

COMMENT

Public Participation in Education Network

Over the past two years we have been coming together as concerned South Africans, committed to public participation in education, and the realisation of quality education for all.

Building up to the World Cup, we have come together to build a coalition of civil society organisations to mobilise around our common concern for quality education for all of our children. On the day before the opening of the World Cup, more than 40 organisations of civil society marched to Constitution Hill to express our shared concern and commitment to education. Teacher unions, affiliates of Cosatu, student, youth and parent organisations, NGOs and concerned citizens came to make a stand for a stronger commitment to the future of our children.

President Jacob Zuma is planning to hold a summit of national leaders during the 2010 World Cup to focus the world's attention on the importance of global education. The venue is likely to be well resourced, the speeches dignified – with little relationship to the pain experienced by so many of our children in classrooms that disrespect their humanity. While it may be desirable to use the energies of the World Cup to recommit world leaders to global commitments, the juxtaposition of the “wealth” of these high-profile events and the contrasting realities of schooling for the majority of our children is difficult to reconcile. Far too often these events become global “branding” moments – but we cannot “brand” our way out of a

system of dismal education: we must speak, act, and invest in fundamentally different ways.

South Africa represents a painful challenge for the world's movement for global education for all. The global movement has tried to package the global problem of education on two specific indicators. They are calling on all nations of the world to invest a certain proportion of GDP into education, and they are calling on all nations of the world ensure that all children can enter a school building during their primary schooling years – they call this “access”. If these are our two measures for “quality education for all”, then we in South Africa can technically claim a victory. We invest more than the minimum percentage of GDP in education; and we can claim that the majority of our children have “access” to primary schooling.

South Africa represents a painful challenge to this way campaigning globally for education. We meet these “indicators” and yet our system of education is in crisis.

A genuine democracy must accept that all children – regardless of ethnic background, home language, “race” or socio economic origins – should have a fighting chance to become good readers, writers, and contributors to society. While many tourists will leave South Africa with images of well manicured urban centres, the majority of our children go to schools that fall painfully short of the objectives of quality education.

Despite initiatives, policies and good intentions, we continue to perpetuate a two-tier educational system – one for the children of the rich, and another for the children of the urban and rural poor. Too many of our children attend schools that are under-resourced, bleak and fearful places. Too many of our children still do not have access to education in their mother tongue,

and, shamefully, too many of our children are forced to “learn” on an empty stomach.

We spent over R63 billion on the World Cup, yet over 90% of our schools do not have libraries and laboratories. This is an own goal! We also continue to neglect Early Childhood Education and most of our schools are not disabled friendly and a quarter of our 25 000 schools have more than 45 learners per classroom. Moreover, there is an acute shortage of teachers.

Comparative statistics show that the South African system of education is particularly unfit for increasing the life chances of a child born into poverty. Children from well-resourced families and communities tend to do well. Children from rural and urban poor and working-class families have very little access to quality educational outcomes.

Our educational system continues to reproduce the characteristics of our apartheid past. While policy-makers are quick to blame the poor outcomes on the lack of commitment of teachers, the patterns suggest something bigger – that we have not yet created the conditions for educational success in the schools serving the majority of our children. This is our collective responsibility.

The awkward challenge of South Africa is this. If a group of children can enter schooling in their early years, but have systematically almost no chance of achieving access to further education and training, then this child does not have access to meaningful education. Education may have access to that child, but the child does not have access to education. If we applied this to our divided South Africa, we could find that the children who

have true “access” to educational success remains under 20%. That is a less pretty, but more real story.

The World Cup is an important moment – it has knocked the myths that we as South Africans have become used to. First, we can see that if something is really important to us as a nation, we can find resources to support a phenomenal project like education. Second, we have the capacity. The World Cup matches have been run smoothly – the South African infrastructure has been safe, friendly, and service oriented. So can our schools.

And so for the world leaders who come together into the upcoming summit, we have some suggestions.

1. More than 72-million children remain out of school across the globe. This is untenable. We should not allow ourselves to come together in celebration until we have eliminated this indignity. That gives the global community four years if we want to come together in dignity for the next World Cup.
2. Education is not “achieved” by the provision of a classroom and a teacher. Education is achieved when a majority of our children succeed in education, beyond the social divides of gender, race, language and other socio-economic differences. When children have little to no chance at educational success, we cannot accept that they have “access” to education.
3. There are certain basic conditions that create the possibility for learning and teaching. Unless these conditions are in place for all children, we are not investing enough in education. While certain recurrent expenditure of GDP may be an international benchmark, most nations of

the South have been denied the initial upfront investment assumed by that benchmark.

4. If we can invest and “win” by holding a World Cup, we must be held responsible for investing in the minimal infrastructural conditions that provide children and teachers a chance for success.

While we call on all world leaders to invest more in public education, we hold the South African government to a higher bar. We have demonstrated our ability to invest in projects like the World Cup and we have demonstrated our capacity for success. No more time to “look away” from the massive investments required in education.

To all who live with us in South Africa, and to our fellow Africans of this continent, we say: Quality education will not be achieved by governments alone. We will have to organise to keep pressure on governments to achieve results. And we will have to become active in our families, communities and educational centres to ensure that children are surrounded by love, reading, writing, thinking and discussing – so that we keep claiming the tools of education for our own lives and the lives of our children.

The coming together of this civil society coalition represents an important victory over this period. We continue to invite concerned organisations and individuals to join a voluntary network, as we build our strength and activities into the future. The objective of this loose coalition of local networks is to advocate and campaign for education more effectively than we can when we are working alone. We are striving to bring the network together for a **national conference** later in **2010**. The purpose of this conference is to mobilise around the project of education, to share our

experiences in education, find areas of common concern, and determine strategies for the network.

The world will learn many things from South Africa during this World Cup. One of them must be the pain of inequity. Another, a public united in the future of its children.

This article is written by the interim steering committee of the Public Participation in Education Network (PPEN), which is a national network of concerned citizens committed to quality public education for all in South Africa. See www.ppen.org.za