



Inferior Infrastructure in Rural and Township Schools

1. Introduction

Part of the National Development Plan's vision is that, by 2030, South Africans will have universal early childhood education, high-quality schooling, and full access to further education and training.¹ The achievement of this vision stands to be seriously hindered by poor school infrastructure, since infrastructure plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process. There are still thousands of schools that lack proper sanitation, water, buildings, etc. According to the Department of Basic Education's *National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS)* report, there were 3 544 schools with no electricity and 913 with no ablution facilities, while 3 532² were still using pit latrine toilets. There were 2 402 schools with no water supply, while a further 2 611 schools had an unreliable water supply. There are also currently over 400 schools in the Eastern Cape that are classified as 'mud schools', many of them consisting of mud and corrugated iron.³

It is most likely that these schools will be found in the townships and deep rural areas. In the NEIMS report, published in May 2011, the provinces that were most deeply affected were the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal; they had the highest number of schools in the worst condition.⁴ What is perhaps most troubling is that, although infrastructure is but one of the many problems plaguing the school system, it is the problem which is most directly in government's hands to fix. The solutions are technically straightforward; what seems to be missing is the political will to implement them.

2. Infrastructure Problems in Schools

The tragic death of five year old Lumka Mketwa, who drowned in a pit toilet at Luna Primary School in Bizana in the Eastern Cape on 12th March this

year, is the second of its kind that has been reported in South Africa. The death of this young scholar is exactly the same as the one that occurred four years ago, when Michael Komape fell into a pit latrine at his school, Mahlodumela Primary School, near Polokwane, and drowned in faeces.

These horrific deaths are what has been made known by the DBE, but there could have been many more similar incidents, perhaps not fatal but deeply traumatic, that have not been reported. The question that obviously arises is, how many more school children need to die such horrific deaths for the DBE to start meeting the required standards for schools in these rural and township areas? But in addition, these deaths raise the broader question of the type of environment children are taught in. Is it sufficiently conducive for them to learn effectively and to develop into young adults with the skills to go on to tertiary education?

There is also a problem with the facilities that are supposed to be present at each and every school, such as libraries, computer rooms and science labs. These facilities are often missing in schools in rural areas, and children who do not enjoy access to them effectively receive an inferior education. Some schools do not even have sports fields, or extra-mural activities such as art and drama, which are meant to be part of the learning process.

It is thus clear that the level of education received in the rural areas is generally inferior to that in urban areas, largely due to the relative lack of facilities and infrastructure available in these schools.

3. Rural Disadvantage

In the rural areas the majority of people come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, characterised by poor housing, poverty and a lack of formal education. Distances are great and communications often poor; public transport is virtually non-existent, and private transport, even minibus taxis, is expensive. For all these reasons, parents may lack the knowledge or confidence to know where and how to lodge complaints and to make the DBE aware of problems at schools. And even if they do know who to approach, it may be logistically impossible for them to do so.

The fact that so many rural schools are in such an appalling condition highlights the difference between them and most urban schools. In an urban setting, parents and children are much more likely to assert their rights, and there would be ways and means of getting the message to the DBE and of ensuring that some sort of intervention takes place. In urban schools campaigns can be run to make the DBE aware of the issues that they face; something that one does not often find in the rural areas.

4. Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure

On 12 September 2013, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga published new *Draft Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure* under the South Africans Schools Act of 1996. However, the NGO Equal Education, which consists of learners, parents, teachers and community members, raised concerns about this document, especially the lack of detailed timeframes and accountability measures. Indeed, these concerns appear to have been justified: the basic norms and standards were intended to meet certain targets by 2016, but it is clear that they have not succeeded, even two years later, if there are still children dying in such horrific scenes.

The DBE published the *Regulations Relating to Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public Schools Infrastructure* during November 2013. This was the first time that Government had set itself targets of this nature in terms of school infrastructure, and it was done because the sector acknowledged that the status quo could not continue, where schools did not have access to water, electricity or sanitation.⁵ While it did make some progress, the department missed the

first deadline contained in the regulations, which required that, by 2016, there should be no schools built from inappropriate materials, such as wood, mud, zinc or asbestos; and that all schools should have water, sanitation and electricity. Earlier this year, Parliament's Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA) heard that the DBE "had managed to build only 16 out of 59 schools, provided sanitation at 10 schools out of the targeted 265, and water to 10 out of 280 targeted schools. It was most worrisome that electricity had not been delivered to any of the targeted 620 schools."⁶

The fact that in 2018 there are still issues with regard to school infrastructure raises many concerns, particularly around what the DBE has been doing to rectify the old and worn-out schools in townships and rural areas. As a democratic nation with deep socio-economic challenges, South Africa needs to be continually developing; having thousands of schools with inadequate infrastructure does not give any sort of indication of development.

5. The 2018 DBE Budget Allocation

The education of South Africa's youth was highlighted as one of the top three national priorities in Finance Minister Malusi Gigaba's 2018 budget speech. Accordingly, the DBE has been allocated an amount of R246.8 billion, and from this an amount of R3.8 billion is meant to cover school infrastructure backlogs.⁷ Given the overall amount allocated to the DBE, and the huge needs outlined earlier in this paper for school sanitation, electrification, water-supply, etc., it may be questioned whether this allocation is sufficient.

Certainly, the slow progress suggests that there are many backlogs and goals that are not being met. These goals are also hindered by the process of budget allocation cuts, figures relating to which were tabled during the 2018/2019 DBE Budget Vote (Vote 14)

"The education infrastructure grant, which provides co-funding for the ongoing infrastructure programme in provinces, including the maintenance of existing infrastructure and the building of new infrastructure, is reduced by R10.9 billion (R7.3 billion shifted to the school infrastructure backlogs grant and R3.6 billion as part of Cabinet approved reductions) to R31.7 billion over the medium term. The department

expects that these reductions will lead to delays in completing outstanding projects."⁸

To be fair, though, the DBE has to rely on information and requests received from the provincial education departments in order to assess the state of school infrastructure and to decide how much money it needs to devote to this expenditure item. If the provincial departments do not take the infrastructure problem seriously (and it seems that some don't) then it is difficult for the national DBE to know what is happening on the ground. Likewise, it is the provincial departments that ultimately spend the money and decide which needs to prioritise. If they lack capacity, or are affected by corruption and maladministration, all the money in the world will not resolve the infrastructure problem.

6. Conclusion

There is a need for proper evaluation processes when it comes to the allocation of funds and the implementation of projects relating to school infrastructure. There should also be formal timelines and rigorous monitoring in the provinces most deeply affected. But it is not all up to Government: other stakeholders can also assist, by donating funds or equipment to needy schools, or by helping to improve access to water and sanitation, for example. The norms and standards

for infrastructure need to be reviewed regularly, and the required deadlines may need to be adjusted so that they are reasonable and can be met on time.

Clearly, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in the formal education system in South Africa. Infrastructure is just one of the problems that plays a role in the lack of performance in schools, and this is why it is important for it to be checked and monitored on a regular basis. Formal education is important and the conditions under which it is conducted need to be up to standard. Otherwise, as time goes by learners will start getting frustrated and will stop going to school altogether. They will not accept being taught in dilapidated buildings, with no proper water and sanitation facilities. This will further reduce the number of learners that successfully emerge from the formal education system; and this, in turn, can only negatively affect our country's future development and its transition to a more equal society.

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¹ <https://www.gov.za/issues/national-development-plan-2030>

² <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1904482/3532-pit-tiolets-in-south-african-schools-prompts-da-countrywide-visit/>

³ <https://equaleducation.org.za/campaigns/school-infrastructure/>

⁴ <https://edulibpretoria.files.wordpress.com/2008/01/school-infrastructure-report-2011.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/Thuto%20117%20Final.pdf?ver=2016-11-23-090857-673>

⁶ <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/25866/>

⁷ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/budgetspeech2018-basic-education-allocated-r2468-billion-13407118>

⁸ <http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2018/enebooklets/Vote%2014%20Basic%20Education.pdf>