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Access to and participation in education in South Africa: a quantitative analysis

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CHAPTER 2
SCHOOL ACCESS: THE LITERATURE

The way in which access is conceptualised must be clarified. Since many of the campaigns and targets since the early 1960s regarding access to education focused on primary education, much of the debates and discussions in the literature regarding the issue of universal access focused on achieving universal primary education (UPE). However, the terminology can apply to any level of education.

Universal access to education can be construed in several ways. It can be construed as the capacity of the system to accommodate all its school-age population, as the accessibility of school places to every individual child, as universal registration, as universal attendance in the first grade, as universal attendance through the primary cycle (Williams, 1983, p.159), or as universal attendance through and completion of, the full length of the school cycle. Universal access, however, goes beyond the quantitative expansion at schools and includes the notion of the provision of quality education. For Fredriksen (1983, p.144, p.149), even if there is huge enrolment growth, if retention rates are low, educational achievement is cast in serious doubt and UPE cannot be said to have been achieved. As Williams (1983, p.156) states, universal attendance throughout the whole of the primary cycle is what truly represents universal primary education. Many authors agree with Fredriksen and stress that the process of universalising access to education must be related to the quality of schooling offered and to achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Hawes (1983) distinguishes between 'real' and 'bogus' UPE. He says that UPE must be considered 'bogus' when a 'significant proportion' of participants in the education system have not learnt much after a number of years of school and where '…drop-out, a high percentage of truancy, or lack of progress through the grades … reach proportions where near universal attendance in first classes no longer lead to anything approaching universality two or three years later' (Hawes, 1983, p.127). Fataar (1997, p.346) states that if quantitative expansion is to avoid falling into the provision of poor quality schooling, access policy must be conceptualised within an educational development context, which should incorporate the provision of good teachers,

educationally sound learner/teacher ratios and learner/classroom ratios, and the provision of adequate learning materials.

Colclough and Lewin (1993, p.40) argue that any acceptable definition should include not only the proportion of eligible children attending school but also 'the nature and quality of schooling offered'. In this regard, they distinguish between UPE and schooling for all (SFA) and contend that SFA is a better target as it has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. They argue that the achievement of SFA is not merely a matter of securing sufficient formal attendance at school, but also of ensuring that the material and human resources available in schools are sufficient to allow minimally acceptable learning to proceed. They define UPE as 'the circumstance of having a primary gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 100 or more', while SFA is defined as 'the circumstance of having a school system in which all eligible children are enrolled in schools of at least minimally acceptable quality'. They argue that NER rather than GER is a more useful proxy for measuring SFA. UPE is 'thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of SFA' (Colclough & Lewin, 1993, p.41).

The literature on access to education in South Africa contrasts two main arguments. The first argument has tried to quantify the extent of school access and children out of school and suggests that South Africa has almost reached a full access threshold, at least at basic education level. With this having been achieved, the issue that now needs to be focused on is the quality of the education offered to learners. The other argument does not try to quantify the extent of children out of school but suggests that large groups of learners, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, are being excluded from schooling and it is important to try to investigate the causes of this exclusion.

The opinion that full access, at least to basic education, has almost been achieved has been put forward by the Department of Education (DoE). Since 1994, the DoE has focused on overcoming, at a national and provincial level, the inequities inherited from apartheid in terms of provision, resourcing, personnel and capacity. One of the consequences of this was a huge increase in access to schooling. Between 1990 and 2001 school enrolment increased by an average of almost 1% a year. Secondary

enrolment growth was particularly large, growing by an average of 2.7% a year (Department of Education, undated (a), p.24).

According to some of the most recent publications of the DoE, South Africa has maintained enrolment rates comparable to developed countries (Department of Education, undated (a); Department of Education, 2003a). In its 2002 *Education For All* status report, which spells out the progress South Africa has made in achieving the Dakar goals agreed upon at the World Education Forum in 2000 (Department of Education, undated(a), p.50), the DoE states that based on projected data, the schooling system in South Africa is characterised by near universal enrolment (although both gender and provincial differentials do occur) with a national gross enrolment ratio (which measures the participation of learners of any age in education) in 2000 of 94%; 99% in primary grades and 87% in secondary grades. Furthermore, according to the DoE's report on financing, resourcing and the cost of education in public schools, South Africa has achieved a net enrolment rate (which measures the proportion of appropriately aged children participating in education) of 97% for the compulsory education phase from grade 1 to 9, again using projected data (Department of Education, 2003a, p.13). In the further education phase, however, the DoE concedes that problems are being experienced because of falling participation rates. This decline is, according to the DoE, mainly 'linked to some grade 11 learners being discouraged from continuing with their schooling if it is suspected that they will be unable to pass the matric examinations' (Department of Education, 2003a, p.14). As this is 'contrary to the strategic objectives of government', it is receiving attention from the DoE, although, as the DoE states it is 'not obliged to ensure universal enrolment' in the further education and training phase (Department of Education, 2003a, p.14).

According to the DoE, the growth in enrolment was mainly due to African learners entering the system in large numbers (at an average rate of 1.5% a year) in the years following the 1994 democratic elections. Since then, the DoE states, 'policies, programmes and funding arrangements have been established to ensure that these gains in participation are sustained'. These include the introduction of compulsory education for children aged 7 to 15 years; the language-in-education policy, which promotes multilingualism in education with respect to South Africa's 11 official

languages and South African sign language; the inclusive education policy which aims at making provision for the elimination of barriers to education and the integration of learners with education barriers into mainstream educational institutions; the school funding norms which prioritises redress and poverty targeting in terms of the allocation of funds and the exemption of poor learners from paying school fees (Department of Education, undated(a), pp.22-23).

This level of enrolment places South Africa on a par with developed countries in North America and Europe, where in 2001 the average NER was 96.3% (Unesco, 2004, pp.292-293) and indicates that South African basic education has reached a full access threshold. South Africa's NER of 97% exceeds what commentators, writing in the 1980s and early 1990s, believed was realistically achievable, especially for a developing country. Hawes (1983, p.132) argues that attendance at school by at least 90% of the population is a 'relatively realistic' criteria for attaining universal primary education. Colclough and Lewin (1993, pp.18-19) feel that an NER of 92%, which was the average NER for developed countries in the early 1990s, is perhaps the maximum feasible target any country could achieve. Williams (1983, pp.160-161) maintains that the goal of 100% attendance is almost impossible to achieve as enrolling 'the last 10% will necessarily include a high proportion of children from very "marginal" groups', including, for example children with severe learning disabilities, migrants, children from remote settlements and farms, and children from extremely poor households. The difficulties of providing education for this last 10% are likely to be considerably greater than those associated with the earlier expansion of the system. It could also involve unit costs above the national average. Education provision for this 'marginal' group could involve the provision of expensive special schools, smaller schools with low learner-teacher ratios, boarding schools, and the provision of transportation. The DoE agrees that it is facing a challenge in meeting its objective of 100% coverage of the compulsory school-aged, as a large proportion of the 3% of compulsory school-aged children who its calculations show should be in school (but who are not), are out of school as a result of a disability (Department of Education, 2003a, p.13).

Quantitative analyses undertaken by independent consultants, also using projected data, agree with the DoE that participation in education is extensive (Simkins, 2002;

Perry & Arends, 2004). However, Perry and Arends (2004) do not agree that access is as extensive as the government's figures indicate. Their analysis, using 1997 enrolment data and projected 1996 population data, indicates that NER at primary level was 92% and at secondary level, 57%. In addition they found that 3% of children aged 7 to 13 years and 23% of children aged 14 to 18 years were out of school (Perry & Arends, 2004, p.310)

While the Department argues that most out-of-school youth are out of school as a result of a disability, some non-governmental organisations and academics have argued that various economic and social barriers are keeping children out-of school or making it difficult for them to keep pace with basic schooling. Much of the evidence for this has come from interviews and documented case studies which have tried to establish the causes of non-participation in education and no attempt has been made to quantify the extent of the out-of-school problem. In this category two large research projects have been carried out; one in an urban area, and one in farm and rural areas.

The first study was carried out by the Vuk'uyithathe Research Consortium in 1998 in informal settlements and hostel complexes surrounding Johannesburg and which sought to understand the life stories of out-of-school children (children who had dropped out of or had never attended schools) and out-of-age, primary-school learners. The aim of the research was to establish the '"causes" underlying each child's pathway away from consistent participation in basic education' (Porteus, 2003).

The study comprised 93 out-of-school children and 91 out-of-age children aged between 7 and 15 years (Porteus, Clacherty & Mdiya, 2000). The study found that out-of-school children fell into two groups: those who had never been to school, who comprised 19% of the sample, and those who had been in school but had dropped out, who comprised 81% of the sample. The majority of the out-of-school children (61%) were out of school for their first year, 16% were out for their second year and 21% had been out for more than 2 years (Porteus *et al*., 2000, p.24). Out-of-age learners faced a combination of challenges. Only a small proportion of out-of-age learners (6%) were out of age as a result of repeating grades alone. About one third of the sample (34%) had never repeated a grade, but were out of age due to a combination of starting school late and dropping out of school for a period of time. The largest group

of out-of-age learners were out of age due to a combination of starting school late, dropping out for a period of time and repetition (Porteus *et al.,* 2000, p.24). The majority of out-of-age learners (61%) started school late after the age of 7 years, while nearly half (47.5%) had dropped out of school for a time during their school careers (Porteus, 2002, p.30).

The Vuk'uyithathe study identified six primary causes affecting participation in basic education. These were (Porteus, 2003):

- poverty – a combination of inability to afford the costs of going to school, inability to ask for help from other family and community members and feeling unable to overcome material obstacles
- family – household structure, support and stability that could be affected by such stresses as illness, death, tension and violence
- mobility – high residential mobility due to unstable access to housing result in children moving during the school year and related to the lack of documentation required for school re-entry
- school – barriers include school fee and uniform policies, lack of space in local schools, language policies, corporal punishment and humiliation
- individual – problems identified by the children and specific to themselves such as barriers (hearing, seeing, cognitive), health, pregnancy or 'lack of interest'
- community violence – the communities studied suffered extreme political violence in the early 1990s and its destabilising effects on schooling were identified by over-age learners.

Similarly, the participation of farm and rural children in schools was also affected. The second large research project was carried out by researchers from Human Rights Watch who visited farm schools in Mpumalanga, Free State and Limpopo in 2003 and documented cases where 'accessibility and availability of the right to education' was being seriously hampered (Human Rights Watch, 2004, p.4).

Human Rights Watch (2004) identified poverty, lack of scholar transport and long distances to school, insecure labour and land tenure of parents, school fees, inadequate infrastructure and service provision, and limited secondary school options as factors affecting farm school children's access to and participation in education. Human Rights Watch also found that education could be affected by deliberate actions on the part of farmers who, for various reasons (sale of the farm, a change in the nature of the business operations, a labour dispute, a dispute between the land owner and the provincial education department) would block access to the school or deliberately close down the school (Human Rights Watch, 2004, pp.8-13). Related to the issue of poverty, they also found that despite child labour being illegal, work sometimes provided an attractive option for children (Human Rights Watch, 2004, p.37).

Both reports lay the responsibility for children not attending school clearly with the government. Porteus (2003, p.2) argues that the causes identified for creating out-of-school or over-age learners could rather be seen as areas where the school system is currently not catering well to all South African children's socio-economic situations or individual differences. 'For example', she says (Porteus, 2003, p.2) 'rather than poverty being the primary reason why children are out of school, it could be argued that the school system is failing to meet the needs of children facing the challenges associated with deep poverty'. Human Rights Watch (2004, p.1) feels that the South African government has 'failed to protect the rights to a primary education for children living on … farms by neither ensuring their access to farm schools nor maintaining the adequacy of learning conditions at these schools'.

Based on the literature reviewed, it is hypothesised that universal access to education in South Africa is not as close to being achieved as the DoE's estimations have led it to believe it is. The DoE's analysis has been based on projected data. Another analysis by independent researchers, also based on projected data, has indicated a less favourable access rate. Furthermore, case-study research undertaken by researchers and non-governmental organisations has found that children's access to education is still being affected by social and economic factors.

By using the latest available data rather than projected data, this study attempts to assess the current extent to which access to education has been achieved in South Africa.