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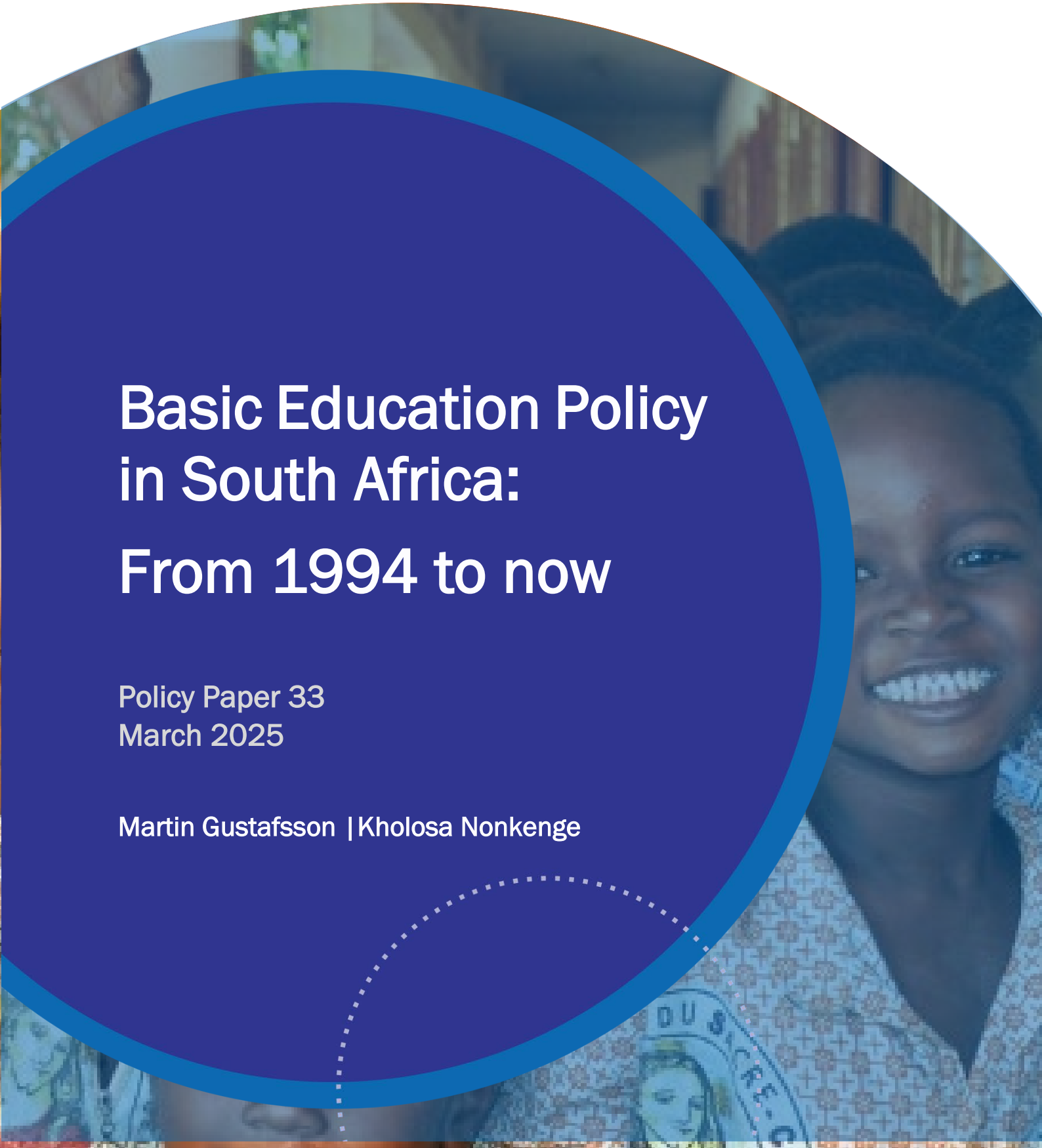

Basic Education Policy in South Africa: From 1994 to now

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About the ERSA 1994 to Now Policy Paper Series

ERSA Policy Papers typically address current issues pertinent to the national economic policy discourse. These papers aim to succinctly summarise a policy challenge and discuss its relevance, significance, and potential pathways forward for South African policymakers and researchers. They are primarily narrative-driven, drawing on existing research and descriptive analysis. We hope that, through this, ERSA can contribute to constructive and informed economic policy debate.

This paper is one of nine papers prepared for the 1994 to Now Policy Paper Series, prepared for the SALDRU, South Africa at 30 Years of Democracy Conference scheduled for 2-4 April 2025. The papers will be (were) presented at the conference with the aim of contributing to discussions and debates and fostering informed and constructive economic dialogue.

Fouché Venter

Executive Director

Basic education policy: From 1994 to now

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Abstract

The paper reviews the history of democratic South Africa's education policies, with a focus on learning in the early grades. Foundational learning is now a high educational priority, in South Africa and beyond, to a far greater degree than three decades ago. Following intensive policy reforms to dismantle apartheid education, in 2005 new results from an international assessment indicating relatively poor learning at the primary level prompted the 2007 launch of the Foundations for Learning (FFL) initiative. While at face value, the FFL strategy was appropriate and led to an internationally recognised national workbooks programme, it was compromised by two problems common in South Africa: weak design of several intervention tools, in part due to an insufficient appreciation of South Africa's linguistic complexities; and a lack of complementarity between the initiative's various elements. Among risks arising from this was a weakening of the state's position in ongoing bargaining with teacher unions. Yet learning outcomes at the primary level improved according to international assessments, suggesting that even a flawed package of interventions can have an impact. The fidelity and cohesion of policies and tools aimed at improving learning outcomes should be strengthened in the coming years to sustain the trajectory of progress. In doing this, the country should learn not just from practices in educationally successful developing countries, but also from pioneering work in pockets of the South African system.

Keywords: South Africa, basic education policy, schools, learning outcomes, early grade learning

JEL classification: D17, H11, I28

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa's basic education policy has undergone significant transformation, focusing on addressing historical disparities and improving learning outcomes. Education is a crucial pillar of national development, and effective policies are necessary to ensure equitable access to quality learning opportunities. The legacy of apartheid-era segregation left profound imbalances in resource allocation, curriculum design, and teacher distribution, necessitating urgent reforms. Over the past three decades, the South African government has implemented various policies aimed at enhancing foundational learning, improving assessment mechanisms, and aligning the education system with socioeconomic needs.

This policy paper provides an in-depth overview of the evolution of South Africa's basic education policies, particularly emphasising foundational learning. It reviews the key milestones, challenges, and policy shifts across three historical periods: (1) 1994 to 2004, which focused on dismantling apartheid-era inequalities; (2) 2005 to 2014, when foundational learning became an important policy priority; and (3) 2015 to 2024, which saw renewed interest in secondary school competencies. The paper then discusses the risks and opportunities within the Government of National Unity (GNU) before concluding with recommendations for future policy directions. The analysis aims to offer insights into what has worked, what has not, and how the current administration can build on past lessons to shape a more effective and inclusive education system.

Three historical periods

1994 to 2004: Replacing the Apartheid Architecture

The first decade of democratic South Africa's education policy centred on eliminating structural inequalities in school resourcing and governance. Key policies focused on equalising per-learner spending and integrating previously segregated education departments into a unified system. While financial disparities were reduced, significant inequalities remained due to school fee policies that allowed wealthier schools to maintain more favourable resourcing levels.

The period also saw the introduction of a national curriculum, which underwent significant revisions due to criticisms of its impractical and overly theoretical nature. Additionally, efforts to bring about standardised assessments of learning outcomes below grade 12 were minimal, with the exception of the Western Cape's systemic testing initiative. Although progress was made in unifying the education system, the lack of a structured approach to measuring and improving learning outcomes in the early grades limited the effectiveness of reforms.

2005 to 2014: An Emphasis on Foundational Learning

A significant policy shift occurred in the mid-2000s when international assessments revealed the poor state of foundational learning in South Africa. The introduction of the Foundations for Learning (FFL) campaign in 2008 aimed to address this issue through standardised lesson plans, national workbooks, and the introduction of the Annual National Assessments (ANA).

Despite its positive intentions, FFL faced several implementation challenges. The design of intervention tools lacked alignment, particularly regarding language instruction. Additionally, the ANA program, though instrumental in raising awareness of learning deficiencies, suffered from design flaws that led to its eventual

suspension in 2015 following resistance from teacher unions. Nevertheless, the period saw notable improvements in early-grade learning outcomes, suggesting that even imperfect policies can yield progress.

2015 to 2024: Renewed Interest in Secondary-Level Competencies

Following the suspension of ANA in 2015, the government focussed increasingly on secondary education and workforce preparedness. This included initiatives aimed at vocational training within schools and the introduction of a Grade 9 national certificate aimed in part at facilitating movement into technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. While these policies sought to improve post-school transition, they often overlooked the root cause of poor secondary performance—weak foundational learning.

The period also saw the integration of Early Childhood Development (ECD) into the Department of Basic Education, reflecting growing recognition of the importance of early learning. However, fiscal constraints and policy misalignment have hindered the effective implementation of new initiatives. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted learning, exacerbating existing challenges. Nevertheless, renewed efforts in 2023, including the establishment of the 2030 Reading Panel, signalled a shift back toward prioritising foundational skills.

Risks and opportunities in the context of the GNU

The formation of the GNU introduces significant risks and opportunities for education reform. The paper pays special attention to how the national education authority could lead the sector in better ways. Two over-arching needs stand out. One is the need to professionalise the way policies, educational tools and information systems are designed and implemented. While there have been areas of success, such as the national workbooks initiative, when it comes to teacher training and learner assessment, South Africa has in the past performed relatively poorly. There are valuable lessons to be learnt, not just from experiences elsewhere, but also from a few promising provincial initiatives.

Secondly, silo effects should be combatted, in part through a clearer and holistic 'theory of change' that encompasses the various parts of the system. A critical gap in the schooling sector currently is the absence in most provinces of comparable measures of learning per primary school. This weakens the targeting of support and a sense of school accountability for learning. Addressing this gap requires the involvement of a range of experts, not just in the area of assessments, but also in school governance and information systems.

Any theory of change needs to be clear about the interconnected roles of the different levels of the education system. New priorities aimed at improving learning outcomes include a strong emphasis on pre-schooling and bringing about more mother-tongue instruction at the upper primary level. These priorities have resourcing implications and need to be carefully balanced with the need to strengthen learning in the lower primary level. Further questions include whether the resourcing of the primary level as a whole, relative to the secondary level, should be more favourable and whether South Africa's school funding regime should be made more pro-poor. Currently, too little information on issues such as per learner spending is produced by the national authorities to ensure that conversations are grounded in solid evidence.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, South Africa's basic education policies have evolved through distinct phases, each responding to emerging challenges. While notable progress has been made, persistent design and implementation flaws have limited the effectiveness of many initiatives. There is an urgent need for a more integrated and evidence-based approach to policymaking that prioritises foundational learning while balancing the needs of secondary and vocational education.

A key lesson from past experiences is that policy success depends not only on intent but also on execution. **Strengthening assessment mechanisms, aligning intervention tools, and fostering collaboration across different stakeholders** will be crucial to sustaining progress. Additionally, a more equitable distribution of resources, particularly in historically disadvantaged areas, is essential to closing the learning gap and ensuring that all learners receive quality education.

Moving forward, a stronger focus on **policy cohesion, data-driven decision-making, and capacity building within the education sector** will be essential to sustaining improvements in learning outcomes. The GNU has a unique opportunity to drive meaningful reform, ensuring that foundational learning remains at the heart of the education agenda. By leveraging past successes and addressing systemic weaknesses, South Africa can build an education system that not only meets current demands but also equips future generations with the skills necessary for national development and economic growth.

1. Introduction

This paper evaluates attempts to improve South Africa's basic education in the country's democratic era, with a view to informing today's policymakers about future risks and opportunities, and researchers regarding key knowledge gaps.

Several policy evaluations covering basic education in South Africa already exist3. These inform the current paper, which includes some updating that takes into account recent phenomena: the pandemic; a worsening fiscal situation; the 'migration' of early childhood development (ECD) to the basic education bureaucracy; and the appointment of the first education minister in three decades who is not from the African National Congress (ANC), as part of the Government of National Unity (GNU).

The basic education system is vast and complex. In the interests of cohesion and sufficient detail, early grade learning is used extensively as a reference point, even when other aspects of the system are discussed4.

Section 2 explains the analytical framework. Section 0 breaks the years 1994 to 2024 into three distinct periods. Sections 3.1 to 0 evaluate the three periods. Section 4 focusses on risks and opportunities for the GNU. Section 5 concludes.

2. The economics of education framework for policy evaluation

This framework for evaluating policy[5] is advantageous as it takes into account resource limitations and, with its focus on monetary and non-monetary incentives, limitations and opportunities with respect to human behaviour, specifically that of teachers. Alternative frameworks are important, too[6]. In the South African context, a rights-based approach, which places constitutional and other legal rights at its centre, has been prominent[7].

The economic framework foregrounds the inter-generational transfer of human capital. Thus, the skills children acquire during their schooling are often less than half the result of what occurs at school, the remainder being determined by home background (Arnett, 2007). Similarly, the skills of teachers are partly determined by their teacher training and partly by their social and class origins. Schools are institutions whose responsibility is to offset learner home disadvantage and narrow inequalities originating in the household.

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[3] In descending order of publication year, the following would include substantive reviews: Gustafsson and Taylor, S., 2022; Mollo, 2022; Gustafsson, 2019a; DBE, 2019; Van der Berg and Hofmeyr, 2018; Crouch and Hoadley, 2018; Lentsa, 2018; OECD, 2017; Van der Berg *et al*, 2016; OECD, 2008; Soudien, 2007.

[4] The 'sufficient detail' part is important. Without this, there is a risk of accepting what the prominent education economist Lant Pritchett, and others, have referred to as 'isomorphic mimicry', arguably a common phenomenon in schooling systems in developing countries whereby interventions and actions carry the right labelling, to provide the impression of effectiveness, while in the detail the interventions fall short in many respects of what is required. See Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews (2012).

[5] World Bank (2018) is an excellent economics of education primer, especially with regard to developing countries. Gustafsson and Mabogoane (2012) provide an account of how the framework assists in understanding education policy problems.

[6] Elements of the economic framework described here are obviously not unique to a framework describing itself as 'economic' and would be familiar to a wide range of analysts from different disciplines.

[7] The South African Human Rights Commission (2021) offers an example of a rights-based analysis. While this commission can be expected to emphasise a rights-based approach, it is noteworthy that through its 'costed norms approach', the Financial and Fiscal Commission has also essentially leaned towards an emphasis on need, arguably with an insufficient focus on the available financial resources (National Treasury, 2000: 86; Financial and Fiscal Commission, 2022: xvi). This appears to be one of several areas that hampers constructive engagement between the FFC and National Treasury, which has tended to dismiss the FFC's recommendations.

Policies on teachers should aim to break cycles of inequality by spreading teacher skills equitably across schools (Reform Support Network, 2015a, 2015b).

The framework has enjoyed prominence following work, particularly by Hanushek and Woessmann in around 2000[8], quantifying the effects of better quality schooling on subsequent economic growth. This work received attention in the 2005 UNESCO Education for All report (UNESCO, 2005) and was instrumental in the shift in emphasis from simply monitoring *access* to basic education in the Millennium Development Goals to monitoring access *and the quality* of schooling within the Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015. The economic framework considers basic skills acquired at the primary school level as pre-eminent and more important than getting the number of specialists right at higher levels. To put it simply, ensuring that the country's engineers have been educated well from an early age is of even greater importance for a country's development than details relating to trainee numbers and the curriculum of engineering faculties.

In getting schools to improve learning outcomes and reduce inherited inequalities, a few things are considered vital within this framework. Public per learner funding must be progressive (pro-poor) and adequate for the basic minimum set of inputs, in particular books. Teachers should be incentivised in their work through a conducive school environment, where learning goals are clear, there are fair opportunities for career advancement, and there is the right mix of administrative controls and professional freedom. The optimal mix may differ across socioeconomic and cultural contexts. While an economic approach may be expected to favour financial rewards for better performing teachers, this is mostly not embraced, largely for practical reasons (World Bank, 2019).

Comparable measures of learning per school are important, as they help hold the school principal and teaching staff as a team accountable. Conclusions in this regard should take into account what outcomes can be expected, given the average socioeconomic status (SES) of learners. This, in turn, implies the need for comparable measures of SES across schools.

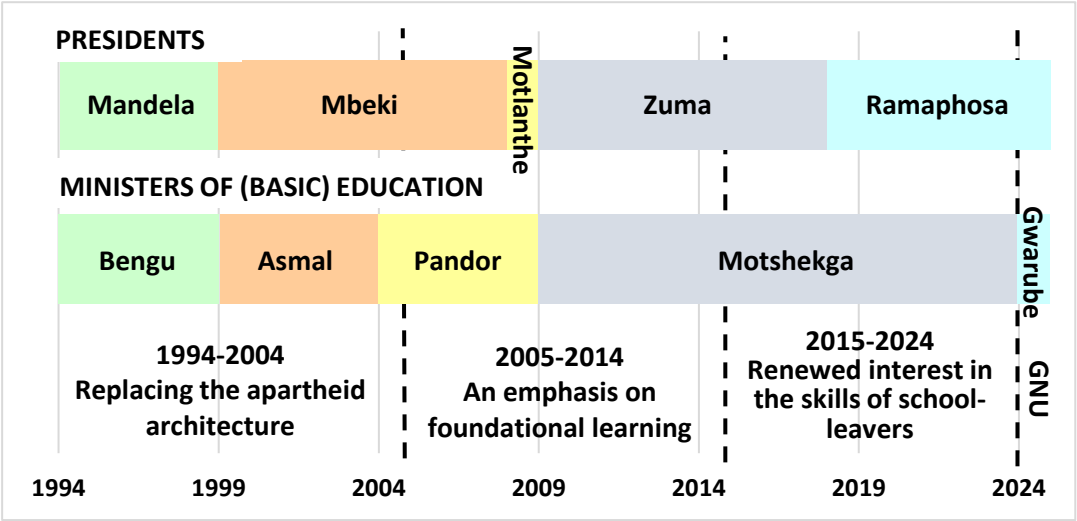
Regarding teacher unions, the economic framework draws from evidence which, unsurprisingly, points to unions prioritising teacher well-being and not necessarily learning gains in the schooling system. This points to the need for careful negotiation between unions and government.

[8] See for instance Hanushek and Woessmann (2012).

3. Three historical periods

Figure 1 identifies three periods for the purposes of the paper. The first saw policy focus largely on undoing the apartheid legacy of unequal resourcing and a plethora of race- and ethnically-specific education curricula and administrations[9]. A shift occurred around 2005, during the Mbeki presidency, when new information emerged on how poorly South African primary school learners fared. Under Minister Pandor work began to address this problem. This was continued by Minister Motshekga after the ministry was split into two, one dealing with basic education (under Motshekga) and the other with post-school education (under Pandor up to 2014).

Figure 1: Three historical periods



The year 2015 interrupted the momentum started under Pandor, when the Annual National Assessments (ANA) programme was stopped, following teacher union complaints. The context was that President Zuma depended on the political support of the largest teacher union. While several pre-2015 initiatives continued, post-2015 saw an increasing focus on areas less likely to meet union opposition, such as specialisation at the secondary level aimed at addressing the dire unemployment situation. But learning in the early grades again came to the fore in 2023 during a widely reported series of events.

A shift seems likely from 2024, given the appointment of Minister Gwarube, from the Democratic Alliance, the main opposition party before 2024.

The following three sections, each dealing with one historical period, address a few questions. What key policies were introduced or abandoned, and what were the underlying pressures? How accurately were the pressures understood? How effective were policies in terms of the framework presented in section 2? How effective was implementation? Did better policy alternatives exist?

3.1 1994 to 2004: Replacing the apartheid architecture

The initial years focussed on undoing the starkest features of the apartheid education system. Given how large the spending inequalities had been, and given a strong interest in keeping the middle class in the public schooling system, new resourcing policies focussed mainly on equalising spending per learner, not designing

[9] See for instance Rakometsi (2008).

a strongly progressive system[10]. There was little interest in moving teachers outside the ethnically defined sets of schools they had historically worked within, a step which could have assisted in breaking down inequalities and social divisions.

Salary scales of black teachers were aligned to those whites had enjoyed[11], and teaching posts were equitably distributed across schools. Non-personnel current spending became clearly pro-poor and based on newly calculated measures of school SES. However, this spending was only 5% of the overall budget. These resourcing formulas remain essentially intact today and have been considered exemplary[12]. Critiques from the left focussed on the perpetuation of historical inequalities made possible by rules allowing for the collection of school fees. This has permitted historically advantaged public schools to reduce class sizes through hiring additional teachers and maintain a range of extra-curricular activities[13].

The merging of the apartheid-era administrations and the creation of nine provincial education departments proceeded well[14]. What is debatable is whether the legislation determining the governance of public schools[15], in which some 98% of all learners were enrolled, was optimal. The legislation essentially viewed the quality of schooling as the responsibility of new school governing bodies, where parents would comprise the majority. The general optimism regarding this arrangement is captured in the views of the prominent education researchers Bush and Heystek (2003: 127):

> *… despite the significant difficulties facing the educational system in South Africa, [school] governing bodies provide a good prospect of enhancing local democracy and improving the quality of education for all learners*

South Africa could have learnt from quality-focussed interventions elsewhere. In 1995, Uruguay established a national assessment that included the primary level, aimed at gauging the level of learning in each school (Benveniste, 2000). Brazil initiated something similar in 2005 (OECD, 2021; Canen, 2012; Bruns *et al*, 2012). Assessments of this kind would have been relevant for South Africa, compared to end-of-primary examinations, focussing on individual learners, common in many African countries. Such examinations are often an entrance test for secondary schooling, a need not applicable in South Africa, where at least lower secondary schooling is a basic right.

A key exception is that one province did pursue a Uruguay-type universal assessment. In 2002, Western Cape launched its 'systemic tests', still in existence today, and involving the use of a service provider to test all learners in specific grades each year. The evidence suggests that by providing information on school-specific quality, this programme assists schools and the administration to plan interventions. However, its ability to compare results reliably over time, and hence arrive at fair evaluations of school-level improvement could be limited (National Treasury, 2017: 21; Hoadley and Muller, 2016; Van der Berg *et al*, 2022).

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[10] Non-personnel funding was determined through Government Notices 2362 and 1298 of 1998, while the allocation of teaching posts across schools was determined through Government Notice 1676 of 1998. While these policies have been subsequently amended, the fundamentals of the 1998 policies remain in place today.

[11] This does not mean that black teachers earned the same as white teachers after the change, as criteria linked to teaching qualifications and age would generally have counted against black teachers.

[12] Crouch (2005), who worked as a USAID-funded advisor to the national administration, has referred to the new resourcing policies as 'the most profound education reforms attempted anywhere in the world'.

[13] See for instance Vally (2017).

[14] The legislation covering the new system of administration is the National Education Policy Act of 1996.

[15] South African Schools Act of 1996.

Establishing a workable post-apartheid school curriculum was a difficult and laborious process. Three years after the 1997 launch of a new curriculum, a ministerial report raised serious concerns about its overly theoretical and impractical nature (Chisholm *et al*, 2000). After several years of interim adjustments, new curriculum documents known as the CAPS[16] were rolled out, starting in 2012. The CAPS have been considered a success by analysts inside and outside the country (Crouch and Hoadley, 2018; Care *et al*, 2017).

While interest in universal assessments of the kind pursued by Western Cape was limited, investment in a national sample-based 'systemic evaluation' did occur. The first round of assessments, focussing on grade 3, occurred in 2000. An assessment of this type had begun in Brazil already in 1990. While sample-based assessments cannot be used to plan interventions for individual schools, they provide a sense of what is happening across the system as a whole (Gustafsson and Taylor, N., 2022: 39). The South African data collected seemed valuable, but the reports were limited insofar as they expressed performance in terms of mean scores, with little sense of what skills these implied[17]. Moreover, a poor understanding of cause and effect led to conclusions that arguably over-stated the role of physical infrastructure as a determinant of learning[18].

One key aspect of the schooling system which barely changed was certification. Though the grade 12 examinations were unified into one post-apartheid system shortly after 1994 and aligned to a new curriculum in 2009, these examinations have remained a key source of continuity. Yet a 1993 report of the National Education Co-ordinating Committee, arguably the most comprehensive and useful stocktaking of South Africa's education system available at the dawn of democracy, pointed to a need for a grade 9 or 10 certificate to address the following gap (National Education Co-ordinating Committee, 1993: 23, 87):

> *The most serious deficiency of the present system is that approximately three-quarters of children, who do not reach or pass [grade 12], leave the system without a certificate of externally validated currency.*

The abovementioned three-quarters have declined to roughly 40% today (DBE, 2024a: 15; 2024b). The fact that the matter of a second certificate was ignored until a few years ago seems indicative of a weak understanding in the education policy arena of needs in the post-school sector and labour market (Van der Berg *et al*, 2020; DBE, 2024b). Instead, much of the focus in the early years was on the grade 12 pass rate, or the percentage of candidates obtaining the certificate, an indicator which was often manipulated by excluding weaker candidates[19].

[16] Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.

[17] This is true of the 2000 grade 3 Systemic Evaluation, though the 2006 grade 6 wave of the programme did report on competency levels.

[18] As explained in Gustafsson and Taylor, N. (2008), a series of regressions on learning outcomes were taken to represent cause and effect, when this was not possible.

[19] A celebrated increase in the pass rate from 49% in 1999 to 71% in 2004 was accompanied by a largely unreported 8% decline in the number of candidates (Taylor, 2009).

3.2 2005 to 2014: An emphasis on foundational learning

South Africa has participated in three sample-based international assessments of learning, which have assisted the policy discourse while also causing some confusion[20]. Participation in TIMSS[21] lower secondary testing began as early as 1995, while participation in the regional African programme SACMEQ[22] commenced with the 2000 round of testing of grade 6 learners. SACMEQ 2000 prompted South Africa's own version of Germany's 'PISA shock'[23] of 2001[24]. When SACMEQ 2000 results were eventually released in 2005[25], South Africa emerged in position 8 among 14 generally less industrialised countries in the region with respect to the percentage of learners with a minimal level of reading skills.

Following the shock, remedial action was taken and, as will be discussed, results improved. Central to this was a 2008 20-page Government Notice titled 'Foundations for learning campaign'. There were essentially five arms of remedial action, with the primary-focussed Foundations for Learning (FFL) initiative set to extend to 2011. The five arms were: instructions to teachers; materials for learners; assessment of learning; teacher training; and school accountability for learning.

One gap in the policy stands out: the use of mother tongue instruction. Indeed, the policy appears to ignore the fact that at the time, a language other than English was the medium of instruction and main language taught for four-fifths of grades 1 to 3 learners (DBE, 2010: 16). Despite this gap, as the policy was taken forward this matter was not (and could not) be completely ignored.

The design of each of the five arms will be discussed, after which a holistic evaluation of implementation will be attempted.

With regard to instructions to teachers, standardised lesson plans were produced[26]. Such tools have been found to improve learning where teacher capacity is weak in the United States (Blaszcyk, 2021) and developing countries (Piper, Sitabkhan *et al*, 2018; UNESCO, 2014: 244). Measured against available effectiveness criteria (Piper, Sitabkhan *et al.*, 2018: 3-4), South Africa's lesson plans displayed strengths, such as a reasonable number of activities, but also weaknesses, in particular no clear linking to specific learner

20 The confusion largely relates to inaccurate releases of results followed by corrections – see Gustafsson (2023).

21 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

22 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

23 PISA is Programme for International Student Assessment, a programme South Africa has not participated in.

24 While Germany's often referenced shock, following weak performance in PISA, manifested itself in sustained media attention that focussed specifically on PISA, in South Africa there was less specific reference to SACMEQ as a catalyst for the 'shock'. A new 2008 national reading strategy (DoE, 2008) only referred to international assessments in general. The same is true for Minister Pandor's 2007 budget speech, arguably the first such education minister speech which clearly acknowledged there was a problem with early grade reading. Yet an interest in South Africa's SACMEQ ranking among academics was clear – see Van der Berg and Louw (2006), also Lee et al (2005). A sector review by the DoE (2009b: 33) discusses SACMEQ results, as well as the results of the earlier Monitoring of Learning Assessment (MLA) study, conducted across several countries in the 1990s and focussing on the primary level – see also DoE (1999). MLA had little impact on policymakers in South Africa, in large part because country rankings (Chinapah, 2003) did not include South Africa.

25 See Murimba (2005: 93), which has probably the earliest publicly available list of the performance of countries in SACMEQ 2000. South Africa's statistic was 32%, with the next best country being Swaziland, at 49%. Slow turnaround between testing and the release of results has been an ongoing problem in SACMEQ.

26 Government's Thutong portal provides links to lesson plans for every grade in the grades 1 to 6 range, for the two key subjects language and mathematics – see https://www.thutong.doe.gov.za/foundationsforlearning/FoundationsForLearning/tabid/1973/Default.aspx. Notably, the lesson plans are only in English. Though the lesson plans are not dated, it could be established through Google that they were uploaded in 2007. They are explicitly branded as a part of the 'foundations for learning' initiative.

books, and not enough detail on daily activities[27]. Strikingly, the lesson plans dealt with the teaching of English only, with only a vague indication that teachers would need to adapt them for other languages[28].

Turning to materials for learners, the 2008 policy specified several resources needed, many existing in the textbook market. Probably the most valuable new resource to emerge from FFL was the national workbooks, full-colour books for key subjects that would belong to learners and be re-issued each year. To illustrate, the grade 3 mathematics workbook comprised two A4 volumes of 150 pages each[29]. Deliveries to schools began in 2011. This delay reflects the effort required to develop the materials, which were available in all eleven official languages from 2011. Periodically updated workbooks continue to be delivered today[30] and are widely considered an outstanding legacy of this period[31].

The assessment arm of FFL is only superficially described in the 2008 policy. There is an allusion to baseline results per school in literacy and numeracy and an explicit commitment to an assessment of grades 3 and 6 in 2011 to evaluate FFL's impact. In 2011, a nationwide assessment of all learners in grades 2 to 7 did indeed occur – this was the launch of ANA. While ANA introduced something completely new at the primary level and helped raise public awareness of learning outcomes, it suffered several design flaws[32]. The tests themselves, which used all eleven languages[33], appeared well designed[34]. Biases within a year in the test administration and marking processes, which were not strictly controlled, could, to an extent, be gauged through a verification involving stricter controls in a limited sample of schools (DBE, 2011)[35]. However, over the years it became clear that improvements were vastly over-stated in ANA[36] and that the programme was

[27] The lesson plans for the first term literacy teaching in Grade 1 were examined in some depth. Hoadley *et al* (2010), in an in-depth evaluation, found the lesson plans, and other elements of the foundations for learning initiative, lacking in coherency and detail. Govender (2013) comes to a similar conclusion. Bawanile (2010), Meier (2011) and Hlomuka (2014) find the lesson plans to be relatively useful, but do not discuss the problem of their exclusive focus on English.

[28] For instance, on p. 49 of the Grade 1 literacy lesson plan document. The 2008 26-page 'reading strategy' appears to have been much less used than the FFL policy and accompanying tools. Like the FFL policy, it refers in broad terms to what should change in the classroom, but it acknowledges to a much greater degree challenges relating to the different official languages (DoE, 2008).

[29] 2013 workbooks available online were examined. The original 2011 versions appear not to be available online any longer.

[30] Unlike spending on other materials for learners, spending on the national workbooks production and distribution is relatively easy to monitor as this falls within one national Department of Basic Education budget sub-programme, 'Curriculum and quality enhancement'. In real terms spending has fluctuated a bit, with per learner spending (counting learners from grades 1 to 9) moving in real terms from R193 in 2011, to R171 in 2024 (all in 2024 Rand values). In recent years, costs have been reduced somewhat by only distributing the resources to schools requesting them (yet the denominator for the figures provided here is all public ordinary school enrolments in the nine grades).

[31] A UNICEF-funded evaluation by the Australian Council for Education Research (2013) was mostly positive, while UNESCO (2014: 285) has considered the workbooks exemplary, as has South Africa's 2030 Reading Panel (2022 :4).

[32] Manuals to guide ministries of education in this complex area of work are notably thin on detail – see Gustafsson (2019b).

[33] Unlike SACMEQ, ANA tests employed not just multiple-choice questions, but also so-called constructed response questions, where for instance learners are required to write a sentence.

[34] Questions raised tended to focus on grade 9 mathematics tests (grade 9 was included within ANA from 2012). Concerns around errors in these tests were probably a false alarm – see Govender (2012). However, it seems clear that difficulty levels for grade 9 mathematics were unreasonably high – in ANA 2012 only 2% of learners achieved a basic level of competency, against 24% in the 2011 TIMSS tests (DBE, 2012: 37; Mullis *et al*, 2012: 115).

[35] However, note that 'verification ANA' results were never used to implement actual adjustments to 'universal ANA' scores.

[36] ANA pointed to improvements in certain years which were over 10 times as steep as reliable South African trends measured in the international assessments – see DBE (2016a: 33; 2020a: 32, 69).

not designed to reliably track trends[37]. The originally envisaged 2008 to 2011 FFL trend analysis was not produced, partly due to the lack of 2008 baseline data (though estimates of the trend using SACMEQ or PIRLS[38] data would have been possible).

There is little detail in the 2008 policy on teacher training, though the need for support is acknowledged. The logic seems to have been that materials such as the lesson plans spoke for themselves. There was little focus on different training modalities and their relative costs and benefits, of the kind emerging some years later.

Finally, school accountability for improvements clearly did feature in the 2008 FFL policy and in a related 2007 amendment to the South African Schools Act (SASA)[39]. However, in many respects, the policies were technically naive. Visible action, such as quarterly FFL progress reports by schools, was emphasised, while technical complexities alluded to above were largely ignored: achieving comparability in results over time; the tension between scores intended for grade promotion versus the monitoring of quality[40]; and considering socioeconomic context.

The implementation of FFL would have been compromised by the design problems and the fact that many envisaged tools only became available in the FFL's final year[41]. However, if a broader timeframe is used, changes intended by FFL clearly occurred. Above all, access to the new workbooks increased steadily, reaching over 90% of targeted learners by 2017, according to both school and household data (DBE, 2013: 99, 2019a: 19; 2019b: 28). However, even in the post-2011 years, with more tools in place and the basic tenets of FFL still considered valid, design flaws and a sense that the different parts were not 'speaking to each other' was common. ANA's findings were seen as unfair or government spin (DBE, 2016b), teachers complained about poor training (Chilenga-Butao *et al*, 2020: 134), school accountability remained weak and confusing (Gustafsson and Taylor, N., 2022), and so on[42].

Yet despite the problems, relatively steep improvements in learning outcomes in South Africa, off a low base, did occur during the FFL years, including at the primary level. This is according to the three abovementioned international assessments – see Gustafsson and N Taylor (2022: 22) for a summary. While the steepness of these gains fell short of what ANA appeared to signal, they were nonetheless steep by global standards. These improvements have been acknowledged in, for instance, the 2024 McKinsey global review of

[37] The comparability problem was far more serious than in the previously discussed Western Cape programme because ANA did not repeat items (or questions) across years, while the Western Cape testing does. Repeating items and keeping them secure (secret) is far more feasible where external service providers administer the tests, which has been the case in the Western Cape and Brazilian systems. In ANA, staff within the school administered the tests, greatly increasing the possibility that test items would be widely distributed and known.

[38] Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

[39] The opportunities and risks associated with these amendments are discussed in Gustafsson and Taylor, N. (2022: 31, 38).

[40] This is a key complexity. Percentage correct test scores which teachers and learners are most familiar with are of the kind that would determine promotion into the next grade. Scoring here is formally based on criteria set out in assessment policies, yet standards applied inevitably differ across schools. Specifically, schools serving learners with greater home background disadvantages will mark more leniently given difficult contextual factors, and given the need to avoid unmanageably high levels of grade repetition – see for instance Van der Berg and Shepherd (2008: 26). There thus needs to be a clear separation between scores designed to inform grade progression and scores designed to monitor levels of learning in a standardised manner.

[41] Moreover, 2012 saw the start of the roll-out of the aforementioned CAPS curriculum documents.

[42] How to teach using African languages, how to combine methods advocated by policy in over-sized classes, how to improve the enabling environment of the school through fairer appointment processes, were some of the additional concerns. The labelling of FFL as a 'campaign' in the official policy is perhaps telling. This suggests an understanding of the necessary advocacy part of the work, but is not suggestive of the substantial technical work that inevitably underlies an improvement strategy.

education[43]. This raises intriguing questions. If improvements that were about as steep as could be expected were achieved, despite policy design problems, how important is the fidelity of policy? To what extent do factors outside the schooling system, such as declining poverty or access to new technologies, influence learning trends[44]?

The case for good design in such a context is arguably that this helps to sustain improvements and assists in the accumulation of local knowledge around 'technologies' that work in areas such as teacher training and learner assessment. The unfavourable fiscal climate of South Africa currently makes it especially important to avoid inefficiencies associated with poor design. A comparison to, for instance, Brazil's stock of experiences in the area of assessment (OECD, 2021), or Kenya's in-service teacher training (Piper, Destefano *et al*, 2018), suggests South Africa is behind and should strive to catch up to exemplary developing countries, not just with respect to learning outcomes, but also policy design capabilities[45].

Apart from technical capacity constraints, an insufficiently holistic picture of how the various arms of FFL would complement each other seemed lacking, both within the 2008 policy and the Department of Education's 200-page 2009 to 2013 strategic and operational plan (DoE, 2009a). Which arms were most critical, which carried the greatest risks, and where would a phased introduction of materials be pursued, given inevitable lead times to produce them? Such critical matters were mostly glossed over.

[43] McKinsey (2024) points to South Africa, Morocco and Peru as the three noteworthy 'sustained and outsized improvers' in the developing world, based on international data such as PIRLS and TIMSS.

[44] This key question is not easy to answer. Gustafsson and Taylor, S. (2022) attempt to explain what caused South Africa's improvements.

[45] At a basic level, improving the capacity to understand the utility, but also the limitations, of what the UN's Sustainable Development Goals refer to as 'minimum proficiency levels', and how to gauge trends in this regard, seems important. Gustafsson (2023) explores how and why understandings are often weak.

3.3 2015 to 2024: Renewed interest in the skills of school-leavers

ANA's 2015 halt was most visibly due to union concerns with its design, though union suspicion towards standardised assessments in general[46] and union dissatisfaction with the state's wage proposals also played a role. This dissipated some of the FFL-inspired momentum, given the centrality of ANA in government's messaging, and shifted the emphasis to other priorities less likely to antagonise unions.

New priorities are often related to school leavers. Accountability for dropping out at the secondary level and grade 12 results has probably always been stronger than accountability for early grade learning[47]. Moreover, 2015 saw a return to an unemployment rate above 25%, after around a decade below this threshold (Kuluvhe *et al*, 2022: 32). Globally, there was a growing interest in 'skills for the twenty-first century'[48].

The National Development Plan (NDP), released in 2012, had called for a technical stream from grade 8 (NPC, 2012: 143)[49]. Work on this began in 2015[50], though implementation beyond special needs schools was limited, in part due to budgetary constraints (Marock *et al*, 2020: 10)[51]. This and other secondary-focussed initiatives aimed to address a problem which has arguably been exaggerated[52]: the fact that around a third of youths do not successfully complete twelve years of education. Such a figure is, in fact, normal for a country such as South Africa, and the numbers have declined as the quality of schooling improved (DBE, 2024b: 41-42, 2024a: 9).

Efforts directed to the difficult task of developing universal national assessments focussed on the secondary level, though there was a need at both the primary and secondary levels. After some six years of preparatory work, a new grade 9 national examination and certificate are planned for 2025[53]. This new system could make flows from school to TVET[54] colleges and from school to employment more efficient. What was not taken forward was a proposal, expressed in a 2016 'post mortem' of ANA by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), to prioritise a new universal national assessment for grade 6, and only then proceed with something similar in grade 9 (DBE, 2016b). Had this proposal been followed through, it could have alleviated the lack of sufficiently standardised data on learning at the primary level.

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[46] The ideological elements of this, and the global teacher union position seen in Education International are discussed in Gustafsson and Taylor, N. (2022).

[47] This is strongly suggested by Figure 2 in the appendix. Between 2006 and 2022 Parliament, which would include the Portfolio Committee discussing education matters with the education departments, has paid around six times more attention to secondary-level issues than learning in the early grades. (Specifically, the ratio of 'Dropping out' plus 'Grade 12' to 'grade 3' plus 'early grade reading' was calculated for each year, and then the average ratio across the years was found – this average was six.)

[48] See Figure 3 in the appendix.

[49] What is easily confusing is that this proposal appears in the economy and employment section of the NDP, but not specifically in the education section.

[50] The 'Three Stream Model' first appears in PMG in 2015. By 2023, it received one-fifth of the attention by 'grade 12'. A 2024 DBE presentation titled 'Skills development as a gateway towards education for sustainable futures: Insights on the Three Stream Model curriculum', available online, provides information on learning materials developed for a technical stream, but also a vocational stream.

[51] Equal Education (2018) has raised valid concerns around the policy clarity and the equity implications of introducing non-academic streams.

[52] See Figure 2 – following a decline in a focus on dropping out in the PMG texts up to around 2015, this topic has seen a resurgence.

[53] This is according to the DBE's 2024/25 annual plan.

[54] Technical and vocational education and training.

Not all new priorities focussed on the secondary level. Rising recognition globally of the benefits of early childhood education[55] contributed to the responsibility for the subsidisation of privately and community-driven pre-schools being shifted, in 2022, from the social development departments to the education departments. There was also interest in upgrading the pre-grade 1 year offered extensively in public schools so that its level of financing matched that of the other primary grades[56].

It should be noted that many primary-focussed interventions, such as the national workbooks, continued, even if they may have received limited public attention[57]. A key DBE research programme with positive international reviews (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, 2019) has focussed on producing new evidence-based tools for the early grades, including lesson plans[58], learner assessments, and manuals for those training and coaching teachers (DHET, 2022)[59], all with a strong emphasis on the use of African languages.

Around the world, the pandemic resulted in a fresh focus on the early grades, as it was in these grades that school closures were likely to cause the most enduring harm[60]. In South Africa, a multi-stakeholder '2030 Reading Panel', led by former Deputy President Mlambo-Ngcuka, was established in 2022, its aim being to monitor and advocate for better reading at the primary level[61]. In 2023, a series of telling and highly publicised events unfolded, focussing on whether the government was doing enough to address early grade learning. In the wake of the release of the 2021 PIRLS results, a popular television programme known for its investigative journalism claimed that a 2019 national reading plan of the DBE, obtained after a public records request, was superficial and had not been taken forward[62]. The DBE argued that the pandemic had hampered efforts to implement the plan. A subsequent online article drew from expert advice in explaining why the DBE's plan was not really a plan (Knoetze and Human, 2023). This article is interesting and unusual, as public debates seldom focus on the quality of plans. The National Planning Commission has, in fact, raised concerns

[55] Indicative of this is the strong emphasis on early childhood programmes in the SDGs, and the virtual absence of this in the earlier Millenium Development Goals (MDGs).

[56] This is expressed through the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act of 2024. While the grade R funding policy (Government Notice 26 of 2008) specifies that public spending per grade R learner should be 70% of what it is in the other primary grades, spending data suggest that the ratio could be as low as 30% as late as 2021 (World Bank, 2022: 115). It is often assumed that raising per learner spending in grade R, which would largely be a matter of raising the minimum qualification requirements for teachers, would result in better learning relative to the current situation. The relationship between a different resourcing package and the quality of Grade R teaching is a topic warranting more attention.

[57] To illustrate, the National Education Collaboration Trust (2023), an agency of the DBE, has focussed mainly on primary schools in its delivery of school intervention programmes.

[58] To illustrate, Setswana grade 1 language lesson plans implemented in 2022, which are around 25% longer than the equivalent English plans forming part of FFL, include cross-referencing to the CAPS curriculum documents, though the role of national workbooks could be clearer. The approach is thus more integrated and holistic than was the case with the earlier lesson plans. New lessons plans, available on the DBE website (under 'Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS): Building Foundations'), have mostly been for English or Setswana.

[59] Sets of reading benchmarks to assist teachers assessing learners have been produced for all eleven official languages (DBE, 2020b).

[60] Monroy-Gómez-Castro (2022) provide statistical modelling of how pandemic-related learning losses in the earlier grades are likely to compound through the subsequent grades in the case of Mexico.

[61] Curiously, this panel has not received much attention in the parliamentary space, with only three hits in the 2022 to 2023 period (using "2030 reading panel" or "reading panel"), against for instance 59 hits for "Equal Education", counting hits only where they were clearly a reference to the advocacy group Equal Education.

[62] 'Reading crisis | Carte Blanche | M-Net' within the Carte Blanche channel on YouTube.

about the broader planning culture in government (NPC, 2015). In the end, the DBE agreed that it would improve the reading plan[63].

4. Risks and opportunities in the context of the GNU

Various organisations contribute to progress in the basic education sector[64]. But a central actor is the DBE, led politically by the Minister of Basic Education. This section focusses on what this centre can do and should perhaps avoid.

Minister Gwarube, in her 2024 budget speech to Parliament, expressed a clear commitment to improving basic literacy and numeracy skills, but with few specifics. What should those be?

The previous sections point to two over-arching needs, which should shape the specifics[65]. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen and professionalise the production of policies, educational tools and information systems. This process should learn from past successes and mistakes, including those of interesting provinces. Products should not be taken to scale without sufficient initial evaluation. In some respects, South Africa lags behind educationally effective developing countries in planning and design capacity, and could learn from these countries. The need has long been acknowledged: in 1985, the then exiled ANC was keen to 'recruit and train specialists in career guidance, educational statistics, educational planning etc' in the interests of building an effective post-apartheid education system (African National Congress, 1985). In certain areas, South Africa has excelled, notably in the design of the national workbooks. However, teacher training and assessment capacity remain relatively weak. In short, while the five arms of FFL essentially reflected what needed to be done, the devil was in the detail.

Secondly, silo effects in the government hamper service delivery everywhere, including South Africa. To illustrate, how ANA and the 2007 amendments to the South African Schools Act complemented each other was never clarified. How lesson plans and the national workbooks complement each other is often unclear. Much of the work in advancing complementarity, or what is often referred to as a 'theory of change', is about creating alignment *post facto* through 'tweaking', especially when entrenched interventions were not originally designed within a holistic framework. Bringing about alignment across different teams of workers, whose basic assumptions around how learning improves might differ, is not easy. Elements that could be better utilised to promote alignment include the DBE's plans and its website. While, for instance, a DBE website that presents a clear and holistic vision of what is important for learning is no guarantee that silo effects have been resolved, using the website as a catalyst for integration could assist.

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[63] See PMG page headed 'PIRLS & Reading Literacy; with Minister', dated 23 May 2023 (https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/37023). While there seems to be a general agreement that the 2019 plan was inadequate, there is less agreement around the journalists' argument that a successful approach requires a standalone 'reading budget'. Former heads of the Western Cape and Eastern Cape education departments have argued in an article that it is optimal to consider the regular budget for primary schooling as resourcing for improving reading, and that making reading a special project detracts from the centrality of reading in the schooling process – see Vinjevold and Mbina-Mthembu (2023).

[64] On the government side, Presidency sends out vital signals to the public, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation should help to reinforce the message that basic education is the bedrock of society's development, and the Department of Public Service and Administration is instrumental when it comes to the conditions of service of civil servants, including some 400,000 publicly paid educators in the schooling system. The nine provincial education departments manage 98% of public spending in basic education. National Treasury is perhaps a less important actor than is often assumed. The funding of provinces is driven strongly by transparent formulas, meaning much of the budgetary decision-making of relevance to basic education rests at the provincial level. Where National Treasury does play a role, is in determining the 'vertical split' of budgets across the national and provincial levels, which in the case of education is largely about the relative prioritisation of basic and post-school education.

[65] Crouch (2020) expresses these needs well.

But how can these over-arching needs be addressed in relation to specific education policy areas? What specific work stands out as needing the most urgent attention? What does the framework outlined in section 2 point to?

The most immediate gap in the schooling system currently seems to be the absence of comparable measures of learning per primary school. In addressing this gap, the mistake made in ANA of thinking about the work as largely a responsibility of the assessment experts should not be repeated. It should involve school governance and management experts to ensure, for instance, that school accountability is clear, fair, not prone to gaming or corruption, and is likely to contribute to a better learning and teaching culture. An obvious point of departure here would be to clarify how the South African Schools Act sections, introduced through 2007 amendments, relating to monitoring the quality of learning could be implemented practically and cost-effectively[66]. The work should also involve Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) experts in the bureaucracy. Data on learning outcomes should be seen as an integral part of EMIS. Curiously, this is currently not the case. Moreover, EMIS experts are well placed to bring together assessment data and measures of SES, a vital link if judgements are to fair[67].

Even among the assessment experts, there is a need to apply modern psychometric techniques in better ways. ANA's design was excessively influenced by approaches used in the grade 12 examinations. Comparability over time is even more important in an ANA-like system, where school-level measures are central, than in an examination system, where certification of individuals is central. This may imply a need, in the case of the former, for not only statistical adjustments but also the repetition of test items over time[68]. Apart from Western Cape's testing system referred to in section 3.1 above, Gauteng has introduced a very different but apparently promising system-wide system aimed at gauging oral reading fluency per school[69]. The challenge thus relates largely to the remaining seven provinces, accounting for some 70% of learners[70].

Apart from collaboration across groups of experts, various stakeholders, including teacher unions, need to be involved in any new approach to generating and using information on learning per school. Experts play a vital role in such stakeholder discussions insofar as they have an idea of what is feasible from a human capacity and budgetary perspective and should be in a position to draw from accounts of relevant systems

[66] Unfortunately, the subsequent two rounds of amendments to the Act, in the form of the 2011 Education Laws Amendment Act and 2024 Basic Education Laws Amendment Act, did not deal with these sections.

[67] A need is often expressed for updated measures of SES per school. The measures underpinning the current quintiles use mostly data from the 1996 national census. A major hurdle to an updating is that more recent censuses appear not to provide the level of granularity required to distinguish schools with substantially different SES profiles in the same area. A task which has not been undertaken is to compare, at a higher level of aggregation, the measures currently used with recent statistics, to gain a broad sense of how inaccurate the existing measures might be.

[68] A part of the difficulty here is dealing with the relationship between test security costs (relatively high in the case of for instance the Western Cape's testing system referred to above) and the sufficiency of comparability of results over time. These challenges become far more daunting for system-wide censal testing, compared to sample-based testing. But many countries have arrived at cost-effective designs. Gustafsson (2019b) discusses some of these complexities and what they mean for South Africa. Subject-specific grade 12 examination results in South Africa are often less comparable over time than many believe, despite standardisation procedures which are about as rigorous as is possible. This has led to misunderstandings around, for instance, whether the quality of grade 12 mathematics has been on the decline. Official statistics did appear to suggest a decline, though closer analysis suggested the problem was an increasingly difficult examination (Gustafsson, 2016).

[69] Details relating to Gauteng's initiative should be more widely available, in part for the benefit of other provinces. A Gauteng Government presentation (Tshabalala, 2023) summarises the initiative, and how it compares to other universal assessments is discussed in Gustafsson (2024).

[70] Important *sample*-based national assessments have occurred or are being planned. An example of the former is the new South African Systemic Evaluation (Department of Basic Education, 2024c). An example of the latter is Funda Uphumelele National Reading Study (Department of Basic Education, 2024d). These assessments play a vital role in the system, but due to their sample-based nature they cannot be used for school accountability or for the targeting of support to specific schools.

that have worked in other countries. The NDP provides an apt reminder of how complex, while necessary, accountability reform in education can be (NPC, 2012: 311):

> *Accountability measures are likely to be met with resistance because they change the balance of power. At first, they will add to the workload of teachers and principals and put new obligations on parents. Once systems and routines are established, the workload will lessen and the system will deliver benefits for everyone.*

The relative prioritisation of the different levels of the basic education system is critical. Experts are often level-specific. They need to work in unison.

While the evidence that quality pre-schooling has lasting positive impacts is strong, it is worth bearing in mind that today's rich countries developed educationally by first ensuring that a functional primary level existed, before embarking on large-scale public spending at the pre-school level[71].

Within the primary level, potential tensions between an emphasis on lower primary (grades 1 to 3) and upper primary (4 to 7) are inherent in a new policy priority reflected in the DBE's 2024 annual plan: the extension of widespread use of the nine African languages as a medium of instruction into grades 4 to 7. This could risk spreading in-service teacher training and materials development efforts too thinly across the entire primary level. Many African and South Asian education authorities grapple with the complexity of harnessing local languages to the educational cause, while simultaneously dealing with the fact the overall language policy in any country is a politically sensitive topic. Experiences in these countries should inform South Africa's approach[72].

In the current context of real declines in overall public spending on basic education and rising enrolments (DBE, 2024b), the question of whether the burden of reduced spending per learner and larger classes is being spread fairly looms large. Worryingly, there is little ongoing and rigorous reporting of per learner public and private spending across provinces and quintiles[73]. The result is that emotive spending equity debates are easily driven by anecdote, as opposed to proper evidence. The DBE should lead the production of the statistics needed to inform the debates. While South Africa's per learner spending seems to remain, on the whole, fairly equal across the system, as intended by the existing policies, economic principles could easily support policies which are more strongly pro-poor. South Africa's public spending on primary and secondary schooling is less pro-poor than in several major Latin American countries (Lustig, 2016: 53). There are important level prioritisation questions here too. Per learner public funding is around 18% higher at the secondary level than at the primary level. Given the special importance of smaller classes in the early grades, the question is whether the spending averages should not be higher at the primary level.

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[71] Akkari (2022) presents an interesting discussion in this regard from an African perspective, published in UNESCO's premier academic journal. In recent years, it has emerged that the evidence that returns to investments at the pre-school level are better than returns at the initial school grades is less robust than was previously believed. Specifically, the widely used 'Heckman curve' by 2000 Nobel laureate James Heckman was critiqued by Rea and Burton (2020), which appears to have led Heckman to declare that 'the Heckman Curve does not describe how the average return on investment of programs differs by the age of recipients' (Rea and Burton, 2021). The education economists Evans and Hares (2021) discuss the policy implications of the recent debates. These debates seem for now to be limited to economists, and have not permeated into the wider policy debates on early childhood development, where the Heckman curve continues to exert considerable influence.

[72] Trudell *et al* (2021) provide a relatively good policy note, drawing from the evidence of various countries. Piper *et al* (2016) discusses language policy in the Kenyan schooling system. Phindane (2015) provides what are probably the best statistics available on a key matter, namely the language preferences of parents in South Africa.

[73] Perhaps the most recent detailed statistics are from 2016 – see DBE (2018).

Given strong public interest in the Grade 12 certificate, attracting sufficient attention and resources to the primary level will remain inevitably difficult. There are opportunities for the DBE to more assertively combat policy populism relating to the secondary level. Dropping out is too often seen as a problem which is, firstly, especially severe in South Africa and, secondly, solvable by simply insisting that dropouts are taken back to school. This ignores the fact that dropping out is mostly due to youths not coping with their learning, given poor foundations[74]. The real problem of insufficient numbers of youths reaching critical mark thresholds in mathematics[75] too easily leads to the conclusion that more learners should take mathematics in their final school grades. This ignores the fact that around half of Grade 12 learners taking mathematics fail the subject and that it is precisely those provinces which limit access to mathematics which have been most successful at ensuring more youths excel (DBE, 2024b: 74). A recurring theme in the policy debates is the idea that raising the pass thresholds in the Grade 12 examinations would improve the quality of teaching. The fact that various experts have looked into this and found little evidence supporting this proposal is often forgotten[76]. The stability of the grade 12 examination system should be protected in the interests of comparable signals over time needed by universities and employers and to avoid unintended social problems associated with a sudden drop in the Grade 12 graduation rate.

There are valid secondary-level policy issues that have received little attention. A curious phenomenon is that among black youths attainment of a good mathematics mark in grade 12 that would permit entry into critical university programmes is highest where one would least expect it: in rural education districts, especially in Limpopo Province, in other words places where the quality of primary schooling is generally poor (DBE, 2024b: 58-59). While quality enhancement is most effective in the early grades, if in certain schools and regions remediation at the secondary level is able to compensate for weak foundations, then this warrants serious attention.

5. Conclusion

This paper, in reviewing South Africa's education policies, focussed largely on policies dealing directly with foundational learning. This is but one part of the wider policy architecture of the schooling system, yet it is central and receives too little attention. The paper argued that South Africa has often focussed on the right basic policy elements. These choices would have contributed to widely recognised improvements in learning, off a low base. Yet a closer analysis of strategies and tools reveals, firstly, many design flaws and, secondly, insufficiently holistic planning. An important part of the solution is strengthening South Africa's capacity to plan and design in a manner that learns from good practices elsewhere. Better capacity could greatly raise the possibility that quality improvements will be sustained, and that educational quality will catch up to that seen in comparable middle income countries.

[74] Branson *et al* (2014), using a nationally representative dataset, find that poor academic performance, as manifested through grade repetition, mostly explains dropping out. This is established through a model that controls for income and other related household factors. This is interesting as reasons given by youths in surveys on why they left school often highlight financial constraints, presumably largely school fees and costs associated with commuting to school. One likely explanation is that households decide not to invest further in the cost of schooling where learners are persistently failing academically, creating the impression that financing is the primary barrier.

[75] In recent years, only 4.0% of young South Africans get to obtain a mathematics mark of at least 60%. A comparison of school supply to university demand suggests there is an under-supply of at least some 15% when it comes to high-achieving mathematics learners, meaning universities are forced to admit youths falling below the formal admissions requirements in order to reach enrolment targets. See DBE, 2024b: 57-58.

[76] For instance, experts participating in a 2014 Ministerial Committee on the grade 12 qualification drew from international experiences to conclude that there are better ways to improve teaching – see DBE (2014). See also Wedekind (2013).

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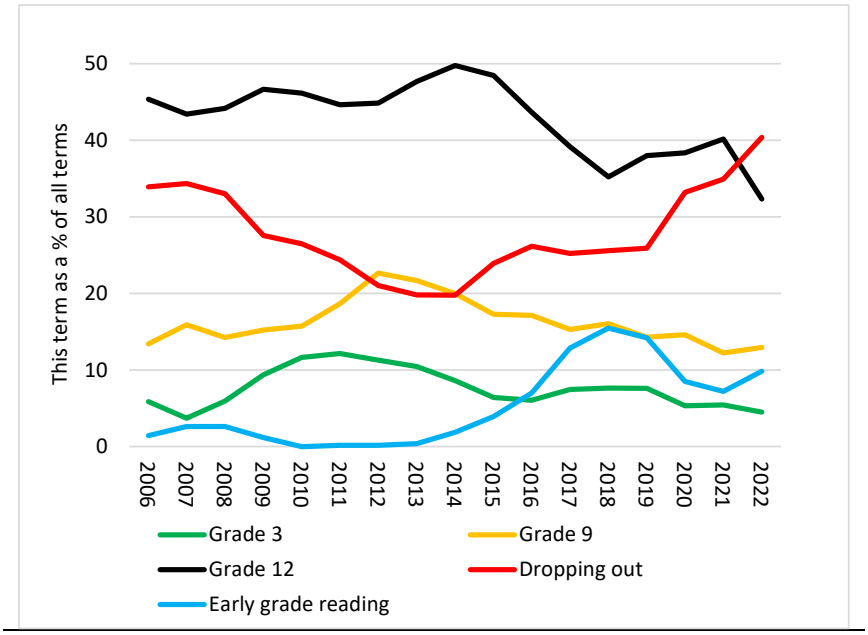
Appendix

Figure 2 below draws from the search facility of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) website (https://pmg.org.za). Seven searches were run, for "grade 3", "grade 9", "grade 12", "dropping out", "dropouts", "early grade reading" and "reading for meaning", always with quotation marks. PMG's search facility is not case-sensitive. No restriction to just the basic education sector was set, meaning PMG as a whole was searched. The number of hits per year for each term was recorded. The sum of all hits across the seven terms for 2006 to 2022 was 2,879. The values for "dropouts" were subsumed within "dropping out", and the values for "reading for meaning" were subsumed within "early grade reading". For each year, values in the graph add up to 100%, with each value representing the percentage of all hits for that year.

The aim was to focus on terms reflecting educational quality at different levels of the system. The terms "primary schools" and "secondary schools" were deliberately avoided, as hits in this regard were often about non-pedagogical issues, such as school infrastructure.

Figure 2: Terms in the PMG website by year



Note: Smoothing was employed, so for instance the value for 2011 seen in the graph would be the average across 2010 to 2012.

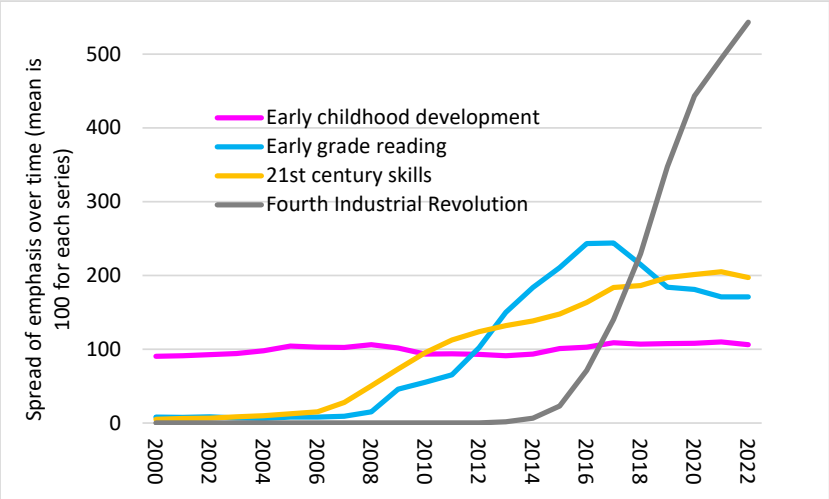
The graph confirms the predominance of concerns around grade 12 and dropping out. In the years following 2007 there was a rise in interest in grades 3 and 9, at the cost of a focus on dropping out. However, after 2014 interest in dropping out, very much a secondary-level issue, increased, largely at the cost of a focus on the grades below grade 12. Since around 2016, references to all three grades declined somewhat, while a focus on early grade reading and dropping out increased.

Figure 3 below draws from Google's Ngram Viewer, which in turn draws from Google Books, the world's largest digital repository of books published around the world. The analysis focusses on how common terms have been in the 2000 to 2022 period relative to "early childhood development" or "early childhood education", whose presence in the literature has remained fairly stable over the period – values for this series were indexed so the average across all years became 100.

Use of the term "21st century skills" has increased greatly over time, and the term is now used more extensively than the two early childhood terms combined. The use of the term "Fourth Industrial Revolution"

has grown to an even greater extent. Finally, “early grade reading” increased, but has since 2017 declined somewhat, in a manner not unlike what was seen in the PMG statistics.

Figure 3: Terms in the global published literature



Note: The exact Ngram search expressions were “21st century skills”, “Fourth Industrial Revolution + fourth industrial revolution”, “early grade reading” and “early childhood development + early childhood education”. Searches were case sensitive, with a smoothing factor of 2. The term “twenty-first century skills” was deliberately avoided as how to deal with hyphens in the searches could not be properly resolved.