# Tackling South Africa's Education Crisis:  The Quality Challenge
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## 1) INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly clear that a weight of evidence exists that supports the fact that there is an on-going crisis in South African education, and that the current system is still failing the majority of South Africa's students. The crisis in schooling is not new. It goes all the way back to before the achievement of democracy in 1994, and has been an ongoing since. What is new is the emerging consensus on its dimensions and causes.

South Africa has consistently spent an average of 20% of it national budget on education. (Bank, 2015). It has unintentionally nurtured a high-cost, low-performance system that as far as educational outcomes go, has the worst education system of all middle-income countries. What is even more shocking is that we perform worse than many low-income African countries that have a lower per-capita expenditure on education. This is a puzzling fact, but one that leads to one ultimate conclusion. This is that, focusing on budget obscures the important questions about the quality of education and teaching in South Africa.

Every year the government attempts to impress us by reporting statistics from the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exam in Grade 12 which mislead the majority of us into believing that the current system is performing well. What is not acknowledged is that these statistics fail to take into account those pupils who never make it to Grade 12. Of 100 pupils that start school, only 50 will make it to Grade 12, 40 will pass, and only 12 will qualify for university. (Spaull, 2013)

There are many well-publicised problems. Non-exhaustively, these include improper teacher deployment, underqualified teachers and poor teacher performance. Looking at government, difficulties have been caused by a failure in implementation and monitoring and major national confusion caused by changing curricula. In the classroom, this results in poor learner standards and results. (Prew, 2009)

While there have been some recent improvements that have been overlooked, as well as some important policy innovations, the picture that emerges time and again is still very dire. This paper aims to assess the issue of quality facing South Africa's education system. It will also, with the aid of various resources, attempt to give real and implementable solutions that will help South Africa solve its education quality challenge.

## 2) THE ISSUE OF QUALITY

They are three main international tests of educational achievement that South Africa participates in. These are TIMSS, PIRLS and SACMEQ[1]. These tests show how the performance of South African pupils has changed over time relative to earlier cohorts of South African pupils, and relative to other countries participating in these studies. In the recently conducted tests, South Africa performed below most African countries that participated in the study. (Spaull, 2013)

**Figure 1: The prevalence of functional illiteracy in SACMEQ 2007**
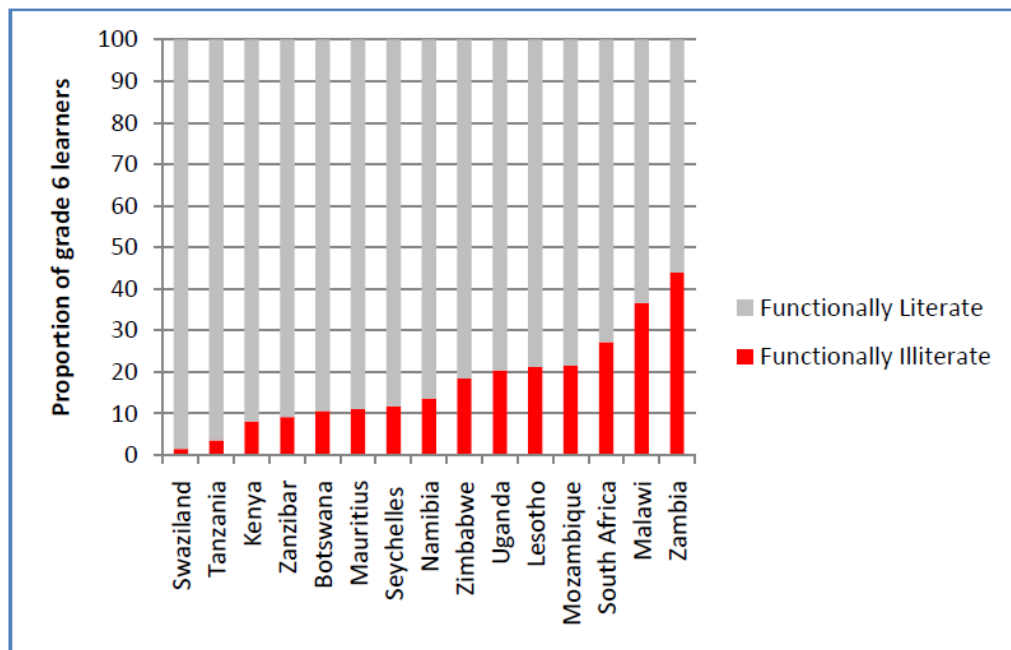


The quality of education varies widely across South Africa. Several authors characterise the South African school system as effectively consisting of two differently functioning sub-systems (Berg, et al., 2011) Black and coloured children which make up the majority, are served by the historically disadvantaged system. White and Indian children, along with the black and coloured upper middle class are served by second sub-system that historically served white children only. The second sub-system performs at a level that is more consistent with that of other developing and developed countries.

The perennial problem that South Africa has been facing is that it hasn't been able to establish what resource inputs are necessary to provide an adequate quality of education.

Since 1994, as a result of the previous apartheid structure, education has been through various development-implementation revision cycles. School access, governance, curriculum, teacher deployment and financial regulations have all gone through the policy mill. The constant revision of policy has been undertaken in order to create better efficiencies and outcomes in a so far underperforming system. The lack of a progressive, long term plan for the implementation of policy, has resulted in many unintended consequences and contradictions

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[1] TIMSS stands for Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, PIRLS stands for Progress in International Reading and Literacy Studies, and SACMEQ stands for Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

that has not only led to poor schooling outcomes, but also to a lack of respect for government and the profession of teaching (Foundation, 2013)

The root of the poor quality of South Africa's schools lies in the rapid expansion of the system. In an attempt to improve access to education, large numbers of poor quality institutions were established between 1970 and 1995. The number of schools grew exponentially, while no further investment went into growing the training and management capacity of educators. It is an increasingly significant problem that the capacity levels of the higher education system, have consistently remained below the levels required to improve the quality of education. (Berg, et al., 2011)

The curriculum transformation process in South Africa was initiated after the 1994 elections (Mahomed, 2004). According to Martin Prew, South Africa seemed to be confused with respect to the difference between the syllabi and the curriculum.

> *"Rather than talking about improving the various syllabuses we kept talking about changing the curriculum. The result was that the whole system was turned upside down too soon and in the process we lost much of what was effective in the old system"*

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### *3) RECOMMENDATIONS: THE VISION*

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### 3.1) <u>Develop capacity within the teaching force</u>

3.1.1) Problem statement

The McKinsey Report (2007) on successful education systems concluded that the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of its teaching force. In South Africa the majority of teachers are characterised as having weak content knowledge and pedagogical skills to successfully teach the curriculum.  (Shepherd, n.d.)

There is a lot of well publicised evidence to suggest that too many South African teachers know too little about the subjects that they teach. In some cases, it is just slightly more than what the curriculum expects their students to know. In order to be effective, a teacher needs to have a deep understanding of the principles of the subject discipline. (Taylor, 2011)

It is very easy for the major part of the blame to be shifted to teachers; however they should not be blamed for this situation. They are simply the victims of inadequate and ineffective training both pre and post-apartheid era. It is a concerning fact  that South Africa still has not managed to create an in-service training program that has been rigorously evaluated and proven to raise teacher content knowledge. (Spaull, 2013)

More recently low teacher effort has been hailed as a more pressing matter. They have been many questions about whether or not the pay of teachers is too low to justify higher levels of effort. One of the big pitfalls in SA's teacher pay system is that it hardly differentiates between better- and worse-performing teachers. (Taylor, 2011)

3.1.2) Recommendations

- Change the teacher pay structure so as to attract and retain good teachers
- The development of an incentivised programme to develop teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skills
- Carefully develop objective performance measures
- There needs to be greater resistance to union pressure so that quality outcomes may be achieved and focused on. It is very likely that unions would resist performance related pay structures (Taylor, 2011)

## 3.2) Improve management and Instructional leadership

3.2.1) Problem statement

The responsibility of the principal and their school management team are of great importance. Their job is not only to ensure that teachers are in class and teaching during school hours, but also that teachers cover the curriculum effectively when they are in class (Taylor, 2011). It is an unfortunate consequence of the lack of effective teacher training, that the majority of South African principals do not understand their responsibilities.

Hoadley, Christie and Ward (2009) wrote in an article that reports on a research study of curriculum management conducted in South African secondary schools in 2007 that of 200 schools surveyed in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape, they found that the majority of principals described their main activities as administration and disciplining learners. This is in contrast to the conclusion of the international literature that school managers should focus on the task of "instructional leadership", a set of systems which propel teaching and learning in the school (Leithwood, et al., 2004)

The phenomenon of unmanageably large classes in South Africa is often a matter of school management. Trending as well is the matter of teacher absenteeism. According to the NSES[2] data, teacher absenteeism was approximately twice as high in schools where the teacher attendance registers were not kept up-to-date (Taylor, 2011)

3.2.2) Recommendations

- Policy should focus on finding new and improved ways of attracting, training and supporting better principals. There also needs to be a focus on replacing those principals at the head of dysfunctional schools. (Taylor, 2011)
- There needs to be a way to monitor instructional leadership

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[2] The National School Effectiveness Study

- The needs to be a campaign in place, tasked with changing the perceptions of principals

## 3.3) <u>Building an accountability and support culture</u>

3.3.1) Problem statement

The relationships of accountability and support amongst stakeholders throughout the school system have been quite weak in the past. When the administration of education in South Africa began to move towards a more decentralised structure, it was not always met with strong systems of accountability and support (Taylor, 2009). South African schools are given considerable freedom when it comes to the way they choose to teach. However, it was not the intention of decentralising the administration, that all the structures stop acting in a coordinated manner. All schools should generally have the same educational goals for their students and they should all be expected to coordinate for the betterment of education standards overall.

A good example of the poor level of coordination and the pursuit of different goals can be observed through the pursuits of teachers unions. These bodies often narrowly pursue better working conditions, higher wages and the strengthening of political power, rather than the professional development of teachers or the educational interest of children. District officials as well tend to fulfil almost exclusively a monitoring role and fail in their duty to support the schools. (Taylor, 2011)

3.3.2) Recommendations

- District officials need to be given a clearer definition of their functions specifically with regards to monitoring and offering support where it is most needed. Their support functions should also be clearly set out so that this is not left to experimentation.
- A campaign must begin with the goal of promoting a partnership with the teachers unions for the improvement of education quality.

3.3.3) Problem statement

In a mission to build a better and stronger accountability and support culture, effort must also be directed towards sharpening accountability through better information to parents and education authorities (Taylor, 2009).

Government has indicated that it intends to hold schools accountable for the performance of their learners. However, it is the parents who have the greatest interest in promoting the educational well-being of their children. It is thus of utmost importance that these parents are provided with reliable information on their child's educational progress. This kind of information empowers parents and allows for the betterment of the overall quality of education, because it is them that will hold the schools most accountable.

The annual national assessments (ANA) that is administered in all schools at Grades 3, 6 and 9 is actually not the best method to achieve this. This is because the assessments are marked by the teachers themselves. With little or inadequate training, teachers will apply a wide variety of practices in administering and marking the tests. This will ultimately result in low reliability in comparing results from one class to the next or between different schools. (Taylor, 2009) (Taylor, 2011)

ANA should give teachers and parents a better idea of the standards their learners ought to be attaining in comparison to other attainment levels nationally. Many primary school teachers are currently under the mistaken impression that their learners are meeting the level required by the curriculum when in fact they are performing well below such levels ( (Berg, et al., 2011)

3.3.4) Recommendations

- ANA should be externally administered and marked
- A plan must be made in order to deal with the additional cost of greater administration.
- Results from the tests must be presented to parents and all stakeholders

## 4) CONCLUSION

Through the research of this paper, it was found that they are a multitude of factors that have contributed to South Africa's education quality challenge. The rapid expansion of the system with its main focus on access meant that quality issues were side-lined. The recommendations of the paper make it clear that in order to solve this problem, the entire system, all stakeholders and administrators, will have to act in a coordinated manner with one goal being the betterment of the quality of education.  Teachers and the skills as educators appear to be at the centre of the struggle. They are the most important resource input in order to achieve increased quality in the education system. Another point is that education reforms need to get bedded down. Each reform needs at least 5 years of implementing before one can determine if they have worked or not. The importance of  monitoring and support must also be elevated.

**FIGURES:** The presence of functional illiteracy in SACMEQ 2007

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