



# Quality education

**SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning**

*Image by Schools Improvement Initiative.*

[www.research.uct.ac.za/research-report-2015-16](http://www.research.uct.ac.za/research-report-2015-16)



# Improving schools to improve life chances

Despite significant advances in education provision in South Africa since its transition to democracy in 1994, the educational possibilities for South African students, especially in high-poverty areas, remain bleak. While there may be improved access to education, deep inequalities remain with regard to the quality of educational provision; and ultimately, to the educational achievement of the majority of South Africa's school-going youth.

"Our trouble is not that South African children don't go to school," says Dr Jonathan Clark, director of the Schools Development Unit and the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII). "The trouble is that what they learn there does not improve their life chances." There is global acknowledgement that a university's destiny is inextricably linked to that of its community. This acknowledgement is very much the driving force behind the SII. While there are a number of school-development initiatives and programmes across the university, the SII is unique in that it functions as a conduit to help facilitate and draw on the university's broader focus on schooling, which it channels into its partner schools.

## How SII works

The SII, established by Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price in 2012, has become a global trailblazer with respect to school-university partnerships. Making full use of the resources the university has to offer,

the SII is collaborating with disciplines in the health sciences, speech and language therapy, library and, information studies and social development to develop a more holistic approach to school development, and to work with those schools in the context of their communities.

"The SII was always intended to be an action-based initiative, but that does not mean it is not research-informed and does not involve research activities," says Clark.

The SII formed close partnerships with five schools in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha. These schools were chosen through a careful selection process based on a number of factors, including evidence of improved learner performance, and levels of involvement in teacher development and school-management improvement. In those partnerships, the SII set about achieving a number of objectives. Clark and his colleague and project manager Dr Patti Silbert stress that the objectives of the SII's engagement were





developed in partnership with the schools themselves. They include, among other initiatives, teacher and school organisational development, equipping learners with the skills they need for tertiary education through the 100UP project, and the development of professional-practice schools in which university students and researchers use the schools for their professional training. The professional-practice schools are linked, with the objective of broader institutional engagement. It is through the building of professional-practice schools that the SII collaborates with other disciplines and faculties, to draw on the broader institutional resources in order to enrich the school-university partnership.

### Unique interdisciplinary model

For both Clark and Silbert, the interdisciplinarity of the SII model is uniquely significant. Being able to access and use the range of professional capital a university has to offer allows the SII to harness expertise into the partner schools (including all 20 secondary schools in Khayelitsha) in a way that is focused on the schools' needs. The collaborating faculties also gain from their involvement in the initiative, in that the exposure allows them to generate new practices that are more appropriate and applicable to the community context than if they were doing their traditional discipline-specific practice.

For students registered for the Bachelor of Social Work, the SII provides a great opportunity to complete their compulsory field practice. The fieldwork in the schools has also been fertile ground for postgraduates to develop research questions. But importantly, notes Fatima Williams (a lecturer in the Department of Social Development), the provision of social work services in the schools means that all areas of learners' lives receive attention, not just their educational needs.

"The reality of learners is that they are severely impacted by any psychosocial issues, and do not attend school in a vacuum," says Williams. "The social work services offered by the students help the learners not only emotionally, but with their performance at school, too."

In the Faculty of Health Sciences there has been a strong focus on interdisciplinarity between occupational therapy, speech therapy and education students. For Roshan Galvaan, associate professor in the Division of Occupational Therapy, this collaboration has created a space for researchers to consider complex issues beyond disciplinary boundaries.

For all researchers and students participating in the school-university partnership, the community



context is valuable. Students in the Division of Communication Sciences and Disorders – which includes speech language therapy students and audiology students – are developing new approaches to practice within a community development framework.

### Student support strategies

"The students work with the school and community to develop strategies to support and strengthen language-literacy learning, which the school identified as an area of need," says Professor Harsha Kathard of the Department of Health Sciences Education. In her opinion, this opportunity allows the students and researchers to develop collaborative interdisciplinary practices that result in creative, sustainable and responsive practice innovations.

An important part of the SII model for school-university partnership is the focus on reciprocity: both partners benefit from the experience. The schools themselves are actively involved in identifying their own needs.

"The most exciting thing for me about this initiative is how we can be the agents of change in difficult situations. It is a great feeling working with principals who leverage their relationship with us to access the resources and support they know their school needs," says Clark. ○

*By Natalie Simon. Images by the Schools Improvement Initiative.*



### Higher education must change students' agency in the world

"Higher education must change the person, and it must change their capacity to act in the world; what they can do, and how they do it," says Professor Jenni Case, who is based at the Centre for Research in Engineering and Science Education. Her book, *Researching Student Learning in Higher Education: a social realist approach*, won UCT's Meritorious Book Award for 2015.

Change and agency are at the heart of the work, which leaps beyond conventional educational theory and tackles crucial aspects of students' access and success in higher education. Case began her research in the early 2000s, when

she spent a year in class with third-year chemical engineering students at UCT. Her interviews gave her a real sense of their alienation from the higher education system – and how it sometimes fails them.

"There's an assumption that if we 'fix' the first-year transition, everything will be okay," says Case. "But third-year engineering is really tough. The students are already dealing with their evolution as 20-year-olds, living with the multiple legacies of apartheid, dislocated from their home backgrounds, and trying to cope with one of the university's toughest courses – with frighteningly little margin for error."

*Based on a story by Helen Swingler. Image by Michael Hammond.*

### Crisis in education in West Africa must be addressed

It is widely recognised that job creation is a crucial aspect of development, and that broad-based, high-quality education is a valuable input for pro-poor development. Unfortunately, in many West African countries, the majority of the population still cannot read or write, or do simple mathematics. Worryingly low levels of educational quantity (how many children are able to go to school), as well as educational quality (how many of the children who are in school acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills), indicate that there is a crisis of education.

"This must be attended to if growth, and inclusive growth, are to pull people out of poverty and into the labour market at a sufficient rate," says Adaiah Lilenstein of the **Development Policy Research Unit**. Her research is based on five West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Togo). Her findings are based on the Grade 5 regional assessment programme for West Africa, called **PASEC**. The results show that the rate for access to literacy and numeracy (i.e. the proportion of the population that both go to school and acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills at a Grade 5 level) was under 50% for all participating countries, and between 10% and 20% for most. The pattern of access and quality issues

differed between countries. "However, all countries still had disastrously high levels of the three indicators – non-enrolment, drop-out, and lack of learning within school," says Lilenstein.

"With such low rates of literacy and numeracy, how can these countries be expected to create valuable employment for all their citizens?" Lilenstein asks. Getting education right is a crucial first step in the road to eradicating unemployment and poverty, and must be considered a priority by national governments and donors alike.

*The full article was published by the World Bank's Jobs and Development Blog.*

#### Grade 5 access, literacy and access to literacy rates

