BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

It is universally recognised that the main objective of any education system in a democratic society is to provide quality education for all learners so that they will be able to reach their full potential and will be able to meaningfully contribute to and participate in that society throughout their lives. The responsibility of the education system to develop and sustain such learning is premised on the recognition that education is a fundamental right which extends equally to all learners. Exercising this responsibility involves ensuring that the education system creates equal opportunities for effective learning by all learners.

There is a critical need to confront an historical assumption in our country that there are two distinct categories of learners in our country. That is, those learners who form the majority with 'ordinary needs' and a smaller minority of learners with 'special needs' who require support or specialised programmes in order to engage in some form of learning process. This assumption, which is also evident in other parts of the world, defined the nature and organisation of educational provision in South Africa prior to 1994. Within this assumption it is recognised that it is primarily the latter category of learners whose educational needs have not been met: they may have been provided with a separate, sometimes inadequate, system of education, they may have been excluded from the system or they may have experienced learning breakdown. Thus the notion of 'learners with special education needs' has become a catch-all phrase to categorise all those learners who somehow do not 'fit into' the mainstream education system and to describe the complex array of needs which they may have.

This assumption not only serves to divide the learner population, but it also fails to describe the nature of need which is regarded as 'special'. Most importantly, this assumption provides no insight into what has caused the learning breakdown or why such learners have been excluded from the system. In a country where the education system is premised on the notion of a rights culture, it is imperative that the system is able to not only prevent learning breakdown and exclusion, but that it is also able to promote equal opportunities for effective learning by all learners. In order for the system to do this it is imperative that policy aimed at the creation of education and development for all learners recognises a range of different needs among the learner population. Most importantly, such policy needs to be based on an analysis of those factors which ensure that the education system remains inaccessible to a significant majority of learners and which continue to lead to high levels of learning breakdown.

In trying to deal with the many concerns which arise out of these conceptualisations, the Education White Paper 6 supports the recognition that a range of needs exists among learners and within the education system which must all be met if effective learning and development is to be provided and sustained. In recognising this, it follows that the education system must be

structured and function in such a way that it can accommodate a diversity of learner needs and system needs. It is argued that it is when the education system fails to provide for and accommodate such diversity that learning breakdown takes place and learners are excluded. It is also argued that a complex and dynamic relationship exists between the learner, the centre of learning, the broader education system and the social, political and economic context of which they are all part.

All these components play a key role in whether effective learning and development takes place. When a problem exists in one of these areas it impacts on the learning process, causing learning breakdown or exclusion. Thus, if the system fails to meet the different needs of a wide range of learners or if problems arise in any of these components, the learner or the system may be prevented from being able to engage in or sustain an ideal process of learning. Those factors which lead to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which lead to learning breakdown or which prevent learners from accessing educational provision, have been conceptualised by the policy on inclusive education as barriers to learning and development.

It is only by focusing on the nature of these barriers, what causes them and how they manifest themselves, that we can begin to address problems of learning breakdown and ongoing exclusion. Most importantly, it is only by focusing on them in this way that we can begin to identify components of the education system which must be present and supported if quality education is to be equally provided, promoted and sustained for learners with different needs in this country. Similarly, such an analysis provides guidance on the nature of the mechanisms and processes which must be set up and sustained in order to enable learner needs and system needs to be met.

2   THE KEY BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

It has already been asserted that barriers can be located within the learner, within the centre of learning, within the education system and within the broader social, economic and political context. These barriers manifest themselves in different ways and only become obvious when learning breakdown occurs, when learners 'drop out' of the system or when the excluded become visible. Sometimes it is possible to identify permanent barriers in the learner or the system which can be addressed through enabling mechanisms and processes. However, barriers may also arise during the learning process and are seen as transitory in nature. These may require different interventions or strategies to prevent them from causing learning breakdown or excluding learners from the system. The key to preventing barriers from occurring is the effective monitoring and meeting of the different needs among the learner population and within the system as a whole.

2.1   Socio-Economic Barriers

The relationship between education provision and the socio-economic conditions in any society must be recognised. Effective learning is fundamentally influenced by the availability of educational resources to meet the needs of any society. In

many countries, especially our own country, there are inadequate numbers of centres of learning and other facilities to meet the educational needs of the population. In most cases, inadequacies in provision are linked to other inequalities in the society such as urban/rural disparities, as well as inequalities arising from discrimination on grounds such as gender, race and disability. Barriers result not only from the inadequacy of provision, but also from policies and practices which are designed to perpetuate these inequalities.

2.1.1   *Lack of Access to Basic Services*

One of the most significant barriers to learning remains the inability of learners to access the educational provision that does exist and their inability to access other services which contribute to the learning process. In most instances the inability to access education provision results from inadequate or non-existent services and facilities which are key to participation in the learning process. For example, in many poor communities, particularly in our own country in rural areas, learners are unable to reach centres of learning because there are no transport facilities available to learners or the roads are so poorly developed and maintained that centres cannot be reached. While such barriers affect all learners in poorly serviced communities, it is important to recognise that particular groups of learners are more severely affected by these barriers. In general transport systems which do exist are inaccessible to learners with disabilities, particularly learners who use wheelchairs. So, for example, learners with disabilities who should be attending school or who wish to go to adult education classes are unable to even reach the school or class because the public transport system which is available is either physically inaccessible or unwilling to transport them. At the same time they are unable to walk to school or classes and in this way they are totally excluded from the education system.

While inadequate transport remains a key element preventing access to education, other basic services such as access to clinics also impinge on the learning process. If a child has a chronic illness, for example, regular medical treatment which may be needed may result at best in learners experiencing periods of long absence from the classroom to reach treatment or at worst in learners 'dropping out' of school in order to be hospitalised in a facility where no provision exists for learning support to continue during the period of treatment. Lack of early intervention facilities and services also means that many children, especially those with severe disabilities, are unable to receive the necessary intervention and stimulation which will equip them to participate effectively in the learning process. This barrier not only leads in many cases to increased impairment, but also to decreased capacity to learn, particularly in integrated settings.

Lack of access to other services, such as welfare and communication services, also affects the learning process and leads to learning breakdown or exclusion. The lack of Sign Language interpreters in public services mean that these facilities remain largely inaccessible to Deaf learners.

2.1.2 Poverty and Underdevelopment

Closely linked to the lack of access to basic services is the effect which sustained poverty has on learners, the learning process and the education system. For learners, the most obvious result of poverty, often caused by unemployment and other economic inequalities, is the inability of families to meet basic needs such as nutrition and shelter. Learners living under such conditions are subject to increased emotional stress which adversely affects learning and development. Additionally, under-nourishment leads to a lack of concentration and a range of other symptoms which affect the ability of the learner to engage effectively in the learning process.

Poverty-stricken communities are also poorly resourced communities which are frequently characterised by limited educational facilities, large classes with high pupil/teacher ratios, inadequately trained staff and inadequate teaching and learning materials. Such factors raise the likelihood of learning breakdown and the inability of the system to sustain effective teaching and learning. Learners from families where one or more of the breadwinners are unemployed or poorly paid are also more likely to leave school as soon as possible to go out to work to supplement the family income. This perpetuates the cycle of limited skills with fewer work opportunities, increased likelihood of unemployment or poorly paid work and, thus, ongoing poverty and exclusion.

In considering the effects of poverty on the learning process and access to education, it is also important to recognise the link between poverty and disability. People with disabilities are often those most easily excluded from the education system and from the labour market and are therefore the most poverty stricken in any population. Related to these realities is the perception in many families who have a child with disabilities such a child is unlikely to be employed or to be in a position to contribute to the family income. At best, the child is kept back from school until his/her more able-bodied siblings have been accommodated or at worst, is never given the opportunity to go to school or to learn. This has, for example, resulted in an affirmative funding approach in Uganda where families with four children receive free education with the proviso that preference is given to the sibling with disabilities.

2.1.3 Factors Which Place Learners at Risk

Effective learning is directly related to and dependent on the social and emotional well-being of the learner. It is important to recognise that particular conditions may arise within the social, economic and political environment in which the learner lives which impact negatively on the learner's social and emotional well-being, thus placing the learner at risk of learning breakdown. Such factors either impact directly on the learner or on his/her family or community. In all cases the learner's emotional and social well-being and development are threatened.

A child who is physically, emotionally or sexually abused is not only emotionally and physically damaged but such abuse may also lead to the learner being forced to miss school and eventually to 'drop out' of the system. Factors such as

substance abuse may affect the learner or may affect the learner's family, causing family breakdown and increased stress. Problems in families and abuse may also cause children to leave home and live on the streets. For young girls who fall pregnant while still at school, effective learning breaks down when the economic implications of having a child force the learner to leave to go out and work to earn money. The associated stigmatisation and the lack of a supportive infrastructure for learning and teaching mitigates against being able to continue attending school and thus engage in the learning process.

Sometimes learners are placed at risk by conditions arising in the wider society. In many countries, our own being a case in point, young learners have been subjected to civil war and other forms of political violence which not only disrupt the learning environment but also lead to trauma and emotional distress. High levels of mobility of families resulting from processes such as urbanisation, the establishment of informal settlements, eviction of farm workers and families being forced to seek refugee status in safer environments also lead to disruption of the learning process and, ultimately, to learning breakdown.

The nature of the centre of learning and its ability to provide a conducive teaching and learning environment is undermined when the surrounding environment is made unsafe by high levels of violence and crime. When the safety of educators and learners cannot be guaranteed learners may be prevented from participating in effective teaching and learning or these may be disrupted. In this way lack of safety in the learning environment becomes a barrier to learning and development. A lack of provision of basic amenities at centres of learning such as electricity and toilets creates an unhealthy environment which undermines learning and teaching and places learners at risk.

In recognising and identifying those factors within the broader environment which place learners at risk, it is important to recognise that problems such as natural disasters or epidemics which arise in any society have a significant impact on learners. For example, over the last decade more and more children and adults have been affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many learners have not only had to deal with chronic illnesses resulting from the disease, but have also had to deal with the loss of family members, particularly breadwinners.

It is obvious from the above that the impact of socio-economic barriers is more severe for those learners who are already excluded or marginalised in the society. Learners with disabilities, learners living in poor communities, learners discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, culture or other characteristics which are used to marginalise people are often subjected to a range of these barriers, such as the compounded nature of various forms of discrimination, thus rendering them even more vulnerable and likely to be excluded or experience learning breakdown. It is also important to recognise that learning breakdown can perpetuate further breakdown, often manifesting itself in disruptive and self-destructive behaviour by the learner which also negatively affects other learners. In recognising the impact of a variety of barriers on learners and the system it follows that overcoming and preventing these barriers must involve a range of

mechanisms which recognise the needs of the learner and the needs in the society which must be met.

2.2 Attitudes

Negative and harmful attitudes towards difference in our society remain a critical barrier to learning and development. Discriminatory attitudes resulting from prejudice against people on the basis of race, class, gender, culture, disability, religion, ability, sexual preference and other characteristics manifest themselves as barriers to learning when such attitudes are directed towards learners in the education system.

For the most part, negative attitudes toward different learners manifest themselves in the labelling of learners. Sometimes these labels are just negative associations between the learner and the system such as 'drop outs', 'repeaters' or 'slow learners'. While it is important to recognise the impact which this kind of labelling has on the learner's self-esteem the most serious consequence of such labelling results when it is linked to placement or exclusion. Sometimes learners are placed in a particular learning environment merely because they are labelled as belonging to a category of learners for which a particular kind of educational placement exists. Because the placement has occurred through the attachment of a label rather than through an appropriate assessment of the educational needs of the learner or what is required by the system to meet those needs, the placement may not only be inappropriate to the learner's needs but it may also result in the learner being marginalised. This also perpetuates the failure of the system to change or adapt to meet such needs. Learners with disabilities have often been placed in specialised learning contexts merely because they were labelled as disabled. The particular nature of their disability, the particular educational needs arising from such a disability, such as a necessary assistive device, or other needs within the system, such as physical accessibility, are not properly considered. Labelling goes so far as to sometimes categorise learners, particularly those with severe mental disabilities, as being 'ineducable'. Such a label fails to consider what is needed from the system in order to meet that learner's needs, whatever their capabilities and capacity.

Sometimes negative attitudes and labelling result from fear and a lack of awareness about the particular needs of learners or the potential barriers which they may face. Children who are HIV+ have been excluded from attending school with other children because of the negative assumptions and misconceptions associated with the disease. Because of poor knowledge of the disease and its transmission, these children, by merely attending school with other children, are seen to be placing other children at risk of infection.

Barriers resulting from fear and lack of awareness may arise from the feelings of parents or educators themselves. For example, learners with high ability are often regarded as a threat and therefore face denial of their significant abilities.

For learners with disabilities, fear and lack of awareness about disability among some parents and educators remain a significant barrier to their learning and

development. Such barriers may arise when the child is born. Many parents have difficulty in accepting a child with a disability. In a patriarchal society the mother is often blamed for the disability and fathers deny responsibility for the child. The isolation and marginalisation of the child is exacerbated when and if they are able to enter into the education system. Very often teachers fear the inclusion of a child with a disability in their class and respond negatively to their attendance. Negative attitudes towards disability are picked up by the other children who further alienate the disabled learner. Many of the negative attitudes towards disability result from some traditional and religious beliefs which denigrate disability.

2.3 Inflexible Curriculum

One of the most serious barriers to learning and development can be found within the curriculum itself and relates primarily to the inflexible nature of the curriculum which prevents it from meeting diverse needs among learners. When learners are unable to access the curriculum, learning breakdown occurs. The nature of the curriculum at all phases of education involves a number of components which are all critical in facilitating or undermining effective learning. Key components of the curriculum include the style and tempo of teaching and learning, what is taught, the way the classroom is managed and organised, as well as materials and equipment which are used in the learning and teaching process.

Sometimes educators, often through inadequate training, use teaching styles which may not meet the needs of some of the learners. An educator may teach at a pace which only accommodates learners who learn very quickly. Alternatively, the pace and style of teaching may limit the initiative and involvement of learners with high levels of ability. What is taught or the subjects which learners are able to choose may limit the learner's knowledge base or fail to develop the intellectual and emotional capacities of the learner. Such barriers arise when sufficient attention is not given to balancing skills which prepare learners for work (vocational skills) and skills which prepare the learner for coping with life (life skills). Some learners are excluded from certain aspects of the curriculum as a result of ignorance or prejudice. For example, learners with physical disabilities are often prevented from playing sport or are not given the opportunity to do so. Similarly, male and female learners are encouraged or pressurised to take certain subjects at school or at tertiary level according to their gender because those subjects will equip them for jobs which stereotypically are undertaken by men or women. What is taught through the curriculum may often be inappropriate to the learner's life situation making learning extremely difficult and ultimately contributing to learning breakdown. For example, adults involved in literacy training may be taught with the use of examples which are unrelated to their particular life experience. Materials used for teaching and learning which constantly reflect only one culture or life experience, may lead to learners from other cultures and life experiences feeling excluded and marginalised.

One of the most serious ways in which learners are prevented from accessing the curriculum is through inadequate provision of materials or equipment they may

need for learning to take place. Such barriers often affect learners with disabilities who do not receive the necessary assistive devices which would equip them to participate in the learning process. For example, blind learners are unable to access the curriculum effectively if appropriate Braille facilities and equipment are not available and if teachers are not skilled to teach Braille or use audio equipment. Lack of provision of assistive devices for learners who require them may impair not only the learning process but also their functional independence, preventing them from interacting with other learners and participating independently in the learning environment.

The ability of the curriculum to lead to learning breakdown also occurs through the mechanisms which are used to assess learning outcomes. Assessment processes are often inflexible and designed to only assess particular kinds of knowledge and aspects of learning, such as the amount of information that can be memorised rather than the learner's understanding of the concepts involved. The seriousness of such barriers is most obvious where there are large number of learners who are forced to repeat aspects of the curriculum, even if this means remaining in levels where the age gap between the learner and the other learners is significant.

2.4 Language and Communication

A further area of barriers arising from the curriculum, are those which result from the medium of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning for many learners takes place through a language which is not their first language. This not only places these learners at a disadvantage, but it also leads to linguistic difficulties which contribute to learning breakdown. Second language learners are often subjected to low expectations, discrimination and lack of cultural peers. Educators furthermore often experience difficulties in developing appropriate support mechanisms for second language learners.

Such barriers can be particularly destructive for Deaf learners whose first language is Sign Language. Misperceptions with regards to the morphological, syntactic, discourse, pragmatic, 'phonological' and semantic structures of Sign Language, which are entirely equal in complexity and richness to that which is found in any spoken language, often lead to Deaf learners being forced into learning through the so-called 'oral' method, or having to learn through signed spoken languages (for example, signed English or Tswana or signed exact English or Tswana. Being able to access Sign Language as the medium of teaching and learning enables these learners to develop bi- and multi-linguilism through Sign Language as the medium of teaching and learning.

Communication is essential for learning and development in both formal and informal contexts. Learners who are non-speaking due to the severity of their physical, intellectual and/or mental disability experience enormous barriers to learning and development. These barriers arise from the general unavailability of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) strategies to enable them to engage in the learning process, and more often than not find themselves totally excluded from learning and development experiences. AAC systems could

consist of alternative communications systems, supplements to vocal communication and communication through facilitators.

2.5 Inaccessible and Unsafe Built Environment

In many contexts the vast majority of centres of learning are physically inaccessible to a large number of learners, educators and communities. Inaccessibility is particularly evident where centres are physically inaccessible to learners, educators and members of the community with disabilities who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices. Such inaccessibility often also renders centres unsafe for blind and Deaf learners.

2.6 Inappropriate and Inadequate Provision of Support Services

Particular enabling mechanisms and processes are needed to support diversity and enable the education system, including educators and learners, to minimise, remove and prevent barriers which may exist or arise. Where no provision exists for such services, barriers cannot be overcome and needs cannot be met.

In some contexts, however, inappropriate or inadequate support services may contribute to learning breakdown or exclusion. For example, where the nature of the service is focused on problems in the learner rather than in the system where the barrier may exist - such as poor teaching methods - the intervention may exacerbate the learning breakdown. Similarly, the nature of the intervention may lead to a learner being removed from a learning environment rather than addressing the problems which may exist in that environment. Learners who may require individualised intervention to address barriers to learning may also not have access to these.

As was discussed earlier, basic services which may support learners and the system to minimise and remove barriers or prevent them from arising are often lacking or limited in poorer communities. This is especially true in rural areas where access to professional assistance is limited or non-existent. Thus the inadequacy or unequal distribution of services which do exist may further disadvantage learners rather than being services which contribute to effective learning.

One of the key contributing factors to inappropriate and inadequate support provision relates to the nature of human resource development of both educators and personnel who provide services to learners and their families. Lack of awareness, service provision which is fragmented and inappropriate to the context in which it takes place, demoralisation and a fear of dealing with a diverse range of needs all result from inadequate and fragmented development of human resources. Not only does poor provision in this area lead to a dearth of necessary skills and knowledge but it also contributes to a system which is unable to meet a diversity of learner needs and prevent barriers to learning and development.

2.7 Lack of Enabling and Protective Legislation and Policy

Many of the barriers to learning and development discussed above do not merely arise from problems occurring in the education system or in the wider society. It is often policy and legislation governing the education system and regulating the society which directly or indirectly facilitate the existence of such barriers. Where such legislation or policy fails to protect learners from discrimination or perpetuates particular inequalities, it directly contributes to the existence or maintenance of such barriers. For example policy which is inflexible regarding issues such as age limits may prevent learners from being able to enter or continue in the education system, thus leading to exclusion. Similarly, legislation which fails to protect learners from discrimination and fails to provide for minimum standards which accommodate diversity allows for individual practices which may inhibit learner development or lead to provision which is inadequate and inappropriate for the needs which exist.

2.8 Lack of Parental Recognition and Involvement

The active involvement of parents and the broader community in the teaching and learning process is central to effective learning and development. Such involvement includes recognition for parents as the primary care givers of their children and, as such, that they are a central resource to the education system. More specifically, they are critical components for effective governance of centres of learning and for facilitating community ownership of these facilities.

Where parents are not given this recognition or where their participation is not facilitated and encouraged effective learning is threatened and hindered. Negative attitudes towards parental involvement, lack of resources to facilitate such involvement, lack of parent empowerment and support for parent organisations, particularly in poorer communities, all contribute to a lack of parental involvement in centres of learning.

2.9 Disability

For most learners with disabilities, learning breakdown and exclusion occurs when their particular learning needs are not met as a result of barriers in the learning environment or broader society which handicap the learner and prevent effective learning from taking place. Having said this, however, particular impairments may prevent the learner from engaging continuously in structured learning and development. Such impairments may render the learner unable to participate in an ideal process of learning. For example, disabilities such as schizophrenia, severe autism, severe intellectual disabilities or multi-disabilities may prevent the learner from being able to continuously engage in programmes aimed at facilitating learning and development. Some learners also experience learning breakdown due to intrinsic cognitive or learning difficulties in areas such as in acquiring skills in literacy or numeracy or in the organisation or management of their own learning.

2.10 Lack of Human Resource Development Strategies

The development of educators, service providers and other human resources is often fragmented and unsustainable. The absence of on-going in-service training of educators, in particular, often leads to insecurity, uncertainty, low self-esteem and lack of innovative practices in the classroom. This may result in resistance and harmful attitudes towards those learners who experience learning breakdown or towards particular enabling mechanisms.

3. Overcoming Barriers to Learning and Development

If the education system is to promote effective learning and prevent learning breakdown, it is imperative that mechanisms are structured into the system to break down existing barriers. Such mechanisms must develop the capacity of the system to overcome barriers which may arise, prevent barriers from occurring, and promote the development of an effective learning and teaching environment.

Central to the development of such capacity is the ability to identify and understand the nature of the barriers which cause learning breakdown and lead to exclusion. Over and above this, however, such capacity requires a commitment to using and learning from practices and processes which exist within the system itself and which have been used or can be used to break down barriers and meet the range of needs which are present.

With these considerations in mind the White Paper on Inclusive Education sees it as critical to identify and analyse the barriers to learning in the South African education system, but also to identify those mechanisms already in the system and those which need to be developed which will enable diversity to be accommodated in an integrated system of education.

Such mechanisms will include: initiatives aimed at providing for learners who have been excluded from the system by both the state and non-governmental organisations; innovative practices for recognising and accommodating diversity; activities that advocate against discrimination and challenge attitudes; processes towards the involvement of learners, parents, educators and community members in the governance of centres of learning; training programmes which equip educators to deal with diverse needs; curriculum restructuring; organisation and development of teaching and learning environments; as well as economic and political transformation supported by enabling and protective legislation and policy.