

13. EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: OUR CONTEXT

Education in South Africa is, in many respects, in crisis. Schools are affected by social problems and many have poorly skilled teachers and inadequate facilities. The Catholic education sector cannot remain aloof from these realities. We have to promote a thirst for the Common Good and a spirit of sharing that goes beyond individualism.



Education in South Africa is, in many respects, in crisis. Schools cannot escape from social problems, and are affected along with the rest of society by poverty, unemployment, unmet democratic expectations, HIV and AIDS, child-headed households, crime, refugees from other countries, land distribution and ownership, poor service delivery, inadequate housing (millions of South Africans live in shacks in informal settlements), inadequate provision of and access to health care, and violence against women and children.

Some schools do not have decent classrooms, toilets, electricity or telephones, much less libraries, laboratories and sportsfields. The new curriculum requires levels of skill that exist only among the better teachers, as well as access to resources that are not often easily available. Basic reading scores, and mathematics and science literacy, in South Africa are consistently amongst the world's worst. 2005 scores showed that only 20% of Grade 6 children could do maths at the appropriate grade levels (average score 27%) and only 40% in the language of instruction (average score 38%). 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.



No-hoppers trapped in poverty

For 60 to 80% of children in South Africa, especially the poor and rural, education is contributing to their marginalisation and inequity rather than their social advancement. Their education actually condemns them to a second economy of unemployment and survival. They are “no-hoppers” trapped in the sinkhole of poverty.

Surveys talk about an overwhelming sense of sadness amongst the young unemployed. Where students should expect opportunity and promise, they find their hopes and dreams crumbling before their eyes. Because life is so difficult, why should they bother about anything when they don't see any future or way out of the misery in which they live?

There are children who, in Grade 8, cannot divide or multiply or write a sentence. There are children who come to school hungry or traumatised because of what they have to deal with at home. The time which teachers have to spend simply caring for and accompanying pain-filled children, in trying to find out what exactly is behind their pain, places great strain on teachers' own sense of well-being and wholesomeness.

The schools that operate in these circumstances are truly heroic. They survive through sheer will and the force of good and committed teachers.

The Common Good

When advocating the promotion of the human person, the social teaching of the Church emphasises the *Common Good*. To be faithful to the gospel Catholic schools have to be as concerned about the welfare of other schools as they are about their own. We love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We all move forward together.

But even more is involved. *The Primacy of the Poor* (also known as The Preferential Option for the Poor) is that part of the Church's social teaching that calls for the poor to be not just included, but at the *centre* of growth and development.

At the Second National Catholic Schools Congress in 2004, Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, in a keynote address, said

The Catholic education sector in this country cannot conceive of itself as operating in an ideal or other-worldly context; in other words, it cannot operate in any other way except in the current real context of people's living situation which inevitably will shape the way the educational project has to be visualised, and indeed modified within an overall vision as we encounter new circumstances and needs.



We have to inspire new hope in the many people who have become disillusioned, by listening to the needs of the poor and the marginalized and making their cause our priority, and by promoting a thirst for the Common Good and a spirit of sharing that goes beyond individualism.



The report of the National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) of October 2008 stated that overcrowding has been reduced, electricity installed and the general state of the country's public schools has improved. The report indicates that about 74 percent of the 28 742 public schools are in a good condition.

The report shows substantial progress since 1994:

- overcrowded schools decreased by 51 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2006;
- schools without running water have been reduced from 8 823 in 1996 to 3 152 in 2006;
- schools with electricity increased from 11 174 in 1996 to 20 713 in 2006 (there are still 4 297 without electricity)
- schools with no on-site toilets have been reduced from 3 265 in 1996 to 1 532 in 2006.

However, there are substantial backlogs remaining in the provision of facilities and the standard of these. In some cases facilities have been degraded due to vandalism, neglect and inadequate maintenance.

- In the Eastern Cape 40 percent of schools were assessed as being in a poor condition, with some of the pressing needs being the provision of water and sanitation.

- Only seven percent of schools have adequate libraries. As much as 68 percent of schools had no computers. Only 2 percent of schools are equipped for disabled learners.
- Teachers in township schools, on average, spend 3 ½ hours a day teaching, in contrast to their suburban counterparts who spend 6 hours teaching.
- The report also shows that 42% of SA's 26 000 public schools are overcrowded, there are 3 152 schools without water, 1 532 without toilets, 79% have no libraries, 68% no computers for learning and teaching and 60% have no laboratories.

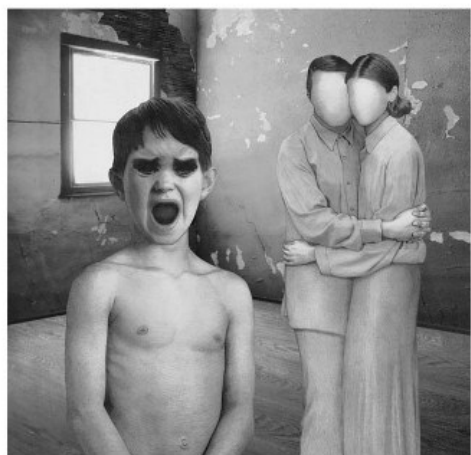
Key challenges facing education in the world

Literacy and Numeracy levels

Most countries in the world are experiencing difficulties in teaching basic reading and mathematics skills. Partly this is due to changes in curriculum which in itself has been a response to a need to provide a modern system of education.

Schooling has shifted from a teaching focus, to one where teachers are now facilitators of learning. While this approach to education has merit and has shown some success with secondary education, there has been a decrease in performance in primary education.

The issue is compounded in developing countries, where the commitment of resources to secondary schools has been prioritised, to the detriment of foundation and primary learning.



Parenting

The education system is reliant on the cognitive preparedness of learners when they start school. This requires that parents are able to provide the foundations for learning prior to schooling and parents must be able to sustain these foundations for the duration of the child's schooling.

Globally, poor parenting has become an issue. Many families are no longer able to parent successfully and there has been an increase in single-parent families. Young parents in particular require a great deal of assistance. In South Africa, parenting requires major state interventions to overcome the socio-economic difficulties that face the majority of learners. Almost two thirds of all learners live under the breadline which puts further strain on the possibility of living in a functional home.

Dumbing down of education levels

The gap between early tertiary studies and the end of schooling is increasing. Many schooling systems have become deficient in preparing learners for tertiary education. First-year failure rates at universities are high. In the United Kingdom, some universities are introducing entry examinations as the A-level examination is considered too weak.

Attitudes to youngsters

While there is an increase in the rhetoric and discourse of children's rights, society's attitude towards children is becoming tougher. In South Africa, it has been reported by Correctional Services that over 11 000 children are arrested every month.

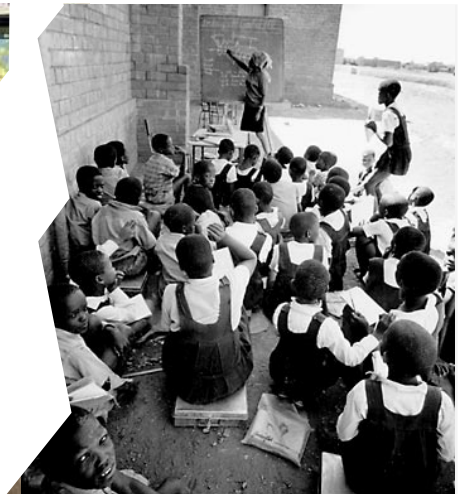
The toughening-up of attitudes towards children must be viewed in the context that, for the greater part of the last decade, society has been viewed as "too soft" towards children.

Truancy

Both teachers and learners are playing truant. This is usually a sign that the schooling environment is unsafe or that the school is failing to meet the aspirations of its community. With the large numbers of dysfunctional schools in the world, learner and teacher truancy is on the rise.

The technological divide

Globally there is a divide between developed and developing countries in terms of access to technology. While electronic white boards are standard for most countries, the lack of capacity and ability to use technology in the developing world places many of the world's children at a disadvantage.



The technological divide affects schooling quality in South Africa. The majority of learners do not have access to interactive whiteboards and for most access to the internet as a learning tool is non-existent.

A success story: FROM ZERO TO HEROES FOR MATHS

When Sandberg Primêr registered a disappointing zero percent numeracy rate for a fourth consecutive year in the Western Cape education department's evaluation of literacy and numeracy levels, principal William Swartbooi knew he had to take action. That was in 2003. By 2007 the hard work started to pay off when an evaluation of the literacy and numeracy levels of grade six learners showed that the farm school, just outside Clanwilliam on the West Coast, had a 51% improvement in its numeracy rate.

The school is a no-fee school and is affected by high levels of poverty. It is also a multigrade school with only two educators teaching 38 learners spread across grades one to six. Language is another challenge faced by the teachers at the school, which services a group of children that move around a lot because many of their parents are farm workers who have piece jobs.

Swartbooi attributes the school's success to "commitment from the learners and making sure they understand the basics of mathematics. We try to make sure that learners understand the principles of mathematics by drilling the basics like multiplication and addition into them," he says. "We also found that setting targets for each grade led to a massive improvement."

The school partnered with other local schools that had also improved their results, allowing them to swap notes and ideas. The school also used the Edupeg system, which has interchangeable faceplates and a series of workbooks. Says Swartbooi: "This educational toy has been a great success with the learners as it is a break from the routine of answering sums in their books. It's lots of fun for them and they really enjoy it."

For a few minutes of each maths lesson learners do mental maths, which encourages learners to work out the sums in a limited time without writing down their calculations on paper.

Swartbooi is confident that the school will continue to improve.

[The Teacher, 26 February 2009]

This pamphlet is part of a series on aspects of Catholic education for teachers, parents and board members, produced by the Ethos Committee of the Catholic Schools Board of the Archdioceses of Pretoria and Johannesburg



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