

During the recent State of the Nation address, President Ramaphosa called on the country to be part of building the South Africa we want.

After speaking in Parliament, the Presidency took out full page adverts in the national press as part of getting government's message out into the public domain.

In the advertisement he writes: "As South Africa enters the next 25 years of democracy, let us proclaim a bold and ambitious goal, a unifying purpose, to which we dedicate all our resource and energies. Let us agree, as a nation and as a people united in our aspirations, that within the next 10 years we will have the South Africa we want.

- No person in South Africa will go hungry
- Our economy will grow at a much faster rate than our population
- Two million more young people will be in employment
- Every 10-year old will be able to read for meaning
- Violent crime will be halved.

Let us make these commitments now, to ourselves and to each other, knowing that they will stretch our resources and capabilities, but understanding that if we achieve these 5 goals, we will have fundamentally transformed our society. We set these ambitious goals not despite the severe difficulties of the present, but because of them. We set these goals so that the decisions we take now are bolder and we act with greater urgency.



Working together, there is nothing we cannot be, nothing we cannot do, and nothing we cannot achieve."

The big, big question now is: How will this be done? On this the President was very quiet. We have heard large numbers being quoted in many other speeches of senior government officials including past Presidents. My view is that the political will to meet these goals is just not there. Most of this is rhetoric and symbolic – never intended for implementation. For example, enabling every 10-year-old to be able to read for meaning is possible. Just look at the excellent work that NPOs such as Shine and Wordworks are doing. We have the programmes, government must just recognise these and fund their full implementation. This way, these goals can be achieved, but not by political posturing.

Enjoy reading this edition of EARLY YEARS.

ERIC ATMORE
Director

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – BAROMETER OF A FAILING SYSTEM?

~ Cally Kuhne and Ayesha Fakie.

Until our education system shatters the misconceptions about Grade R that stubbornly prevail and effectively resource and deliver quality Grade R education, our school system will continue to hobble learners from the outset of formal schooling.



With elections done and dusted and a new Cabinet finally in place some have noted that the ministries looking after education are as "idealess as they are visibly tired that South African education is going nowhere". It's not hard to see some truth in that when we consider that despite progress the overall education landscape is defined by inequality of opportunity, access, and quality.

Nowhere is this inequality more profound when you consider that educational achievement is "locked in" from the earliest years of schooling. It is entrenched and compounded from year to year as children progress through our education system, failing them and society, resulting in an ever-widening gulf between middle class and working class, between well- and poorly resourced, between urban and rural, between, still, white and black.

Early Childhood Education (ECD) is, by definition, from birth to eight to nine years (Grade 3). In South Africa however, ECD typically refers to birth to four years and, further, often neglects the 5 to 6-year-old Grade R focus. What this means is that children, especially poor black children, are not effectively prepared for school entry and that this deficit is never really made up, dragging educational achievement downwards for both the child and system. The shape and nature of this lack of efficacy in preparedness is brought into sharp relief around mathematics and literacy. These are cornerstones of educational achievement throughout schooling and indeed post

-schooling; fundamental conceptual building blocks that shape educational milestones in years to come even beyond school into Further Education and Training and career.

We know from sensational headlines how poor mathematics and literacy performance is in South Africa compared to other nations. What is less known is that the purpose and importance of mathematics learning in the early years is not properly understood or valued in our country. This is because of misconceptions around how mathematics skills and ideas develop or how best to approach the teaching of mathematics concepts and fundamentals.

Generally, there is very little understanding about what constitutes early literacy and mathematics and the conceptual underpinning that informs later learning in Grade one and beyond. There is also not enough South African research into early mathematics learning and teaching resulting in us continually adapting lessons from elsewhere for our context, to poor results.

What is also not well understood is what mathematics is actually about. Many, including teachers, think mathematics at the Grade R level is about learning to identify and say numbers out loud, adding and subtracting. But mathematics, even at a Grade R level – or especially at that level – involves learning the language that makes use of symbols and notations for describing numerical, geometric and graphical relationships. It is a human activity that involves observing, representing and investigating patterns and qualitative relationships in physical and social phenomena and between mathematical objects themselves.



Young children possess considerable competence in numerical operations, geometry and spatial relationships, measurement, algebraic thinking, and data analysis. Most pre-schoolers count verbally, which serves as an explicit sign to adults of the child's burgeoning number skills. However, research suggests that children have a basic understanding of one-to-one correspondence even before they can enumerate a set of objects verbally. Without counting, they can match up two sets

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of items or point to items in a collection, labelling each with a number, even if it is not the correct number.

Evidence also suggests that they can make a matching collection for one that is not visible but is mentally represented. For example, a toddler who retrieves two dog treats for two pets in another room is saying, in effect, "This [one] is for [the first dog], and this [one] is for [the second dog]." Such intuitive understandings and everyday applications of knowledge may help lay the groundwork for later understandings of numerical equivalence and operations, such as addition and subtraction.

As important as cognitive concepts, mathematics and literacy in Grade R requires that a child understands how their body moves in space and learning how to manipulate objects in space. Young children learn about spatial relationships and shapes while moving through their classroom and outdoor spaces and by manipulating toys such as puzzles and two- and three-dimensional shapes. It goes without saying that this is difficult to do with no puzzles or games, where resources are absent, where the school outdoor spaces are not only lacking but unsafe.



What is interesting is that even where there is quality in teaching and learning in Grade R (when children are five turning six), research tells us that the optimal learning years for mathematics and literacy are between the ages of three and five. Formal teaching, which Grade R forms part of, is thus compensatory from the outset resulting in a deficit-based approach. This is compounded when accounting for factors such as home language versus medium of instruction, level of parent education and their comfort in the instructional languages, time available for working class parents to spend with their children reading and writing, and similar interweaving variables forming an ecosystem of learning in which the child's mind, body and wellbeing is situated.

Until our education system shatters the misconceptions about Grade R teaching and learning that stubbornly prevail and effectively resource and deliver quality Grade R education, our school system will continue to hobble learners from the outset of formal schooling. Understanding the importance of Grade R,

what it is, how it should be taught, that it is part of foundation phase teaching and not preschool, is fundamental to entrenching Grade R in South Africa, ensuring a greater likelihood of learner and school success in later years.

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Article available at

<https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/early-childhood-education-barometer-of-a-failing-system-20190618>

KIDS ON SOCIAL GRANTS ARE LESS LIKELY TO BE OBESE THAN THEIR COUNTERPARTS. THEY ALSO GO TO SCHOOL EARLIER

~ Jenita Chiba and Jacqueline Moodley

Children whose parents or caregivers receive South Africa's child support grant are less likely to be overweight or suffer from obesity and they are also more likely to attend pre-school than those whose households don't get a grant (and come from a similar socio-economic level).

These are the key findings from our study, which looked at how children who received the child support grant fared with those who didn't receive the grant. The study focused on children aged five to 14 years old.



Health, education and an adequate standard of living is central

to a child's development, enabling them to become productive members of society in later years of life.

South Africa's child support grant is the country's most successful poverty alleviating intervention. Almost 12 million children live with caregivers who receive R380 a month to meet basic needs. These include access to health care, education and an adequate standard of living.

South Africa's social security system is one of the most advanced and wide reaching in the developing world, similar in range and impact to Brazil's cash transfer programme.

A large body of evidence has shown the positive effects of South Africa's social grants. To determine them, our study looked at two measures among children whose caregivers received the grant: their health in the form of their Body Mass Index (BMI), and their enrolment in education. BMI is the measure of body fat based on weight in relation to height. It can be used as an indicator of obesity – a growing problem in many parts of the world, including South Africa.

We found that children whose caregivers received the grant were more likely to have a normal BMI than those who didn't and therefore less likely to be overweight or obese. And their caregivers were more likely to enrol them in pre-primary schools than those not receiving the grant.



This adds to the body of knowledge showing that the grant enables caregivers to make healthier food choices and provides them with the means to send their children to school earlier.

Disadvantaged children

Early enrolment in education and obesity are both big challenges in South Africa.

Obesity is not only the manifestation of overeating. It can also be caused by eating food that has poor nutritional value and is high in fats and sugar.

Overweight children have a greater risk of developing lifestyle diseases such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease later in life. In South Africa childhood

obesity is increasing. More than a quarter of children between the ages of two and 14 years are obese. In our study, 9% of children who received the child support grant were obese compared to 12% who did not.

At the same time, 63% of children younger than 18 live below the poverty line. And close to 30% of children younger than three are stunted. Stunting is a result of under-nutrition, which in turn hampers the way a child's brain develops.

Research shows that children living in poverty and who are stunted go to school later. Our findings show that children whose caregivers received the child support grant were more likely to enrol in early childhood development programmes.

It also found that the impact of the grant on child health and education was evident despite household circumstances such as income poverty and limited access to basic services.

We analysed data collected as part of the National Income Dynamics Survey, a government funded study that's repeated every two to three years.

The findings showed that in addition to the child support grant, other factors also influenced children's development. For example, basic services such as water and electricity were also linked to the early educational enrolment and better child health. This confirms previous research.

Our findings are also in line with studies in Latin America about the benefit of the Brazilian Bolsa Familia – a conditional cash transfer programme that requires families to comply with certain health and education conditions before getting the grant.

Added services are a must

The South African government has highlighted the importance of access to quality early stimulation, education and care for all children. Our research shows that this is becoming a reality for children who receive the child support grant, with likely positive long-term benefits.

On top of this there's growing evidence that grants reduce poverty and inequality. This is because they enable money to be spent on higher quality food and school related expenses. This means that children stay in school.

Our study also confirms global evidence that social grants need to be accompanied by basic services to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to develop optimally.

Article available at

<https://theconversation.com/kids-on-social-grants-are-less-likely-to-be-obese-they-also-go-to-school-earlier>