

Policy brief

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SA learners perform poorly relative to local and regional standards

Average literacy and numeracy rates don't tell the full story

Despite positive trends in completion rates and Grade R enrolment, staggering numbers of South African learners continue to lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Research based on the *SACMEQ III* Grade 6 reading, maths and health survey (2007) shows that South African learners perform poorly, both in terms of their own curricular standards, and when compared to regional benchmarks.

The survey tested the literacy and numeracy skills of learners in 14 African countries. Recent research by Nicholas Spaul at Stellenbosch University analysed and compared test results for four of them: South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique.

Sub-standard regional performance

South African learners were outperformed in both reading and mathematics by their counterparts in Botswana, and in reading by their Namibian peers.

At 27%, South Africa has the highest rate of functional illiteracy¹ amongst these four countries. This is surprising, given that South African learners hold some important advantages over their regional peers:

- According to the *Education for All* report (2011), South Africa's current expenditure on primary education per pupil in 2007 was \$1225, compared to \$1228 in Botswana, \$668 in Namibia, and \$79 in Mozambique.
- Of the four countries included in the study, South African students had the most exposure to preschool education.
- South Africa has a higher proportion of children receiving free school meals than Namibia and Mozambique.

Despite these favourable numbers, South African learners underperform. This is illustrated by the alarmingly high levels of functional innumeracy and functional illiteracy in the table below. In addition, South Africa has the highest rate of self-reported teacher absenteeism amongst the four countries - at an average 19 days a year - which amounts to 10% of the total number of days in the South African school year.

¹ Observing only the data for Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, the survey covered 22,713 Grade 6 students, 3,249 teachers, and 1,002 schools. In South Africa alone the survey covered 9071 Grade 6 students, 1163 teachers and 392 schools.

² By this definition, a functionally illiterate learner cannot read a short and simple text and extract meaning, while a functionally innumeracy learner cannot translate graphical information into fractions or interpret everyday units of measurement.

At a glance

NATIONALLY

- 27% of all Grade 6 learners functionally illiterate¹, and 40% functionally innumeracy
- 41% of poorest 20% of learners functionally illiterate, 56% functionally innumeracy
- Inequalities persist, with the richest 20% of learners significantly outperforming the poorest 80%

REGIONALLY

- Higher levels of functional illiteracy than Mozambique, Botswana and Namibia
- Higher proportion of Mozambican learners have access to their own textbooks than learners in South Africa
- Average SA teacher is absent at least 19 days a year
- 67% of schools regularly have to deal with unjustified teacher absence

Table 1: South African numbers in a regional context

	Self-reported teacher absenteeism	Proportion of Grade 6 learners functionally illiterate	Proportion of Grade 6 learners functionally innumerate	Proportion of Gr 6 learners with own reading textbook	Proportion of Gr 6 learners with own mathematics textbook	Proportion of Grade 6 learners attending at least one year of preschool
Botswana	10.6 days	10.62%	22.48%	63%	62%	36%
Mozambique	6.4 days	21.51%	32.73%	53%	52%	21%
Namibia	9.4 days	13.63%	47.69%	32%	32%	70%
South Africa	19.4 days	27.26%	40.17%	45%	36%	69%

Furthermore, the statistics beg the question: how is it possible that more Mozambican Grade 6 learners have their own reading and mathematics textbooks than South African children, when South Africa spends fifteen times as much per child compared to Mozambique?

A tale of two systems

A pervasive legacy of inequality remains in the education system, defined not by oppressive laws and skin colour, but rather by a framework of socio-economic privilege and exclusion.

Poor learners, who make up the majority of the South African school population, attend dysfunctional schools and face dire labour market prospects. This is in stark contrast to their wealthier counterparts, who make up roughly 25% of the school population; they attend well-functioning schools where ability, motivation, and hard work are the principal determinants of success or failure.

The *SACMEQ III* test results bear testimony to the effects of this inequality. The wealthiest 20% of South African learners significantly outperform the poorest 80% in both reading and maths; and there are five times as many functionally illiterate learners amongst the poorest 20% as there are in the richest 20%

Overall, the differences are so significant that South Africa effectively has two distinct education systems, one rich and relatively effective, and the other poor and tragically under-performing.

Useful numbers and effective policy

While not all the reasons underlying this poor and unequal performance are known, there are a variety of measures that are likely to decrease the inefficiencies of the system and improve learner outcomes. These include decreasing teacher absenteeism, increasing the frequency of standardised testing, and ensuring that all learners have access to basic educational resources, such as textbooks. In addition, policymakers need to recognise the bimodal nature of South Africa's education system. The official habit of measuring performance by looking at national averages is fundamentally flawed, as the over-performance of the top 25% masks severe under-performance in the bottom 75%.

The South African government and external stakeholders should report learner performance by wealth quartile or quintile, and not only by province. This will enable a more honest evaluation of educational performance and - over time - to the formulation of more effective policies aimed directly at underperforming socio-economic groups.

Contact Details

The full research report can be found on the SACMEQ website at: http://www.sacmeq.org/downloads/Working%20Papers/08_Comparison_Final_18Oct2011.pdf

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