

# Editorial

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Learner achievement and attainment are central in the measurement of both schools' and tertiary education institutions' performance. At all levels of education, it is important to track student progress and show their achievement – year on year, module on module. This not only motivates learners but also contributes to their attainment journey where their knowledge, skills and competences are measured against pre-set, external standards and for which they receive acknowledgement of their success, typically in the form of certification. Learner attainment is deemed by many societies to be one of the main goals of formal education. (Needless to say, there is a proliferation of philosophies about the purpose of education.)

Much effort is expended by academics, educationists and education ministries to ensure learner success. However, as can be seen in comparative studies such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), data on achievement show that South Africa does not fare well. Regarding the former, in the study of 2019, South Africa performed considerably lower than the TIMSS centrepiece of 500<sup>1</sup>; regarding the latter, PIRLS 2016, the country came last.<sup>2</sup> In higher education institutions, graduate throughput rates are the measure of students' attainment; unfortunately, success here is all too often missing. Throughput rates were 31.8%<sup>3</sup> at Technical, Vocational and Education Training (TVET) colleges in 2017, whilst in higher education institutions, these were 36.0% over four years of study at undergraduate level and 58.1% when taken over six years.<sup>4</sup> Analyses of data collected and maintained in places such as *inter alia* the South African Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training show that high-level achievement and attainment at all levels of education remain evasive for a large proportion of learners.

Since 1994, equality and inclusivity of education opportunities have been central tenets of government policy as evidenced in enacted legislation and regulations. New curricula have been developed and introduced for schools, and, in higher education institutions, the transformation of curricula has been high on the agenda with varying results. Furthermore, teachers, principals, academics, policymakers and the like continue to seek new methods, approaches and tools to enhance learner outcomes in education institutions across the country. Desiderata are high-quality teaching and learning, good and well-used resources, a well-functioning and caring learning environment, and effective school and tertiary leadership. All of these are necessary although not sufficient conditions for learner achievement and attainment.

1 [https://www.timss-sa.org/download/TIMSS2019\\_Briefing\\_DBE\\_8Dec2020\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://www.timss-sa.org/download/TIMSS2019_Briefing_DBE_8Dec2020_final_2.pdf)

2 [https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/164/ZP\\_Files/pirls-literacy-2016\\_grade-4\\_15-dec-2017\\_low-quality.zp137684.pdf](https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/164/ZP_Files/pirls-literacy-2016_grade-4_15-dec-2017_low-quality.zp137684.pdf)

3 <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/APPs/DHET%20Amended%20APP%202020-2021.pdf>

4 <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-how-many-south-african-students-graduate>

It is worth noting a further challenge that presented itself in the past 18 months, i.e., the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected all learners who have had to deal with physical school closures and a switch to remote learning as an emergency measure to maintain the teaching and learning process in accord with the Commonwealth *Guidelines for Remote Learning during COVID-19 (2020)*<sup>5</sup>. However, not all institutions, in particular rural and township schools, and learners had the technological resources for online learning. Some schools were able to provide other forms of support, such as hardcopy resource materials, so that learners could work at home, but this was necessarily with limited teacher guidance. And, sadly, some children had no access to education at all during school closures, which compounds their already existing disadvantage. As elsewhere in the world, the pandemic has had a negative impact on learners' growth and development. Similarly, teachers at all levels of education have experienced hardship and distress. As well as coping with health worries for themselves, their families and the learners under their care, they have had the additional stress of having to adopt new approaches to teaching and learning at pace and many have done so with few resources; all of which has led to teacher fatigue.

Taking together the performance of educational institutions prior to COVID and the impact of the pandemic on education delivery, and thereby achievement and attainment of learners, the challenges facing the South African education system have been magnified considerably.

It is timely that in this second edition of volume 16 of the IJTL, the thread that runs through the articles is: how to ensure that students/learners have an education experience that enables them to achieve and to attain success. This is tackled in different ways. In the first two articles, the role of school principals is explored. The first in how principals support both high and low teacher performance. It was found that there is less consistency in support of the latter. This needs to be addressed. In the second article, a quantitative study with open-ended questions was carried out regarding perceptions of teachers and principals on the school climate; a good climate is necessary to support learner success and thereby school performance. While perceptions of teachers and principals varied, there was concord on a range of factors that impact school climate.

In the next cluster of articles, the training of schoolteachers and continuing professional development are explored. This is of high importance. Teachers need to qualify with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools to meet the multiple learning needs of students. Continuing professional development is needed to support teachers to provide high-quality education that meets the needs of 21st-century learners. It would be difficult to find anyone who refuted that reading literacy is the foundation for academic success. However, the premise in the next article is that pre-service teacher training does not prepare teachers well enough to teach reading to learners in their early years. The authors explored whether in-service training could address this weakness. They found that, while such training helped, it was not sufficient; they recommend that coaching be added to the professional development programme. Another author explored how secondary school teachers use social networking tools to enhance teaching and whether there are supportive mechanisms to integrate social networking tools in teaching.

The following two articles deal with blended learning as a strategy to support student learning and achievement, as well as teacher continuing professional development, respectively. In the first, the authors explored definitions and models of blended learning and synthesised these in a new model, which, if implemented, would contribute to fostering the characteristics of self-directed learning in teachers. In the second, the authors were concerned that current teaching strategies in mathematics are not adequate in helping learners to understand mathematical concepts. In an attempt to address this, a quantitative research project was conducted on the use of blended learning. The authors found that this methodology

5 [https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Guidelines%20on%20DE\\_COVID%2019.pdf](https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Guidelines%20on%20DE_COVID%2019.pdf)

enhanced learner understanding and performance in mathematics. They recommend that primary school mathematics teachers be trained in the use of blended learning. In the last article in this cluster, the authors explored tutor experiences of facilitating online learning. They found that tutors need to have online training so that they can effectively facilitate student online learning.

The next articles are focused on the student learning experience. In the first, the authors conducted a study in which they found that factors such as students' irrational beliefs negatively impact on their learning of mathematics. The authors suggest that teachers need to have the tools to challenge such learner beliefs and find ways to replace them with rational beliefs that will positively impact success in mathematics. Perceptions of students were investigated in the following article. The authors found that perceptions of postgraduate Management Accounting students were that Individual Learning Programmes increased their marks. However, when compared with actual performance gains, there was no significant benefit found. Both articles demonstrate the importance of the subjective experience of students, which needs to be considered when planning programme delivery.

In the Practitioners' Corner, the author used a mixed methods approach through the lens of critical discourse analysis theory to investigate and further define the role of a Writing Centre in a university of technology in supporting students in their academic development. The findings are useful for other Writing Centres to consider.