

# THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

*Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality*

A summary of research undertaken for the Mandela Initiative, May 2017  
Supported by the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation

## Improving education for the poor

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### 1. What is the project about and why is it important?

The SARChI chair on the Economics of Social Policy, Servaas van der Berg, and his Resep team (Resep stands for *Research on the Economics of Social Policy*) have been researching issues in the economics of education. This included analysis of a large number of education data sets, including international education evaluations that South Africa has participated in, such as TIMSS (testing Grade 10 learners in Mathematics and Science), PIRLS (testing Grade 4 and 5 learners in Reading Literacy) and SACMEQ (testing grade 6 children in Reading and Mathematics). In addition, the team also looked at how education outcomes feed into outcomes in the labour market, thereby influencing poverty and income distribution.

The funding received through the Mandela Initiative supplemented that obtained through the SARChI NRF chair itself, as well as funding from the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), a collaboration effort between the Presidency and the European Union, and also from the Zenex Foundation. These joint inputs made possible a large number of outputs, including three published research reports (available at Resep):

- “Identifying Binding Constraints in Education”
- “A Society Divided – How Unequal Education Quality Limits Social Mobility in South Africa”
- “Laying Firm Foundations – Getting Reading Right”

### 2. What are the main research findings to date?

After synthesising years’ worth of collaborative research effort from contributors across economics, education and policy-making arenas, the unanimous conclusion is reached that quality improvements in basic education, particularly learning to read in the foundation phase, are a national priority.



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Earlier work by this team has identified low quality education as the main poverty trap holding back upward mobility of children from poor families. Despite significant improvements and pro-poor spending shifts in education in post-apartheid South Africa, too many young children in the country are still failing to master the basics of learning. PrePIRLS 2011, a nationally representative literacy test of Grade 4 students in predominantly home language, indicates that 58% of these children have not yet learnt to read for meaning in any language, and that 29% of Grade 4s are reading illiterate. Not being able to read becomes a binding constraint for children as they progress further into the schooling system. Students who have failed to learn to read cannot subsequently read to learn. For all subjects, the curriculum assumes that children have learned how to read by the end of Grade 3. But, as most children in South Africa do not acquire the most basic reading skills, they never fully accessing the curriculum despite being promoted to higher grades. For this reason, the reports recommend that the Department of Basic Education should adopt a unifying goal: “Every child in South Africa must learn to read for meaning by the end of Grade 3”.

A fundamental concern is that learning in schools is highly unequal with respect to the socio-economic status of children and their race group. For instance, it was found that there is achievement gap of almost three years between Grade 3 learners in the wealthiest quintile 5 schools and those in other schools. The gap widens to 3.5 years by Grade 9, with a projected gap of four years by Grade 12 (Spaull & Kotze, 2015). These learning backlogs essentially preclude many poor children from meaningful subsequent learning, including achieving a bachelors’ pass in matric – necessary for university acceptance and an important signal in the labour market (Van der Berg, 2015).

Weak teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, particularly in poorer schools, are possibly the dominant constraints for system improvement. Only 32% of Grade 6 teachers in South Africa have a desirable teacher content knowledge level. In Kenya this figure was 90%, 76% in Zimbabwe and 55% in Swaziland (Hungu et al., 2011, p. 52).

### 3. What is the significance of these findings?

These stark realities present significant consequences for social mobility, success in the labour market, inequalities and economic growth. Differences in education quality are at the root of South Africa’s high levels of income inequality. This is explained in Van der Berg’s depiction of



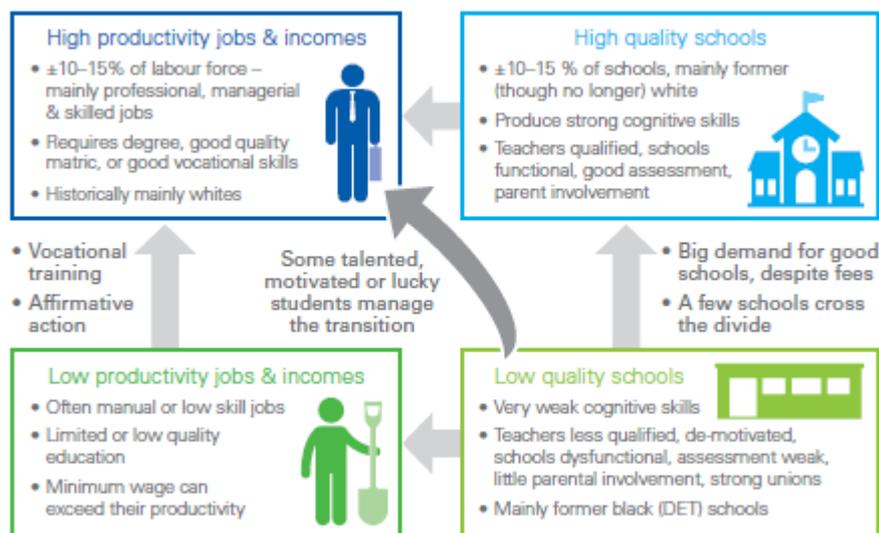
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the dualistic natures of both the school system and the labour market and how they are linked together (figure below). Important new evidence also finds that learners who attend poor quality schools in South Africa generally earn substantially less than those who attend good quality schools, even when they have the same education levels (Burger & Teal, 2016).

**Figure E1:** South Africa's dualistic school system and labour market



Source: Van der Berg (2015).

#### 4. What are the wider policy implications?

What is clear is that, until we raise the quality of education service delivery to the poor, intervening as early as possible, South Africa will not circumvent wider income inequalities. In this research this policy challenge is approached through the following lens: certain constraints to improvement must be tackled first as they preclude progress in other areas. It is not possible for governments to tackle all things well. Prioritisation is necessary. Four binding constraints to improved educational outcomes that must be addressed are identified:

1. Weak institutional functionality reflected in provincial department weaknesses in fulfilling critical administrative functions.
2. Undue union influence on administrations' ability to act in children's best interests.
3. Wasted learning time.
4. Weak teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, including skills to teach reading.

For more on the Mandela Initiative research projects, see:

[www.mandelainitiative.org.za/research/research-areas-themes.html](http://www.mandelainitiative.org.za/research/research-areas-themes.html)

