

**The starting point for change in the education sector is with the poorest of the poor, and the key question is how do we get the public and our partners in the private sector to respond to this?**

Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Mr Enver Surty

In this issue of **From Evidence to Action**, we look at the education system in South Africa, and in particular, how evidence informed policies can be implemented to address many of the problems it faces. While there is more focus on the complexities around the use and uptake of credible research evidence, as Vice Chancellor of the University of the Free State Professor Jonathan Jansen points out, "We need humility in our dealings with evidence. There are limits to what we can know. The best available evidence is as much a product of science as it is a cultural construction. What counts as best evidence is adjudicated by human subjects, within particular institutional privileges."

We interview researchers working directly in the education policy environment and show how they play a crucial role in bridging the gap between

relevant evidence and policies, and we put the *Spotlight* on the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), which highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluating in improving systems. We also consider some of the challenges faced by the research community in developing countries in getting their evidence taken up by policy-makers. And of course, as usual, we keep you up-to-date on events, campaigns and new resources.

**From Evidence to Action** aims to stimulate debate around evidence-based policy-making. If you have anything to contribute towards getting research into policy, and policy into action, whether successful or unsuccessful, please send your submissions to [pan@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:pan@hsrc.ac.za).

## Poor education, poor future

Post-apartheid, the quality of education offered in 'poor' schools remains sub-standard.

While school enrolment is high and there have been large increases in educational attainment, low quality tuition continues to limit opportunities for the historically disadvantaged.

A recent study by the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Economics, *Low quality education as a poverty trap*, sought to gain a better understanding

of this complex and self-perpetuating relationship between low education quality and poverty. The study also investigated why the quality of education offered to poor children is so below par, and whether poverty itself is perpetuating poor performance or if the way schools operate in poor communities is to blame.

Another key focus area of this quantitative study was the link between education and the labour

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Photo: Institute for Social Development, School of Government, University of the Western Cape

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market. “Research suggests that employment and earnings are strongly dependant on having about 12 years of schooling. But approximately 60% of our youth do not complete secondary school and are entering the labour market without a qualification; that piece of paper that tells potential employers what abilities they have,” explains Martin Gustafsson, a researcher from the University of Stellenbosch’s Department of Economics involved in the study. Grade attainment in South Africa is more or less on par with what is found in other developing countries, but as crucial as grade attainment is, the performance – or underperformance – of schools from which that education is attained is just as important.

**Underperforming schools**

According to a study investigating the causes of underperformance at secondary schools in the Western Cape by Amiena Bayat and Wynand Louw from the University of the Western Cape’s Economics Department and the Institute for Social Development, underperforming schools are categorised as having a Grade 12 pass rate of less than 60%. The study, however, provided a more nuanced analysis of “underperforming”, separating these schools into three sub-categories. Firstly, those that are functioning surprisingly well *against the odds*. “The principals and teaching staff at such schools often have to confront a range of issues that are beyond the scope of teaching; issues that emanate from the social environment from which learners come,” she explains. “Our data shows that learners at under-performing schools very often come from families where the nuclear unit had disintegrated. The low level of educational attainment among caregivers, even in households where both biological parents are present, is also a factor because this implies that parents are not able to meaningfully assist learners with homework.” The other two types of underperforming schools classified by the study are those that are *getting by*, where systems are functioning, but not very efficiently; and *non-functioning*, where systems have completely broken down. The study revealed that most underperforming schools were found in poor

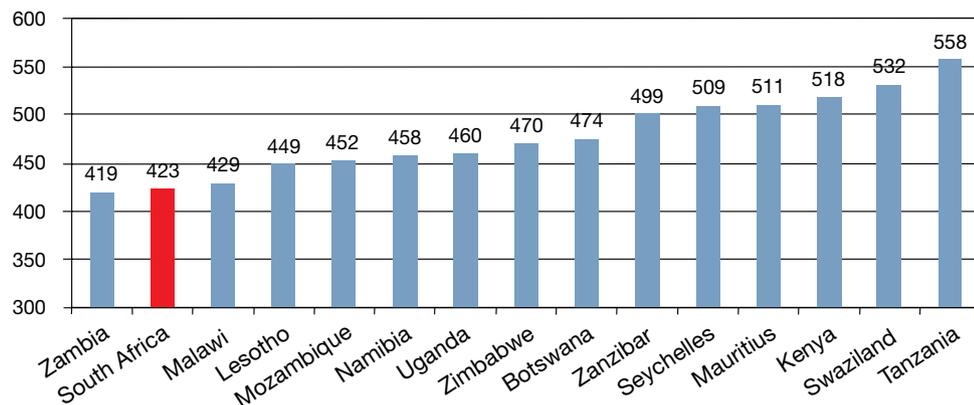
communities that exhibited dysfunctional traits such as crime, violence, gang activities, alcoholism and substance abuse – and this influenced learners’ attitude and ability to engage with educational programmes.

“A striking characteristic revealed by our research was the high level of grade repetition at underperforming schools,” say Bayat and Louw. Repetition rates were higher for boys than girls. They were also higher in rural underperforming schools than urban ones. According to their study, one of the main reasons for this chronic underperformance is the current government policy which states that a child may only be ‘held back’ once per educational phase. “This imperative forces schools to promote learners to the next grade without them having mastered the necessary subject knowledge and educational competencies as demanded by the curriculum.” The consequence of promoting children to a level beyond their competency can be extremely damaging. “Learners feel lost and disengaged and their behaviour becomes disruptive. Teachers, in turn, feel demoralised and experience a sense of failure when large numbers of their learners continuously fail. In fact, our findings suggest that the high dropout rate in Grade 10 at underperforming schools is, to a significant extent, a consequence of this policy.”

**Why are we underperforming?**

There is more to the underperformance of South African schools, particularly in poor communities, than just grade repetition. “Some point to poverty and lack of resources as the reason, but is this really the case?” asks Servaas van der Berg from the University of Stellenbosch’s Department of Economics, lead researcher in the *Low quality education as a poverty trap* study. Although inadequate facilities and resources definitely play a role and are a common denominator in most underperforming schools, ranging from the absence of playgrounds to the appalling state and lack of toilets, van der Berg points out that other African countries that are even poorer and have fewer resources than South Africa have actually performed much better in Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) surveys. In fact, of the 15 countries assessed in tests evaluating the reading proficiency of the poorest 25% of children in each country, South Africa came 14th, making it the second worst, beating only Zambia. Maths scores were also abysmal, with South Africa coming in 12th. “These results answer the question as to what extent poverty is the constraining effect in South Africa,” reiterates Gustafsson. “Clearly there is a lot one can do despite poverty and it does not necessarily place a ceiling on what we can achieve in schools that cater for poor learners.”

Reading performance of poorest quarter in SACMEQ 2007



According to van der Berg, curriculum coverage and frequency of mathematics and literacy exercises are extremely low and strongly associated with poor performance. “The respondents in our research – educators, principals, School Management Teams (SMTs) and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) – repeatedly stressed the view that primary schools are failing to lay a solid educational foundation, especially with regard to numeracy and literacy,” agree Bayat and Louw. Their research reveals that although over 60% of all grade repetitions at underperforming schools occurred during secondary school, this can, to a significant extent, be attributed to underperforming primary schools. Other causes are that “the difficulty level of what is covered in class (some of which is rooted in weak teacher subject knowledge) is simply too low, the pace too slow, there are too many interruptions – and most principals are not really interested enough about how much teaching and learning is really happening in classrooms,” says van der Berg. “That is why the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) that were introduced this year are potentially so important. These are tests written by all children in a grade across the country, and then marked by the teachers in the school. These tests provide teachers with a better idea of the level of difficulty of the assessments they should set their classes, they indicate to them what work they should have covered, and they could also provide a valuable comparison of how well their classes are performing relative to others in similar schools, or against the country average.”

The ANAs are one way to address the problem of underperforming schools. But Bayat and Louw feel that schools should also be allowed to fail learners that do not achieve the required standard in examinations, acknowledging that addressing the issue of forced promotion is but one aspect of improving the education system. “Learners in underperforming schools are facing a double challenge: they are not adequately prepared for the demands of a secondary school curriculum and class sizes makes individual tuition and regular support from teachers impossible,”

they add, suggesting some type of compulsory national grade 7 assessment to make sure that those leaving primary school are competent to enter Grade 8 at secondary school as one way of addressing this.

Reducing the teacher-to-learner ratio by providing more classrooms to address overcrowding and increasing the number of teachers are other possible solutions. “While the consequences of forced promotion are central to our findings on underperforming schools, there are various other issues that also impact critically on the school environment. The lack of management capacity and leadership of specifically school principals, SMTs and SGBs is one such area. The devastating effect of teacher knowledge and absenteeism is another. However, possibly the most important additional issue to resolve is the official language policy practiced at South African schools. English and Afrikaans as mediums of instruction profoundly debilitate both the learning and teaching process at underperforming secondary schools in the Western Cape that cater for predominantly Xhosa-speaking learners.”

Finally, Bayat and Louw recommend a bridging mechanism to address both school and non-school issues and pull together programmes and interventions by all stakeholders in society. “Given the multi-faceted nature of factors giving rise to underperformance, an integrated response requires the involvement of government, civil society, business and the community,” they conclude.

Parents can also play a crucial role in taking a stand against inferior education, but many do not know what they should be expecting of their schools, explains Van der Berg. “Only when parents have a better understanding of the quality of the education that their children receive will there be appropriate indignation or anger at schools that are failing them. We need this information to empower our communities. As a nation, we cannot continue with a situation where only one tenth of our schools really provide acceptable quality education. Our children deserve better.”



Photo: Turnelo Lerole, Blue Media

# Case study: Researcher as policy-maker

P>AN continues to explore the importance of evidence-based policy-making in this case study, which looks at the role researchers working directly in the policy environment can play in the link between research and policy. Two highly respected and experienced researchers fulfilling just this role are **Martin Gustafsson**, Advisor to the Department of Basic Education and economist attached to Social Policy Research Group, and **Linda Chisholm**, Advisor to the Minister of Basic Education. We interviewed them to find out more.

## ***What are the benefits and drawbacks of being both researcher and policy adviser?***

**Martin:** Being both researcher and policy adviser can sometimes be overwhelming, especially if you work across different organisations simultaneously, as I do. You continuously have to adjust to different ways of doing things, different ways of looking at the same issue. But of course, this is what makes the work exciting. There is some cross-pollination between the education research and education policy worlds in South Africa, but what I would really like to see is, for instance, government policy people taking ‘sabbaticals’ within research organisations and, conversely, more opportunities for academics to spend time at the coalface of policy-making and planning within government. Some of that is happening, but I believe institutions could actively promote such opportunities to a greater degree.”

**Linda:** The main advantage of this role is the insight into and learning about government processes that from the outside can often seem to be impenetrable and mystifying.

## ***Is there a focus on evidence-based policy-making in the education departments?***

**Martin:** There is a stronger emphasis now than there has been at any point since 1994. Policy people will often tell you the constraint lies in the lack of data and relevant research and to a large degree, this is true. But while I’m a great supporter of smarter data collection and the filling of data gaps, I also believe that we seriously underestimate what can be done with existing

data. The data we have in education in South Africa is not bad by developing country standards but I think the trick is to use what we have more creatively, making comparisons across different data sources and making informed judgments about what is happening.

**Linda:** There is undoubtedly a focus within the national Department of Basic Education (DBE), and probably some, but not all, of the provincial departments. But it is important to think about what we mean by evidence-based policy. It can sometimes simply be research that uses evidence to legitimise a policy that government may want to implement. We need to take into account that not all research done for departments is of equally good quality.

## ***How should research be presented to policy-makers?***

**Martin:** Decision-makers often don’t have the time to read everything that’s available in their area and find some of the language used in the research inaccessible and obscure. Moreover, nothing puts a policy-maker off more than a maze of research articles pointing in different directions. Building the bridge between the worlds of academia and government is vital and policy briefs as well as well-structured policy conversations are a large part of the solution. But the skills needed for this should not be underestimated. It is not a matter of copying and pasting a lot of abstracts, to put it crudely. Policy-makers need carefully considered assessments of the different findings, which may appear contradictory. This is obviously not a simple task. The problem is often that it’s not clear who should do this work. Often, policy-makers expect researchers to produce this kind of meta-analyses,

while researchers believe that policy-makers will themselves iron out any contradictions in their minds. The result is that no one does this work. I think both government and the researchers should devote more time to this important task.

**Linda:** Our current Minister, Deputy Minister and Director General of Basic Education are persuaded by evidence. Policy briefs are a common and recognised communication tool for policy researchers. The trick is to communicate the message of a 150-page research paper in a few clear sentences in a conversation with any of them – not just in written communication, but when you bump into them in the Checkers queue, stepping off the plane, or over tea at a conference.

## ***Can you give us some insight into the policy development and implementation processes?***

**Martin:** A lot of concern is currently devoted to translating policy into effective implementation, with many believing that we have good policies but poor implementation, but I think this is less true than we like to think. I think implementation could be facilitated if our policies were clearer, accompanied by more logical tools (from school management manuals to workbooks for use in the classroom), and if we made it clearer which policies applied and which were old, cancelled or redundant, because policy confusion is a big problem. But then there is also a pure implementation problem and I believe we could gain a lot by relying less exclusively on traditional top-down command-and-control methods and relying a bit more on creating space for schools and teachers who prove their capabilities.

# Spotlight on the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU)

**Linda:** It is commonplace among policy researchers that the policy decision-making process is not linear but complex. Policy researchers who do not understand how government works often assume that policy can be changed or made at the snap of a policy recommendation in a report. One simple recommendation may, for example, have implications and ramifications that researchers often would not dream existed. The path from making a recommendation to its adoption, let alone implementation, is a lengthy one. Although this is something I have always known in theory, seeing why and how this is the case in practice can be instructive.

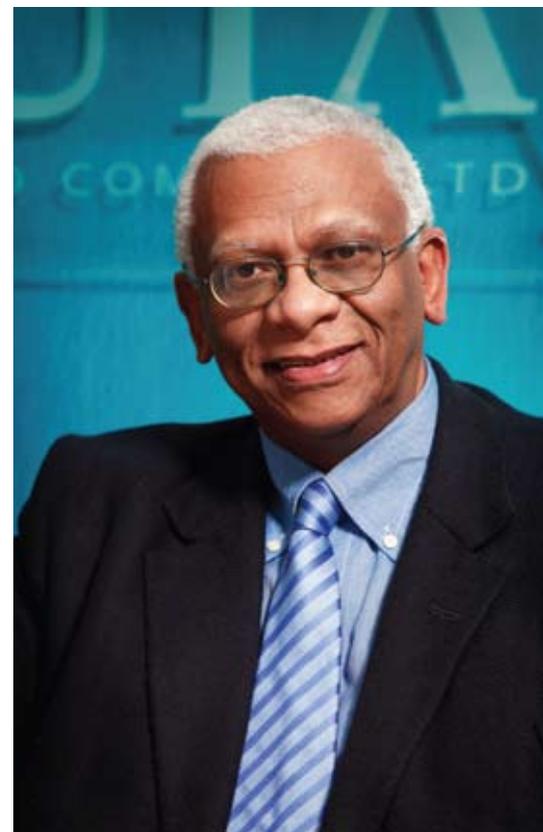
## **How do you think we can improve the “pull” of research into policy, that is, get departments to look for research that speaks to the policy they are developing/revising?**

**Linda:** Bear in mind that not all research is good and worth taking up. But the DBE did recently hold a research forum on its proposed research priorities for researchers in the educational community to engage, discuss and amend. This kind of formal dialogue is critical. It gives researchers the opportunity to insert their own priorities. But informal modes of communication are also important. Policy researchers and makers often share common concerns – their points of intervention are simply different. Getting to know one another as friends so that communication is easy can enhance the traction of good research in the policy environment.

Launched earlier this year, the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) aims to provide the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, with a mechanism for the independent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the education system, including schools, districts, provinces and the Department of Basic Education itself. “The entire system has to be monitored and evaluated in terms of how it is able or unable to support schools, learners, teachers, school managers, workers and parents,” says Motshekga. An important aspect of NEEDU is that it is impartial and must exercise its powers and perform its functions in the public interest without fear, favour or prejudice; but the Unit must also recognise the disproportionate and unequal nature of the system of education in terms of infrastructure, resources and capacity and must identify methods and strategies to achieve equality and equity.

Although the performance of the whole education system is vital, the Unit will particularly focus on schools because, as Motshekga points out, schools are at the heart of the Department’s delivery and the main purpose for its existence. NEEDU’s CEO, Professor John Volmink, agrees. “Schools are the central building blocks of the education system and that means meaningful change can only come from within them.” But Volmink also emphasises that good quality education is not just up to teachers; district officials, circuit officials and department officials all have a role to play. Volmink said he envisaged that over time, all the role players in the education system would monitor and evaluate themselves, and the Unit’s role would eventually just involve the auditing of this self-evaluation.

Although M&E is central to NEEDU’s role, the Unit will perform many other functions as well, including identifying the factors that inhibit or advance school improvement; make recommendations for redressing the problem areas that undermine school improvement; and propose appropriate solutions to ensure that schools offer effective education for all learners.



*Professor John Volmink, CEO, NEEDU*

# The challenges of getting research into policy in developing countries

Very often, the challenges of getting research into policy and practice are different – and in many ways more challenging – in developing countries. For example, the institutionalised interactions between researchers and policy-makers, which are common in more developed countries, are not always systematic or comprehensive in developing countries. The benefits of such ‘institutionalised’ interactions are clearly evident in our *Researcher as policy-maker* case study, and without them, more informal personal interactions are often relied on. However,

this can lead to an over-reliance on certain advisors and result in a skewed view of current research which can affect governance.

Another challenge is that implementation barriers are often far greater in developing countries and therefore good policy can be compromised by inadequate administrative ability and a lack of monitoring and accountability. The high turnover of staff in both research organisations and government departments can also lead to a lack of continuity or ongoing insight into policy problems.

But these challenges also present opportunities for intermediary institutions (groups which bridge the gap between research and policy-makers, for example, independent media and think tanks): they can ensure that important research is being made available to policy-makers and that both policy-makers and researchers have the capacity to engage with this research and with each other.

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.  
Nelson Mandela

# Resources

## Recent research

### Value in the classroom: The quantity and quality of South Africa's teachers

([http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a\\_id=406](http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a_id=406))  
Summarises the findings of in-depth studies into the supply of, demand for, and quality of South Africa's teachers, particularly in respect of maths and science and presents further research from the Centre for Development and Enterprise since 1996.

### Policy briefs

(<http://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/policybriefs/2011>)  
A number of policy briefs on education were produced by the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Economics during 2011.

### Working papers

(<http://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2011>)  
A series of working papers on education were published by the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Economics during 2011.

### Poverty, race, and children's progress at school in South Africa

(<http://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2011>)  
Investigates inequalities in children's schooling in South Africa in 2008 using community-based data collected by the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS). The related policy brief is available at <http://www.pan.org.za/index.php?module=Pagesetter&type=file&func=get&tid=2&fid=doc&pid=621>

### Stunting and obesity in childhood

(<http://sds.ukzn.ac.za/default.php?3,6,800,4,0>)  
A reassessment using longitudinal data from South Africa.

## Toolkits and guidelines

### Evidence informed policy in education in Europe

(<http://www.eipee.eu/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=YTjhQmGR7qY%3d&tabid=2510&language=en-GB>)

Information on the different types of brokerage activities and mechanisms that are used to link research evidence to policy –with the broad aim of raising awareness of evidence-informed policy in education. The full report and an executive summary are available. –

### Education rights: A guide for practitioners and activists

([http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base\\_id=104&language\\_id=1&erc\\_doc\\_id=5044&category\\_id=44&category\\_type=3](http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base_id=104&language_id=1&erc_doc_id=5044&category_id=44&category_type=3))  
Presents ideas and methods – to implement a human rights-based approach to education.

## Campaigns and networks

### African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results

(<http://copmfdrfrica.ning.com/>)  
A community of over 1 000 practitioners from 37 different African countries and regions.

### Equal Education

(<http://www.equaleducation.org.za/>)  
A South African social movement working for quality and equality in South African education through analysis and activism.

### Herana Gateway: Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa

(<http://www.herana-gateway.org/>)  
This network is being developed to distribute research-based information to experts and decision-makers.

### Public Participation in Education Network

(<http://www.ppen.org.za/>)  
A campaign calling for greater public participation in education in South Africa.

### Policy > Action Network

(<http://www.pan.org.za/networks.html>)  
A number of other Africa-wide networks on education are also listed on the Policy > Action Network website.



## Links

### **Centre for Education Policy Development**

(<http://www.cepd.org.za/>)

Develops alternative education and training policies aimed at promoting the principles of non-racism, equity, democracy, quality education and lifelong learning.

### **Centre for Higher Education Transformation**

(<http://www.chet.org.za/>)

Aims to develop transformation management capacity in the higher education system. The site includes a list and links to tertiary-level institutions in South Africa.

### **Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE)**

(<http://www.create-rpc.org/publications/countrystudies/southafrica/>)

Five-year programme of research funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), with partner institutions in the UK, Bangladesh, Ghana, India and South Africa.

### **Department of Basic Education**

(<http://www.education.gov.za/>)

Policy and other documents are available in the document library.

### **Department of Higher Education and Training**

(<http://www.dhet.gov.za/>)

Particularly see policy and other documents and curriculum documents.

### **HSRC – Education and Skills Development Programme**

(<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/ESD.phtml>)

Researches education, skills development and capability enhancement at the individual, institutional and systemic levels.

### **JET Education Services**

(<http://www.jet.org.za/>)

Non-profit organisation that works with government, the private sector, international development agencies and education institutions to improve the quality of education.

### **Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa**

(<http://www.praesa.org.za/>)

Independent research and development unit attached to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town, focusing on language planning and policy formulation at national and provincial levels.

### **Umalusi**

(<http://www.umalusi.org.za>)

Statutory organisation which monitors and improves the quality of general and further education and training in South Africa.

## Upcoming events

### **Community engagement: The changing role of South African universities in development**

08 - 09 November 2011

(<http://www.pan.org.za/event-96.html>)

Deadline for abstract submissions for this South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) conference is 29 April 2011.

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