

ARE WE HONEST ABOUT IMPROVING PERFORMANCE AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

MOSS NKONYANE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is primarily to stimulate critical thinking and a debate on a subject that has become illusive to both scholars and curriculum implementers in South Africa and the International community. We are all busy. We are extremely busy. No one has ever stopped to think about what it is we are doing, why we do it and for whose benefit? All of us can see and we agree that something is wrong with our schooling system.

The South African Schooling system is like what Peter Senge in Kenneth Tewel (1990) has called the Parable of the Boiled Frog. Senge has observed that if you drop a frog into boiling water, the frog will immediately hop out without suffering much damage. If, however, you take the same frog and put it into the same pot filled with cold water and gradually heat it, you get a completely different result. Initially, the frog will swim actively. As the water temperature increases, the frog becomes more lethargic and eventually just lies there. When the water reaches 212 (37) degrees, you have a boiled frog!

This paper cannot claim to be a scientific discourse that leads to scientific evidence. It is based on the experience and the assumptions of the author. The approach followed in the paper is descriptive. A brief review of related literature was undertaken to analyse what is known about educational change in South Africa and globally. This was done in order to enable the author to put the discussion in perspective.

The paper is not representing the views of any organisation, but it is the reflection of the subjective views of the author. The author is deeply enmeshed in an environment where competing change programmes are taking place and can therefore not claim to be neutral. Jansen in Nkomo (1990:327) is explicit when he argues that “there can be no neutral curriculum or disinterested knowledge.”

Quoting Richard Schull, he has observed that “there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

The significance of the paper is to assist both policy developers and implementers to think critically whenever they deal with change programmes at School, District, Provincial and National levels.

When an education system fails to produce the required results, we all have someone to blame. The first target is the principal. We all accuse the principal of being weak. The teachers, the learners, the parents and finally, the Department of Education agree that the principal must be “removed.”

The teachers do not escape the blizzards of criticism. They are not properly qualified. They come late for school. They always absent themselves from school. They do not prepare their lessons.

Kenneth Tewel (1990:18) comments that some High schools are saturated with teachers who have done things exactly the same way for twenty or more years. Such teachers rarely, if ever, think about whether or not their mode of operation makes sense any longer. Such teachers may brag about having twenty years’ experience but, in essence , they haven’t really taught for twenty years; they have taught for one year twenty times – and learned nothing on the journey. That one way of doing things – well learned, highly practiced, and thoroughly embedded in their psyche – is at the core of their thinking about the school, in how it ought to function, what constitutes instruction, and the role they ought to play in providing it. They have no other pictures of schooling.

Principals too, he continues, fall victim to habits and practices that restrict thinking about new and different ways of doing things. He has observed that most High school principals agree that something very serious is wrong with high school education, that is, when speaking about high schools in general and about schools with which they are not associated. However when mentioning their own schools, principals claim that everything is fine. These schools are doing all they can under difficult circumstances. They provide special programmes for high risk students and have caring teachers who work closely with students and regularly contact parents.

A friend of mine who works in a poorly performing school and an “activist” in the true sense of the word complained that it would take more than 20 years before their school improved because the apartheid system had been implemented for more than 40 years before it was eradicated. This was despite the fact that the school that is separated by the fence from theirs is doing extremely well.

What about the Education Department? They do not support the schools. They do not visit the schools. They do not provide Learning Teaching and Support Materials on time.

But, the learners are not disciplined. They come late to school and leave early. They do not write their homework, class work, assignments and portfolios.

APARTHEID EDUCATION

Before 1994, most scholars and curriculum implementers focused on the deep conflicts over educational iniquity which was a major theme under the general crisis that gripped South Africa during that period. Mokubung Nkomo’s 1990 work, for example, outlines in detail the aims of Apartheid Education which among others are: To produce a semi-

skilled black labour force to minister to the needs of the capitalist economy at the lowest possible cost, and earlier on, especially after the introduction of the Bantu Education Act, the Colored People's Act, and the Indian People's Act, it was intended to blunt competition with white workers.

To socialize black students so that they can accept the social relations of apartheid as natural. That is, to accept the supposed superiority of whites and their own "inferiority."

To forge a consciousness and identity accompanied by a sense of "superiority" among whites.

To promote the acceptance of racial or ethnic separation as the "natural order of things," or as an arrangement better suited for "South Africa's complex problems of national minorities that can only be solved through the separation of races or ethnic groups."

Finally, to promote black intellectual underdevelopment by minimizing the allocation of educational resources for blacks while maximizing them for whites.

The net consequence and cumulative effect of these practices, according to Nkomo, have been high attrition rates; high failure rates; high illiteracy rates and general alienation from the schooling process among blacks.

Any attempt to discuss and debate educational change in South Africa had to take into consideration the racially-skewed provision of education which had produced massive disadvantages among blacks. The question to be asked is whether the current changes and discussions do take into account the historical effects on the current system and the purpose of the current education system or not? Put differently, has the apartheid system had an impact on the current system? Is the tendency and propensity to use apartheid as the main cause of the problems an honest approach both theoretically and practically?

POST - APARTHEID CHANGES

The year 1994 was a turning point in the history of South Africa. Politically, South Africa became a major force to be reckoned with in the global community. We were all excited about the change. Like the pre-1994 period, we felt that our schooling system was not right. Something had to change. Our actions were guided by "Reconstruction and development". According to Fleisch (2002:36), the pressure to "delivery" was felt from the onset. One of the ANC's election platforms was the RDP, a broad umbrella strategy to coordinate its various macro-economic policies and basic services delivery programs that would be unleashed after the elections.

The first school improvement initiative to come from within the Gauteng provincial education department after the 1994 election, according to Fleisch, was the Culture of Learning Programme. Even before the new department had assumed legal responsibility for all the schools, the new staff developed a plan to kick – start what was then referred to

as the ‘transformation’ of education by allocating a small development grant to all historically disadvantaged schools.

As part of the cross – sectoral Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Culture of Learning Programme was conceived within the ideological framework of a ‘people-driven development’ in which the new state would rebuild society through social partnerships. Although the original plan focused on improving physical infrastructure, the emphasis was less on product and more on process.

The development of stakeholder ‘capacity’ at school level was seen by the new department as the single most driving force for long-term school improvement. The thinking behind the Culture of Learning Programme was that the processes that the school development committee would go through would strengthen school governance, which in turn would spin-off into improved teaching and learning.

Perhaps Fleisch is correct when he makes use of a rudimentary model of the relationship between broader historical and social processes, organizational culture and change strategy. According to him, the model suggests that ‘organizational culture’ – the material practices, social relations and the ways of knowing – are shaped by the layering of the life histories, beliefs, values and proclivities of the new leadership onto older bureaucratic practices.

It is important to note that Fleisch has cautioned that little research has been done on the organizational culture of state educational bureaucracies. Such research, he continues, would be framed by the debates between theorists who argue that culture is a variable ‘in’ organizations and theorists who view organizations ‘as’ cultures. Current corporate change theory, as an example of the first, relies on the assumption that ‘culture’ within organizations is a measurable variable alongside other variables like leadership, business processes, human resource capacity and organizational structure. Fleisch has concluded that while the ‘culture as a variable’ approach has shown its value in practical applications, it has a number of serious theoretical weaknesses. By treating culture as a variable, he contends, deeper and pervasive institutional assumptions that permeate every facet of the life of an organization can be missed.

The appointment of the new Member of Executive Council (MEC) for education in 1999 resulted in a series of new projects and programmes. For the sake of this paper, I will briefly focus on the ‘Education Action Zones’. Drawing loosely on the model of the British Labour Party’s Education Action Zones, as Fleisch puts it, the plan was develop and implement a new reform model to assist profoundly dysfunctional schools.

It is not the purpose of this paper to present a list of intervention programmes. It is however tempting to mention just a few which have been introduced recently. In his 2008 book, *Primary Education in Crisis*, Brahm fleisch tries to analyse and explain why South African school children underachieve in reading and mathematics. His analyses are based on national and international studies which all conclude that South African school children underachieve in reading and mathematics. He mentions studies such as TIMMS,

SAQMEC II and Systemic Evaluation, to mention a few. These and other reports have resulted in intervention programmes such as the Foundations for Learning Campaign and Quality of Learning Campaign.

The question to be asked is whether the changes have made any significant change to the system of education or not? In his 1982 book, *The Meaning of Educational Change*, Michael Fullan, comments that new programs either make no difference, help improve the situation, or make it worse.

WHERE IS THE PROBLEM?

We all agree there is a problem. This sounds boring. I am bored myself. What about you? Most of our change programs or interventions as they are known focus on Grade 12 results. It is as if education starts with Grade 12 and ends there. Forgive me for being a product of apartheid education, but I am tempted to say Grade 12 is an end in itself. Absolute focus on Grade 12 results causes untold damage to learners in lower Grades, for example, Grades 8 to 11. The performance of learners in those Grades is not good and we know it. Every year we collect statistics as we control examination schedules, but at the beginning of the year we forget about the high failure rate in those Grades and we are only concerned about Grade 12. It sounds simplistic.

Schlechty (1990:53) has linked results to a shared vision. According to him, a shared vision is essential to the development of a results orientation. A clearly articulated purpose and a well-thought-out vision that is consistent with that purpose indicate what a school is all about, the school's reason for being, as well as the general ways in which those who live out their lives in the school will go about serving this purpose. Equally important, he continues, purpose indicates the results that are worthy of pursuit, as well as the results that are irrelevant, trivial, or even harmful.

Schlechty has concluded that it is not enough for schools to produce test-scores that satisfy the press and the business community if this result is accomplished in ways that dissatisfy students. He also cautions against producing test-scores by means that teachers find morally reprehensible and professionally indefensible. He is convinced that such a strategy may work in the short run, but student disaffection will develop to the point where parents will object, dropouts increase, or teachers will rebel and sabotage the system.

It is not the aim of this paper to suggest that Grade 12 results are not important, but to point out that focus on results should not be separated from the purpose of education. Schools are not teaching results. Any attempt to change the system that is not looking at the purpose of schooling is likely to lead to untold problems.

In the quest for improving results, schools are "culling" learners in particular Grades. It is not uncommon for a school that has 400 Grade 11 learners to promote only 100 to Grade 12. What happens to the 300 learners? No one cares to find out. Teachers teach question papers. Is that what learning is all about?

CONCEPTUAL PROBLEM

One of the major challenges facing us as educational policy developers and implementers is the lack of common understanding of what it is we are doing. The problem of meaning was identified by Fullan (1982) when he concluded that “One of the most fundamental problems in education today is that people do not have a clear, coherent sense of meaning about what educational change is for, what it is, and how it proceeds.” Although Fullan was writing about the American system, it is reasonable to conclude that as South Africans, we have the same problem.

One of the most overused concepts is “quality.” “Providing quality education” has been common in documents of both the ruling party as well as opposition parties since 1994. Commenting about the problem of measuring the qualities of school work, Schlechty (1990:57) argues that quality either is or it is not. He continues and says that quality is not a question of more or less.

Quoting Phillip Crosby (1979:14), he has noted that the first erroneous assumption is that quality means goodness, or luxury, or shininess or weight. The word “quality”, he continues, is used to signify the relative worth of things in such phrases as “good quality,” “bad quality,” and what he has called that brave new statement “quality of life.”

Slechty has concluded that “quality of life” is a cliché because each listener assumes that the speaker means exactly what he or she, the listener, means by the phrase. His argument is that it is a situation in which individuals talk dreamily about something without ever bothering to define it.

In our quest to improve quality, we work hard to produce more bachelors or university exemptions as they were previously known. To us if a school produces more candidates who qualify for university study, that is quality. Our products have come under critical scrutiny from university professors who have questioned their capacity to cope at university level. Their observation is that the majority of our candidates do not go beyond the first semester.

This is despite the fact that they pass our examinations with flying colours, for example, they pass our examinations with A’s and B’s. Is it because our intervention programmes are examination centred and therefore our emphasis on previous examination papers which do not necessarily focus on the entire education process?

One of the most confusing concepts is ‘restructuring’. Part of the debate surrounding the term ‘restructuring’, according to Schlechty has to do with disagreements over the need to improve schools, as opposed to reform them. For some, the problem is rooted in the failure of schools to teach the “basic skills” to all children. Thus efforts to change schools so that all children master the basic skills aim at school improvement. For others, the problem goes well beyond the failure of the schools to teach all children to read, write and cipher. The fundamental problem is that schools do not prepare all children to

function effectively in the world of ideas. The schools do not prepare all children to think critically and creatively.

In an effort to clarify some of these terms, Kenneth Tewel has defined restructuring, first, and perhaps most importantly, as the decentralizing of authority: that is, devolving authority from the state level to the district, from the district to the school building, and from the building administrators to teachers, pushing decision making down to the lowest appropriate level in the system or the school. In some places, he has observed, this is called site-based management or SBM. It provides authority consistent with responsibility. Tewel has however cautioned that restructuring means more than just delegating authority to lower levels of the system or school. He believes that it also involves a basic change in accountability.

Tewel believes that restructured schools empower teachers, parents, and students; and they expand the school community. He believes that they unite parents, professional educators, businesses, universities, foundations and the general populace into a collective force dedicated to the improvement of schooling for all children.

Several questions come to mind as one tries to digest Tewel's definition: firstly, are our intervention programmes giving people at the school level authority that is both equal to their responsibility and, at the same time, checked by real accountability? Secondly, are our teachers empowered and are they professionals in the true sense of the word? These and other questions about our teachers are very difficult to talk about. Fleisch is cogent when he comments that like sex, one of the more complex and difficult to talk about issues is the average levels of teachers' academic competence.

One of the reasons why our primary school children are underachieving in reading and mathematics is the training of our teachers. Some of our teachers with lower qualifications are reading at a frustrating level. What compounds the problem is that they are not regular or fluent readers. Fleisch has concluded that researchers have recognized that what teachers 'know' is one of the most important factors that influence school classrooms and learner performance. This, he argues, has been confirmed recently in the SAQMEC II study in which South Africa did not participate. Across participating countries in the region, school children's achievement was consistently and positively correlated with teacher subject knowledge.

This insight, he continues, has been confirmed in South Africa in a number of important small-scale case studies undertaken in the past decade. In 1999, for example, Tailor and Vinjevold also noted that one of the most consistent findings of a number of the Presidential Educational Initiative projects pointed to teachers' low levels of conceptual knowledge, their poor grasp of their subjects and the range of errors made in the content and concepts presented in their lessons.

The following are some of the key requirements or qualities of a professional: high education; high levels of prestige and influence; professional autonomy in areas such as decision making and control of time; commitment of members to the profession; and a

code of professional ethics to mention a few. If our teachers meet these requirements; I agree that authority can be pushed down to their level, but are they ready?

The 2007 industrial action by teachers was well documented. Recently, Soweto experienced what was described as barbaric acts of intimidation and disruption perpetrated by teachers in the name of professionalism. Commentators and the public agree that the tendency by some teachers to embark on strike action at the slightest provocation is one of the major contributors to poor performance. What compounds the problem is the lack of initiatives by teachers to correct the situation.

A friend of mine who is a secondary school principal was telling me about how excited she is about going to the United Kingdom for the first time in her life. When I asked her how much she will be paying for the trip, she proudly told me that her school is a poorly performing school and the department of education was paying for the trip. The concern from other quarters is that we are putting more resources to the poorly performing schools to the total exclusion of the schools that do well. The question is whether we are rewarding poor performance or not.

In a study by Berman and McLaughlin in Fullan (1982) it was found that school-district decisions to engage in particular reforms were of two types: those reflecting opportunism, in which districts were motivated by the desire “to reap federal funds,” and those characterized by problem-solving, in which the main motivation emerged in response to locally identified needs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a road runner I took part in a 32km race one day. I must confess that I am a slow runner and I enjoy it. In long distance running, there are water points after every three kilometers. I had just left the water point when I heard a big voice calling: “young man, are we sweating or running?” Before I could respond, a seventy-five year old man cruised past, leaving me as if I was walking. The question I want us to share is whether we are intervening or educating?

Let us accept that apartheid is part of our history, but can we expect Verwoerd who is blamed for being the architect of the system to rise from the dead and reverse the system? I am reminded of my cousin who wanted to open a bank account for his thirty-five year old helper as a token of appreciation for the good service she had rendered to him and his family for a long time. Unfortunately he needed her Identity Document and when he asked her to give it to him she told him that her father died before applying for it. She expected her father to rise from the dead and assist her to get an ID book. I am not sure whether that is not “wheel-burrow mentality.”

My recommendation is that we accept the responsibility to transform the entire system. The district, as the interface between the provincial and national levels should be the main driver of the change process. The district should be empowered to identify the

needs of the schools and design a strategy that is relevant to the dynamics of the communities served by that district.

The focus must not only be on secondary schools. It must be holistic and long-term. The education of the child starts from Grade R and we should make sure that the training of Grade R teachers is given attention so that children can receive proper learning from qualified teachers. Primary school teachers also need development and therefore resources should not only be channeled to secondary school teachers.

Teacher development should not be a reactive event that receives attention only when results are poor, but should be a planned process that is aimed at improving performance in the identified areas.

The district should initiate stakeholder meetings where stakeholders are made aware of their roles and responsibilities. At those meetings, the district should draw a distinction line between the “negotiables and the non-negotiables.” Punctuality, completion of class work, assignments and portfolios must be strictly monitored and that must be conveyed to all relevant stakeholders without any excuses.

When short listing and interviews take place, the responsible stakeholders should recommend qualified individuals. Favouritism must be discouraged at all costs because it may be difficult to terminate the services of an incompetent individual once appointed.

Stakeholders at all levels should accept their roles and responsibilities without evading them. The union members have a role to play by ensuring that their members cooperate with the school management team. They should not only play a negative role such as defending members who act unprofessionally by arriving late and leaving early without getting permission from authorities, absenting themselves from school and not honouring their lessons.

REFERENCES

1. Fleisch Brahm D. 2002. Managing Educational Change: The State and school Reform in South Africa. Heinemann.
2. Fleisch Brahm D. 2008. Primary Education in Crisis: why South African schoolchildren underachieve in reading and mathematics. JUTA.
3. Fullan Michael 1882. The Meaning of Educational Change. Teachers College Press. Columbia University.
4. Jansen Jonathan 1990. In Mokobung Nkomo (Ed). Pedagogy of Domination. Africa World Press, Inc.
5. Mokobung Nkomo 1990. Pedagogy of Domination (Ed). Africa world Press, Inc.
6. Slechlechy Phillip C. 1990. Schools for the 21st century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
7. Tewel Kenneth 1990. New Schools for a New Century: A Leader’s Guide to high school Reform. St. Lucie Press.

