Challenges Facing South Africa's Education Sector and Recommendations for Improved Quality in Education

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UNDERGRADUATE

1. Introduction

South Africa spends a substantial portion of its budget on basic education yet the outcome barely matches its expenditure. Developing Countries like Zimbabwe and Tanzania have lower expenditures on education yet experience better returns than South Africa (Van der Berg, 2007).

This essay will discuss current challenges in South Africa's basic education system, focusing extensively on the quality of teachers. The essay will then discuss solutions that could improve the quality of education in South Africa.

2. Basic Education in South Africa vs Basic Education in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe spends has spent an average of 8% of government expenditure on education in recent years (World Bank, 2016). This is considerably less than the 19.7% spent by South Africa in 2015/16 fiscal year (National Treasury, 2015). However, Zimbabwe produces better quality learners than South Africa Zimbabwe faced a similar historical background to South Africa which affected access to quality education, this being racial conflict. Thus it may be beneficial to contrast the differences in the two education systems.

The basic education system in Zimbabwe inherited the British education system as a result of colonisation. After independence, Zimbabwe changed their curriculum once while South Africa went through a number of curriculum changes after 1994, causing a destabilisation of the system (Pew, 2012). This curriculum involves A-level which is taken by a number of learners after completion of their matric equivalent, O-Level. These A-levels equip Zimbabwean learners with the education standard to study in universities abroad, thus making them internationally competitive. This results in Zimbabwean learners possessing higher quality education than South African learners.

The National Benchmark tests in South African Universities reveal that 67% of matriculants are not adequately prepared to cope with the rigorous academic demands of University (Cliff, 2015)..

Zimbabwe's school management system operates by centralisation, which creates accountability in the expenditure of finances within schools and teachers' output (Pew, 2012). South Africa, in contrast, has a decentralised method of school management in which schools are given autonomy in managing finances and teachers.

3. Challenges in South Africa's Education System

2.1 Performance of School Learners

One commonly used method of evaluating the quality of education in a country is through the assessment of literacy, mathematics and science knowledge and understanding among learners (Holborn, 2013). In the World Economic Forum's competitiveness index for 2012–2013, South Africa's education system was placed at position 140 out of 144 countries (Holborn, 2013). The World Economic Forum (2015) ranked South Africa last in its quality of Maths and Science education.

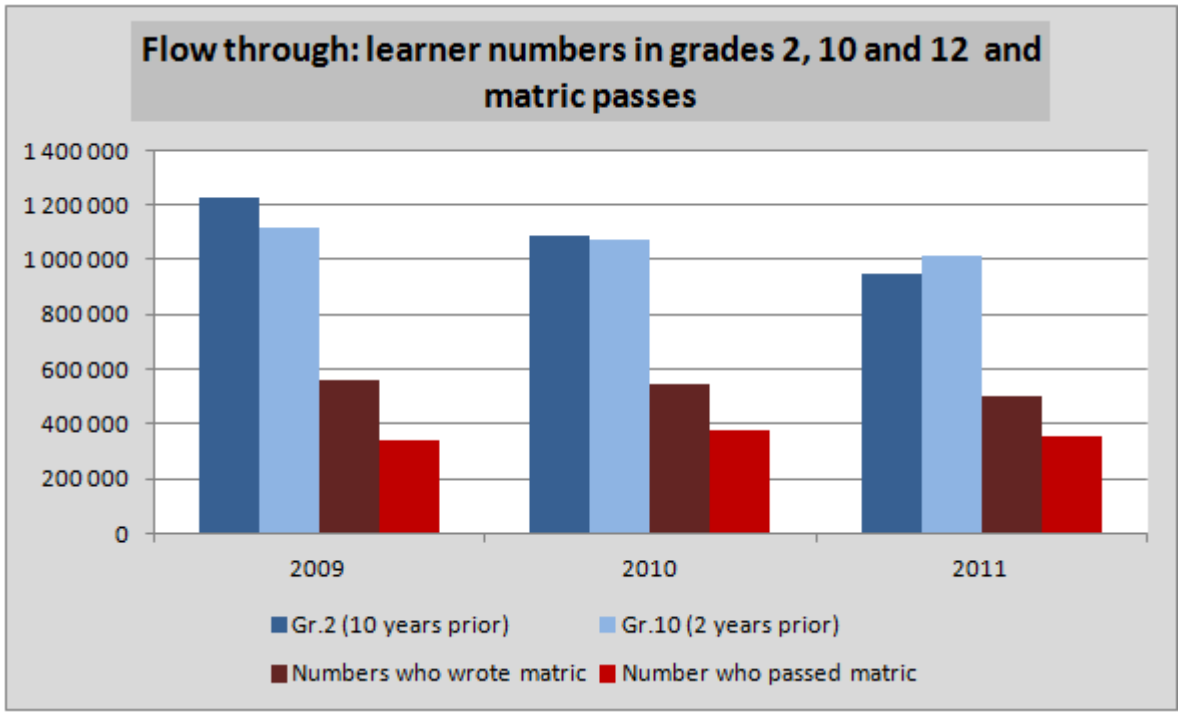
The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ III, 2007) revealed that out of 14 countries that participated, South African Grade 6 learners were placed in

10th position for their level of reading and 8th position for Mathematics, being outperformed by Grade 6 learners from poverty-stricken countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Swaziland (Van der Berg, 2007). It was also discovered that 27% of South African Grade 6 learners were illiterate and 40% were innumerate (Spaull, 2013).

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) revealed that 76% of Grade 9 learners in South Africa had not grasped the concepts of whole numbers, decimals, operations or basic graphs, and these statistics were an improvement from the learning deficits in previous years (Spaull, 2013).

Further research was conducted to discover the percentage of learners who begin primary school and complete their matric in 12 years (Taylor, 2012). In Eastern Cape this percentage is only 20%; in the Western Cape it is 50% and in Gauteng, 60%, (Taylor, 2012) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Spaull, 2012

The decline in the number of learners enrolled from grade 2, grade 10, and those who wrote the matrix exam reveals a high dropout rate amongst learners, especially between grades 10-12. The cause of this problem may stem from what has been revealed by the prePIRLS[1] (2011) study as learning gaps acquired by learners early in their primary school years (Howie & van Staden, 2012). It was found that grade 4 learners from rural areas are 2-2.5 years behind urban learners in reading (Howie & van Staden, 2012). These learning gaps acquired early in primary school grow larger through

[1] Progress in International Reading and Literacy Studies

progression into higher grades, making it difficult for learners to grasp concepts in higher grades, resulting in high dropout rates between grades 10-12.

2.3Teachers' Curriculum Knowledge

The OECD[2] (2005) revealed that the second largest factor affecting learning in school pupils is teachers. Furthermore, Grade 6 mathematics teachers in the North West were tested on grade 6 mathematics content knowledge and only managed to score a 40% average (Carnoy *et al.* 2011). Hungi *et al*. (2011) also found that only 32% of grade 6 mathematics teachers in South Africa possess the appropriate content knowledge in mathematics, in comparison to poorer African countries such as Kenya (90%), Zimbabwe (76%) and Swaziland (55%),

Teachers cannot impart knowledge that they do not have and consequently learners cannot gain skills that teachers have not acquired themselves (Spaull, 2013).

2.4 Teacher Qualifications

In South Africa, the minimum qualification required to become a teacher is a Bachelor of Education Degree (Department of Basic Education, n.d.). Finland, which has been ranked in 5thplace in the list of countries with the best education systems in the world, requires their teachers to acquire a Master's degree, (Fair Reporters, 2015). In Finland, the teaching profession is a highly respected and prestigious career path and the educational requirements prove that (Crouch, 2015).

As a result of the high standard of training teachers in Finland undergo, they are given great freedom to choose the methods of teaching that they believe will best benefit their students, based on research (Crouch, 2015).

2.6 Ability to Attract Highly Qualified Professionals

In South Africa, teachers' salaries increase based on years of experience in teaching. Teachers do not get paid more for having additional educational qualifications such as a Master's degree or a PhD (Barry, 2014). The lack of additional compensation for individuals who possess Master's or PhD qualifications could be one of the reasons that such individuals are so scarce in basic education institutions.

4. Recommendations

3.1 Benchmarking the CAPS Curriculum with the IEB Curriculum

Learners who attend IEB schools complete their matric and receive the same National Senior Certificate as non-IEB school learners. The difference in the IEB curriculum is that learners undergo a more rigorous teaching and assessment regime; learners are required to complete research courses in addition to the standard curriculum; learners take advanced subjects such as Advanced Mathematics and Advanced English (Independent Examinations Board, n.d.).

[2] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

These differences are some of the reasons why IEB education is of a better quality (IEB, n.d.) The matric pass rate for IEB schools in 2015 was 98.3% and Bachelor passes were 85,26% (Karolia, 2015). IEB (n.d.) found that 98% of learners who went to IEB schools completed their degrees in the record time of 3 years. Furthermore, some IEB learners have been accepted into Universities in the UK, US and Australia (IEB, n.d.). These findings suggest that IEB schools are successful in adequately preparing learners to cope with the pressure and demands of tertiary institutions. This is a possible indication that learners attending IEB schools receive higher quality education, making them more competitive with their peers from other countries.

South Africa has recently implemented the new CAPS curriculum in the education system which Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, says has "increased the cognitive rigour and demands ... with high-order questions that will over time drive quality" (Business Day live, 2015). CAPS has reintroduced Maths paper 3 which has been infused into Maths paper I and II. Upgrading the quality of the curriculum is as step in the right direction for South African education. Taking into account the success of IEB students currently, it would be beneficial for the government to consider introducing these research courses as well as the Advanced Maths and English into the CAPS curriculum gradually, over time. As learners begin to adapt to CAPS and their improvement in performance reflect this, these additional courses could be introduced. The IEB curriculum has proven thus far to produce learners who are internationally competitive. Benchmarking CAPS curriculum with IEB curriculum may help develop the majority of South African learners who are in public schools to an internationally competitive standard.

3.2 Evaluating and Increasing Teachers' Knowledge of the Curriculum

At the end of every year, teachers' knowledge of the curriculum can be evaluated through tests of the specific subject that a teacher is employed to teach. Any gaps found in teachers' knowledge can then be taught to teachers through training during holidays as well as during the school terms. Such a recommendation provides a solution for current teachers with large gaps in subject-content. Additional teacher training regimes should be introduced into schools to improve teachers' ability to impart knowledge to learners, as having knowledge of the curriculum content does not mean that a teacher will be able to teach concepts effectively.

3.3 Upgrade the Educational Requirements for Teachers

South Africa currently faces a huge crisis in the quality of its teachers. However, the quality of education in South African will not improve if the government does not place higher educational and training requirements on teachers. The government could set new regulations for teachers, requiring them to pursue higher educational qualifications, as Finland has proven that higher qualifications such as a Master's degree gives great value to the quality of education which learners receive in schools. The government could also consider funding the attainment of higher qualifications for teachers, as many teachers would not be able to afford attaining higher qualifications.

If the government increases the educational requirements for teaching without providing funding for current and future teachers to attain these qualifications, it is likely that schools will lose a lot of

teachers. The government could provide funding by shifting some funds from the budget for education to funding for Masters Degrees for teachers.

3.4 Higher Remuneration for Teachers with Master's or PhD Qualifications

South Africa currently faces a large shortage in teachers, and furthermore, an even larger shortage in good-quality teachers. One method of attracting individuals with Master's and PhD qualifications as well as highly successful individuals with a wealth of expertise into basic education is by introducing higher pay-incentives for such individuals. Such an incentive could also persuade current university students and high school-leavers to pursue teaching in basic education.

South Africa currently faces fiscal constraints and low growth, the public sector wage bill is relatively large. The government could therefore adjust their allocation of funds by shifting some funds from the budget for education to teachers' salaries.

3.5 Effective School Management

Schools that are effectively managed are more likely to produce better performing learners compared to schools with poor management. Effective school management begins with a competent principal with the required expertise and effective management skills, together with the School Governing Body (SGB) made up of teachers, parents, some learners and possibly sponsors (Department of Basic Education, n.d). When an Effective SGB is put in place in every school, it becomes more feasible to enforce strong accountability within a school.

A possible strategy for promoting effective management would be to introduce regular workshops for SGB's for all schools hosted by long-time experts in basic education in South Africa, for example principals and Head of Departments (HOD's) from schools that are considered to be among the best. These experts can impart knowledge to SGB's on effective school management and monitor their progress, then give feedback to government on the progress of SGB's, thus painting a better picture of the individual challenges that each school faces and how the government can assist. A more involved approach can assist the government in implementing effective solutions that will gradually transform dysfunctional schools into functional schools.

3.6 Efficient Allocation and Distribution of Finances

It currently stands that the value of expenditure on education does not match the output. The government may consider assigning skilled personnel to monitor the allocation and distribution of finances given to each province through strict evaluation of the usage of these funds between heads of provincial education and schools. This introduces transparency and accountability into governance and management between these structures.

5. Conclusion

Higher quality in basic education will have a positive impact on South Africa's economic growth. The outcomes include lower unemployment levels in the long-run, increased number of skilled personnel in designated professions and reduced poverty, thus supporting the National Development Plan of increasing economic growth to 5.4% and reducing the unemployment rate to 6% by 2030, (National Development Plan, 2011).

The improvement of the quality of South African teachers, the quality of School Governing Bodies and the quality of the curriculum could bring progressive and sustainable changes to the quality of education in South Africa. It is not recommended that the South African government increase expenditure on education in the current situation, but that a portion of funds be shifted from the education budget to furthering education and increased remuneration for teachers.

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