore encourage its young that education and development is not only in formal schooling, but in vocational and occupational fields as well.

The rat race of quantity of numbers through matric results rather than quality education through better skills should be discouraged. For example, Ghana reports less than 1% of its secondary enrolments in technical and vocational education and in



Learners listen attentively to their teacher.

Kenya, the figure is 2%. Yet both have much larger numbers engaged in traditional apprenticeships. These are largely private contracts between a master craftsperson and a parent or student whereby the master craftsperson agrees to provide training for a fixed period of time to a student in exchange of labour and small fees.

Employers in these countries are active trainers, whereas in South Africa that is not the case because the country is highly industrialised. According to Adam, the evidence shows that technical and vocational education is more effective when focused on skills closely linked to market demand. Special programmes that provide skills and other support services by both government and private companies should be encouraged to improve employment opportunities for disadvantaged youth. Apprenticeships should also be an effective means for providing skills alongside schools.

LANGUAGES

Language is part of culture and a driver of education and skills development. The use of the mother tongue will profit many disadvantaged learners. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Barasa* points out that the language used in educating African children is foreign to them, and their school books are written in foreign languages. This includes exercises, tests, and exams, all of which contribute to linguistic confusion and poor results.

Literature on bilingual education by writers including Cummins and Hauptman indicates that 'the competence to infer, deduct, apply, and to engage in problem-solving, using de-contextualised language clues, also called "academic literacy", is a skill that can be acquired in any language. This is what South

Africans should demand from their government if they are serious about improving educational and skills development prospects for learners.

NATIONAL PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Sadtu and other stakeholders are currently engaged in developing a national partnership to accelerate school and district improvement plans. This partnership aims to urgently improve learning outcomes in different ways and will build on what works in order to direct coordinated action towards clear results, as well as build accountability for government, business, communities and labour organisations.

This process is being developed in the spirit of the 2011 National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) Accord on Basic Education and Partnerships with Schools, and in line with Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga's wish to build partnerships across society to advance quality learning.

CONCLUSION

While Sadtu acknowledges that there are challenges in poor quality of education for black South Africans as a result of colonial and apartheid policies of the past, and failures of the curriculum change policies, we are of the view that these challenges should be looked at in context. Failure to acknowledge and address these challenges will deny African learners opportunities to succeed not only in education but also in life and render the notion of 'better life for all' an election slogan. ^{LB}

Kaiser Makole is a research officer with Sadtu and this article comes from a presentation he made at a Ditsela Siyakbuluma seminar.