

Testing, testing...

First national assessment of Grade 9 pupils shows much work lies ahead

The first systematic assessment and evaluation of the senior phase of the education system (Grade 9 learners) suggests that simply ensuring that schools have access to teaching and learning resources as proposed in the Department of Basic Education's Action Plan to 2014 will not be enough, according to **GEORGE FRAMPONG** and **CHARLOTTE MOTHA**.

The 1996 National Education Policy Act 27 imposes a Constitutional obligation on the Department of Education to conduct regular evaluation and assessment of the quality of educational provision in South Africa. Further, the Assessment Policy of 1998 provides for the conducting of systemic evaluation at the end of each schooling phase, namely grades 3, 6 and 9, which are the key stages of schooling.

Over the past decade, the department has carried out systemic assessment and evaluation for grades 3 and 6 (Grade 3 in 2001 and Grade 6 in 2005) but not Grade 9, largely because of the administration of the Common Task Assessment (CTA) that allows schools to assess their Grade 9 learners annually.

The National Assessment of Learner Achievement (NALA), carried out by the HSRC in 2009, was the first systemic survey of the senior phase of the education system.

Following the grades 3 and 6 systemic surveys in 2001 and 2005 respectively, NALA is expected to identify the major strengths and weakness in the South African education system at senior phase level.

The focus is on monitoring learner achievement in three subject areas: language, mathematics, and natural sciences, as well as the context of teaching and learning.

Unlike the traditional large-scale assessment exercises that wield a hammer and see the world of education as full of nails, NALA is based on the assumption that assessment, broadly conceived, can play a prominent role in identifying strategies to shape discussions in the provision of quality education for all.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our analysis attempts to address the fol-

lowing research questions:

What is the achievement level of Grade 9 learners? To what extent do Grade 9 learners' background characteristics and their access to quality schools play a role in their success or failure to achieve the expected standard?

Does access to high-quality schools ensure success of learners from disadvantaged homes? What would it take to achieve the 2014 target?

FINDINGS

Our analysis indicates that the achievement levels of a large number of Grade 9 learners across the nine provinces are quite poor. In Language, the mean score was 34% (at 'elementary' performance level) and 25% (at 'not achieved' performance level) in mathematics and science. About 46% of learners performed at the 'not achieved' level in Language, while over 70% of learners did not achieve the minimum expected standard ('elementary' performance level of 30%) in mathematics and science, as shown in Table 1.

Learners attending schools in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Northern Cape were more successful than learners from other provinces. In Language, the average learner from these three provinces performed at the 'moderate' level (about 40%) compared to 'not achieved' performance for learners from Lim-

popo and the 'elementary' performance level for learners from Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, and North West. In mathematics, the average learner in all the provinces performed at 'not achieved' level and over 60% of learners in all the provinces did not meet the minimum performance standard. About 80% of learners from the Eastern Cape, North West and KwaZulu-Natal failed to meet the minimum performance standard. The results for science are quite similar to those of mathematics.

Open-ended questions where learners were often expected to provide short or extended responses were particularly difficult for most learners.

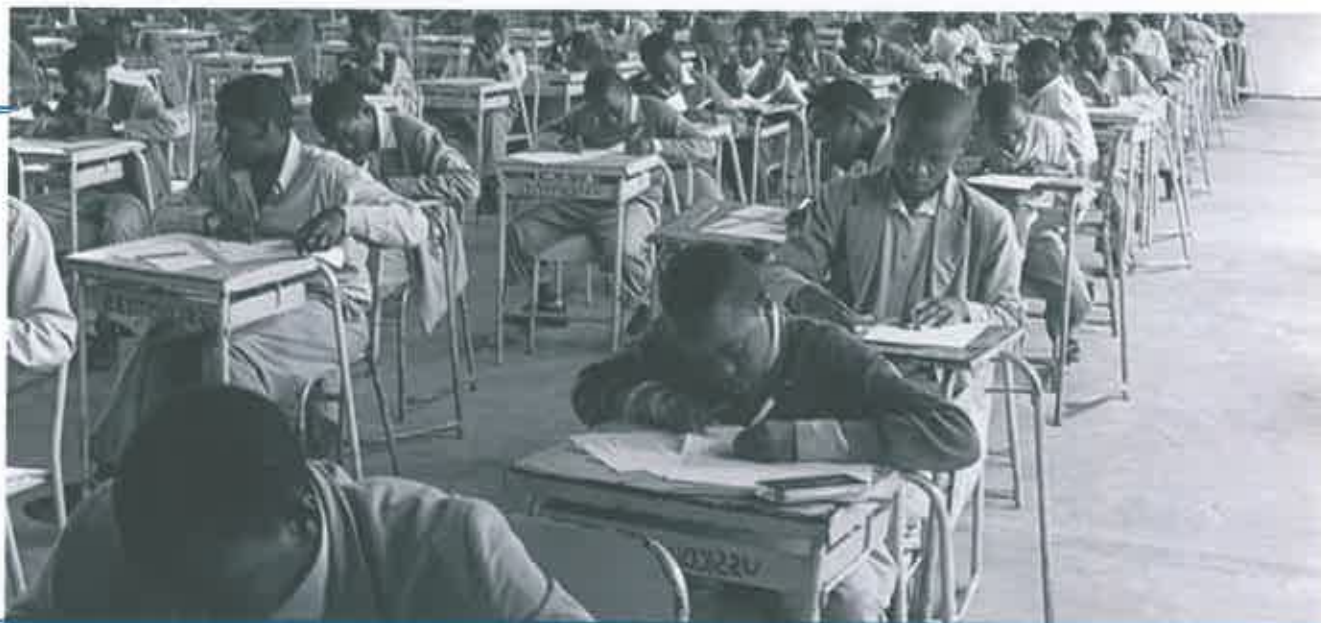
In Language, most learners found writing more difficult than the other learning outcomes. In mathematics and science, the performance of an average learner was at the 'not achieved' level in all the learning outcomes.

Gender did not seem to make a difference in learner achievement levels as both male and female learners performed at elementary level in Language and 'not achieved' level in mathematics and science.

Poverty plays a significant role in learners' success in learning. In general, learners who attend the least poor schools (quintile 5 schools), decided by the quintile system which determines the amount of funding for individual schools, are more successful in learning than those who attend the poorest schools (quintile 1 schools). Learners from the poorest homes are also less successful in learning than those from the least poor homes.

Only a small proportion of learners from the poorest homes attend the least poor schools. The few learners from disadvantaged homes who are privileged to have access to the best

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schools are often not very successful. However, there are a few learners from poor homes who attend poor schools who are successful, a trend we need to study to develop an understanding of how these learners succeed in learning under these conditions.

CHALLENGES

These findings suggest the need to revisit the South African 'social transformation' agenda, which has always been about redress of the past educational imbalances and the provision of equal educational opportunities for all sections of the population.

The Department of Basic Education's Action Plan to 2014 supports the argument that an education system is most effective when all learners – including the poor and vulnerable – can attribute their success in learning to the system.

Our analysis clearly demonstrates that the South African education system is not working very well for the poor and vulnerable, most of whom attend the poorest schools, and the

few who attend the best schools are often not successful.

These findings highlight the magnitude of the challenge ahead of the Action Plan to 2014 to provide quality education for all children. Simply ensuring that schools have access to teaching and learning resources as proposed in the Action Plan will not be enough; it would require the mobilisation of all education stakeholders, probably to the scale of the preparations for the 2010 World Cup. We need to galvanise support for our learners, both at home and at school, in order for them to work very hard and develop a hunger for success.

We hope that such an approach would help South Africa realise its vision of a schooling system where all students, irrespective of their background, have the opportunity to succeed.

To achieve this vision, the South African education system would need to function in such a way that students' successes do not depend on their background. That is, the school processes and policies in South Africa need to

be inclusive, supporting the learning of all students, so that learner achievement levels do not depend on the province in which schools are located or on the children's backgrounds. And, most importantly, in such a scenario, we should expect our best schools to compensate for socioeconomic disadvantages to minimise the achievement gap associated with poverty. This is one of the scenarios that would guarantee that continuous improvement in access to the quality of educational provision leads to successful learning outcomes for all learners.

As previously noted, the phenomenon of the few poor learners in poor schools who are more successful than their counterparts in better schools calls for more research to better understand the schooling conditions that provide opportunities for these learners to succeed. ◀◀

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TABLE 1: Percentage of learners at the different performance levels in the three learning areas

Performance level/ rating code	Description of rating	Marks in %	Percentage of learner population		
			Language	Mathematics	Science
7	Outstanding performance	80-100	1,2	0,4	0,1
6	Meritorious performance	70-79	2,9	1,1	0,4
5	Substantial performance	60-60	5,8	1,4	1,2
4	Adequate performance	50-59	10,9	2,4	2,6
3	Moderate performance	40-49	14,3	5,1	6,8
2	Elementary performance	30-39	18,7	14,7	16,5
1	Not achieved	0-29	46,2	75	72,5



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**INVESTING
IN OUR
CHILDREN'S
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**Clashing systems
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