

For the first time ever, South Africa has a suitable evaluation system in place

# At last, a real test of quality

## Comment

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**I**f one were to say that 2009 represents a historic year in understanding quality in South Africa's schools, most education commentators would probably not know what you were talking about. This is in fact the first year ever that we will have accurate information on whether primary schools are improving, getting worse or staying the same.

Coincidentally, two results will be released this year. The 2007 grade three results from the Systemic Evaluation will be comparable with those of 2001, and the 2007 grade six results from the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (Sacmeq) will be comparable with those of 2000. One would have expected a bit more nail-biting anticipation of these events.

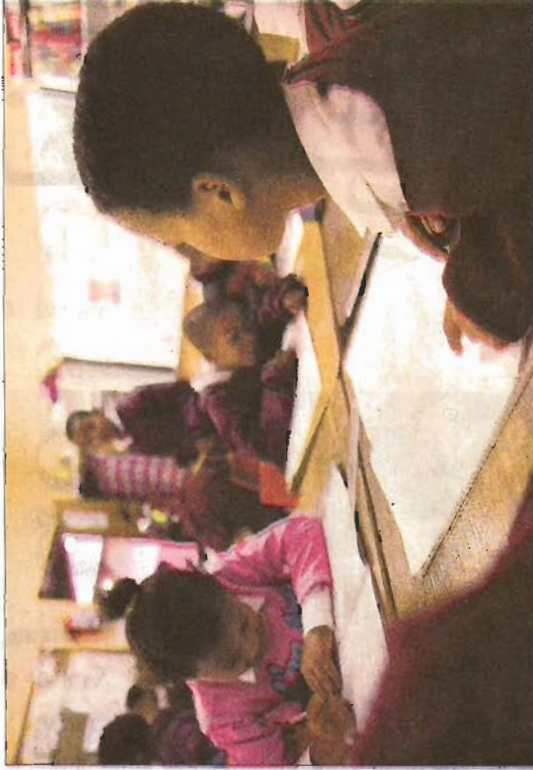
In recent years an awareness has taken root that poor educational quality in our schooling system is a serious national problem, which we need to solve. That we have

arrived at this realisation is a good thing. What is needed now among education commentators is a better awareness of how educational quality is measured, so that we can have an informed debate on government and non-governmental programmes designed to measure quality and tackle its absence.

Work by economists such as Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, who have used data from international school testing programmes to indicate how sensitive economic growth is to a sound basic education, are part of the reason why educationists, and often non-educationists, are paying closer attention to the measurement of educational quality.

The fact that we have done badly in the international tests has been reported on rather well, often with the additional spice of some bashing of the schooling system. Yes, we came bottom in the 2003 grade eight Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Timss) — not bottom of the world as some have put it, but bottom among the 20 developing nations that take education seriously enough to participate in Timss (in Africa our co-participants were Botswana, Ghana, Egypt and Morocco).

In the regional 2000 grade six



**A grade two class at Soetendal Primary School. Quality problems start at the primary level and therefore this is the focus of the new assessment system.** Photo: David Harrison

Sacmeq mathematics test, we fared better than Namibia, Malawi and Zambia, somewhat worse than Botswana, but much worse than Kenya (where government's annual spending per learner is about a quarter of what it is in South Africa).

The reasons for our underperformance are to a large degree found in our historically black schools, where even if post-apartheid policies now rule, most teachers, at least 80%, received the bulk of their training under apartheid.

But a curious fact that seems to elude most commentators is that even the historically advantaged segments of our society appear not to fare well. We saw this pattern again in the recent 2006 grade five Progress in International Reading Literacy Study tests, where our best 10% of learners scored on average 570, about the same level as the 10% best in Iran, but well below the top 10% in Trinidad and Tobago (598), Rumania (621), not to speak of the

means good interventions can, by education standards, have a relatively quick impact.

Not only have we become accustomed to participating in international testing programmes, we also have a national testing programme, started in 2001, that has been run three times and reached relative maturity. This programme, the Systemic Evaluation, is the only accurate gauge the country has of whether or not educational quality in schools is improving. That it should rarely be mentioned in our national education debates is not a good sign.

The famous matric exam pass rate, which is lavishly reported upon, is in fact a rather poor indicator of educational quality, not just because examination standards might intentionally or unintentionally change over time, but also because the profile of the youths who do not write the examinations changes from year to year, as do the subject combinations of those who do write. One is therefore comparing apples with pears.

Examination systems are good at giving people qualifications, but they are rarely reliable measures of the educational quality trend. The Systemic Evaluation, on the other hand, tests a sample representing all learners, at the primary level (which is of course where the quality problem starts), using tests that are comparable across time. It is programmes such as these that have become the gold standard in the more educationally ambitious developing countries in recent years.

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top performers of developed countries such as the United States (650) and New Zealand (663).

In the Hanushek and Woessmann model, the quality of South Africa's basic education, across all socioeconomic strata, stands out as the Achilles heel of our economic development. Our educational quality indicators appear much less healthy than other key indicators such as our governance, saving and competitiveness indicators. The quality of our schools is too big an issue to be just an education issue.

Government's focus on the quality problem has improved, with the past five years or so seeing the launching of a number of ambitious intervention programmes focusing specifically on what learners learn. Despite the widely reported problem of near-dysfunctional pockets in the provincial education bureaucracies, the fact that more than 95% of the country's schools are subject to the same set of national policies