

# Education

## Pupils with disabilities 'ignored'

The National Development Plan renders at least 6% of South Africans invisible

COMMENT  
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**T**wo weeks ago an alliance of non-governmental organisations in the children and disability sectors hosted a seminar on the "Right to Education for Children with Disabilities in South Africa". At about the same time the National Planning Commission released its National Development Plan, which has a whole chapter on education – yet we see no plan there for improving access to education for children with disabilities.

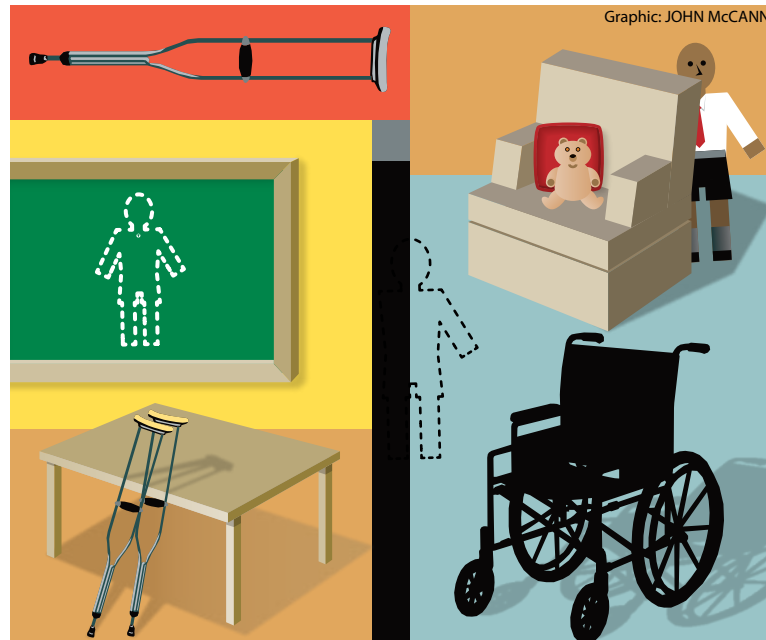
The plan's aims include eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by 2030 by setting a developmental agenda and targets, including "improving education, training and innovation", in various sectors.

The 2010 national household survey estimates that 6.3% of people older than five in South Africa have some form of disability. This might be an

underestimation: the World Health Organisation's 2011 World Report on Disability placed the global disability population at about 15%.

In the past, one of the most pernicious results of the marginalisation of people with disabilities was to render them "invisible" as people and citizens. But in recent years an impressive international human-rights framework has developed on the rights of persons with disabilities, culminating in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006.

In addition to its detailed provision on their right to education (article 24), the convention also expects governments to take into account the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities in all policies and programmes – and, presumably, the planning processes underlying such policies and programmes. Article three sets out a number of general principles that are meant to apply to the entire convention. These include non-discrimination, full and effective



participation and inclusion in society, respect for difference and acceptance of people with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, equality of opportunity and accessibility.

It has been argued that one effect

of the development of international human-rights law has been to make these groups visible through legal protection – and the convention, in addition to being both a human-rights instrument and a development tool, therefore also represents a "visibility project" for people with disabilities.

However, the new directions promised by the convention hold little value if these people are ignored in key planning documents such as the National Development Plan. Its chapter nine on education is a stark example.

It demonstrates not only a lack of understanding of the realities of education as experienced by children with disabilities but also, more disconcertingly, a misreading of the meaning of "transformation" in the South African context.

For example, the five cross-cutting themes identified for education, training and innovation include "creating an education and national science system that serves the needs of society". One of the key actions here is "increasing the numbers of African and women postgraduates, especially PhDs".

It is not clear why postgraduates with disabilities have been omitted here, given the recognition in equality legislation that disability, with race and gender, has historically been a singular focus of unfair discrimination in South Africa. This omission is repeated more than once in the chapter.

In addition, the plan's summary of the vision for education – on page 256 – clearly shows its lack of any consideration of disability: there is no reference to inclusion, accessibility or any of the other aspects that are essential from the perspective of pupils with disabilities.

As can be expected when the basic thinking underlying a planning pro-

cess is flawed, the results are not encouraging.

Because the plan did not start off by taking disability into consideration, its discussion of early childhood development leaves out considerations such as the early identification of disabilities and the complicated relationship between the departments of social development and health in providing early childhood development services. Its plans for infrastructure leave out the important factor of universal access to school buildings. More importantly, its list of challenges discounts the number of pupils with disabilities who are unable to attend school because their parents are unable to afford safe transport to school – a burning issue for a great number of pupils, both with and without disabilities.

Seen through a disability lens, chapter nine of the plan is even more problematic, though. In acknowledging the progress made by our education system since 1994, it says "universal access and gender parity were almost achieved in schooling by 2010" and "about 99% of children complete[d] grades one to nine". Even though universal access to education might have been achieved based on gender parity, it certainly is highly debatable whether access to education for learners with disabilities, which includes both female and male, is universal. Bearing in mind the barriers to access for pupils with disabilities, it is also incorrect to estimate that 99% of all children completed their basic education – grades one to nine.

The department of basic education itself concedes that progress in implementing Education White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (2001), the key policy document on the education of children experiencing barriers to learning, is not proceeding at the rate it should be. The white paper's 20-year plan is being implemented and a number of milestones have been reached, but it is being held back by budgetary constraints and the isolation of inclusive education within the broader education system, among other things.

But the National Development Plan does not even refer to this white paper. The plan sets quantifiable targets for 2030 but, here again, it does not address the day-to-day barriers faced by pupils with disabilities and their parents, and so it omits any quantifiable targets for increasing access to education of children with disabilities.

The plan's goal of eliminating poverty and addressing inequality by 2030 will not be reached for people with disabilities.

The document's failure to include their perspectives, interests and capacities means that it renders between 6% and 15% of the South African population invisible.

This is not only unwise but also discriminatory.

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