

Tipping Points in Schooling

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Keynote presentation on the occasion of the launch of the reports:

“Binding Constraints in Education”

&

“Laying Firm Foundations: Getting Reading Right”

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Introduction

Last August, standing right here, I offered the view that the gathering on that day represented a step forward in research in the schooling domain, in that it combined the efforts of the academic community with those of government, NGOs and donors. Today’s meeting consolidates this collaboration, and it feels very good to be part of what is beginning to feel like a family dedicated to the improvement of schooling in South Africa.

But I stand here today somewhat perplexed and not a little insecure. My problem is this: for years I have been telling a story of why the school system can’t improve; various iterations, if you like, of the Binding Constraints arguments. And that is how I was intending to pitch my talk here today: very familiar territory from the perspective of schooling in stasis. But that was 3 weeks ago, and subsequently something has dumped my perspective upside down. I feel like I’m in the middle of a tipping point, just like one of those waves that you underestimate and only know which way is up when your face is thrust into the sand. And in thinking about this upheaval, I began to think of other tipping points which seem to be threatening to somersault us into a new way of seeing things.

Tipping Point 1: From policy to action

The first tipping point that assailed me two weeks ago was precipitated by the news that the latest round of SACMEQ results exhibited a very significant improvement on the previous set.

This is not the first strong sign of systemic improvement. That occurred last year when South Africa’s results from the last iteration of TIMSS showed a large and positive movement in both science and maths in Grades 8 and 9. Surprisingly, this good news seems not to be generally known and debated, perhaps because of a ‘One swallow doesn’t make a summer’ attitude. Let’s wait and see before we celebrate prematurely.

But now, confirmatory evidence is provided by SACMEQ. If what the Minister gave us a preview of two weeks ago in her budget speech (Motshekga 2016) is correct, then the improvement in the SACMEQ results, along with those of TIMSS, are about as large as can be hoped for without arousing suspicion that they represent some factor other than genuine improvements in teaching and learning.

This is really good news for a system that has endured criticism bordering on insulting for many years. Perhaps it signals a point at which the system has moved from talking about doing things (policy) to actually doing them (action).

However good this news is, it has plunged analysts like myself into a profound state of narrative inadequacy. I have to change my story around, through 180°, from explaining **why we can't** improve, to a story of **why we are** improving.

I immediately began working my networks in search of plotlines to carry this new narrative. My Saturday morning golf partner, a highly respected academic, offered the following view:

Ummm, well we've thrown the kitchen sink at the problem for 20 years, and while none of the individual interventions has actually worked, the cumulative effect of these activities has caused a forward movement.

Ok, hard to argue with that, but it's not very helpful in pinpointing the key levers for consolidating and accelerating the forward movement. Perhaps that the point: there are no key levers, no magic bullets in Thabo Mabogoane and Luis Crouch's famous phrase from nearly 20 years ago, and systemic change requires a broad system-wide set of interventions.

A second member of my network, a very senior and successful leader in the bureaucracy, didn't disagree with the Saturday morning golfing perspective, but was more specific. She places textbooks at the top of her list of explanatory factors. This strikes me as a very plausible plotline for a new narrative.

There is no doubt that we have saturated schools and classrooms with books in the last 6 or 7 years, including the Rainbow Workbooks developed and distributed by DBE. Research studies keep pointing out that the books are not being used to anywhere near their full potential. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that ANY increase in access to text, however far short of 'optimal use' that may be, will lead to improvements in literacy. So perhaps the book flood has been the key to explaining the upward movement of test scores.

It's far too soon to offer here today even the bones of a new narrative for schooling, just to emphasise the need for one. And to suggest that a relentless focus on literacy should animate the narrative and drive it forward, a theme already adopted by the Zenex Report being released today.

If my first tipping point may be referred to as a movement from policy to action, then the second, which is undergoing an even more difficult gestation, could be labelled a movement from patronage to expertise.

Tipping Point 2: From patronage to expertise

My reflections in this direction were stimulated by the other big news to surface recently: the slow leaking of the Volmink Report on Jobs for Cash. Not that its contents are news any more: in true South African fashion, in the face of seemingly endless legal obstacles by interested parties, the report had to be leaked, perhaps to maximise its impact on the public debate, but drafts, rumours and recriminations had been circulating for months. This issue relates to Binding Constraint #2: Undue Union Influence. Of course there is union involvement, but what is happening here is not so much about the unions, but an integral part of the culture of patronage that has taken hold of the political sphere in recent years and spread its tentacles into business and the civil service. From this perspective unions are just one of a myriad of networks used to channel patronage to its members.

It strikes me that these developments, in principle, reflect a realisation that is similar to the one that began to dawn on the 'verligtes' in the nationalist government during the 1970s and 80s. At that stage it began to be apparent that, aside from the devastating collateral damage that apartheid had wreaked on the black population, while affirmative action had been very beneficial to its target audience, further development was now dependent on widening incentives and opportunities in the economic terrain to all citizens.

In the same way, it is clear that the best intentions of affirmative action practiced by the present government have become perverted in a number of areas to the point where their benefits are restricted to narrow patronage networks. Not only do such practices undermine respect for the rule of law, and kill the entrepreneurial energy needed to stimulate micro-enterprise, they ultimately inhibit national development and poverty alleviation by diverting funds for these purposes into the pockets of rent-seekers.

The way forward for this tipping point that I think, I hope, is beginning to tremble is going to be long and hard. But if we are to achieve the capable state envisaged by the NDP, then human resource policies need to deliberately build an expert-oriented civil service. As Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant point out in a recent paper on school leadership, schooling is about the nurturing of specialised knowledge, and this requires specialised systems of leadership and pedagogy, as exemplified in what they are calling the epistemic school. My observations during my time at NEEDU, tell me this has begun to happen in certain provinces, notably the Free State, Western Cape, Gauteng, and possibly Mpumalanga. Progress is uneven and still lies far from achieving critical mass, but the movement is decidedly forward in parts of the school system.

Tipping Point 3: Pedagogy, from art to science

A third tipping point relates to Binding Constraint #3 – inadequate content and pedagogical knowledge among teachers. This issue has been occupying my attention since reading the HEQC *National Review of Academic and Professional Programmes in Education* in 2010. And reflecting on the words of Crain Soudien, HEQC Chair who, some two years before the release of the Review was commenting on the poor state of literacy instruction in our schools:

We do not ... have a body of empirical work and theoretical engagement that is able to speak to this situation ... after almost 50 years of serious research into teaching and learning, we cannot say, without qualification, what works and what does not.'

Soudien, 2008: 7

A profoundly obvious conclusion struck me, seeing one Grade 2 literacy lesson after another during NEEDU's survey of Foundation Phase classes across the country in 2012: teachers are not teaching children how to read because they don't know how to. And they don't know how to because no one has ever taught them. It occurred to me that, however poor the teacher education delivered by many of the old colleges may have been, it couldn't be true that the universities are still not neglecting such fundamental pedagogical skills as the teaching of reading and writing. But it turned out on closer inspection that this is precisely the case for the majority of the country's ITE graduates. And the reason for that, in turn, is because our teacher educators have not articulated a coherent and generally accepted theory and pedagogy for early literacy.

Of the three tipping points I have discussed, the third – which is concerned with moving the occupational field of teaching closer to being a science – is the most fundamental. By this I mean that the impact of the first two tipping points will be greatly increased once significant progress has been made in this third field. Optimising implementation of policy in schools and building an expert civil service are both dependent on strengthening the capacity of educators. This starts with initial teacher education (ITE), although, to deal with vast backlogs of teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills in the system, we also need to find a way of increasing the impact of continuing professional development (CPD).

I see some movement in this direction, if not full tipping points yet, in both ITE and CPD. With respect to the latter, I think of the work done over a number of years by Brahm Fleisch in developing and evaluating a method for assisting primary school teachers to teach literacy and maths. The evolution of this project since 2011, while it has not achieved success yet, has a number of very important lessons for all CPD programmes. This first is that perfecting such a system is not a one-off event, but takes time, ongoing adjustment to conditions in schools, and a constant evaluative eye.

There are a number of initiatives which are also beginning to adopt a rigorous empirical approach to educator development, including the work of Karin Brodie with respect to peer learning communities, the work of Yael Shalem and Ingrid Sapire on diagnostic assessment in maths, to say nothing of the prolific output of the NRF/FRF Maths Chairs. When I look over this activity I see a definite trend towards a more scientific approach to the study of pedagogy.

But if teaching is to become more like a science, then the centre of gravity of this tipping point must lie in initial teacher education. While CPD can be seen as attempting to mop up the blood on the floor of a very inefficient education system, reforming ITE is the route to stopping the bleeding and producing a teaching force capable of taking schooling to the heights of Singapore and Finland. Yet, ITE seems to be the forgotten ghost in the machine of schooling.

Promisingly, I see strong movement here too. On 8-9 March this year, representatives from all universities offering ITE met under the auspices of the Teaching and Learning Development Capacity Improvement Project (TLDCIP). (With a name like that it must be a government project!). The purpose of the programme is to develop:

... research-informed knowledge and practice standards for [BEd programmes in primary literacy and mathematics, including] curriculum frameworks, course/module outlines, assessment tools, pedagogical models, materials, and tools for work-integrated learning....

DHET, 2016: 2

Working groups were established, incorporating teacher educators from across the country, in 6 areas:

Project 1: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **teach literacy in African languages** with a special focus on reading.

Project 2: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **teach literacy in English First Additional language** with a special focus on reading.

Project 3: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **teach literacy in multilingual environments**.

Project 4: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **teach number sense and early algebra**.

Project 5: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **teach geometry and measurement**.

Project 6: Developing new teacher graduate's ability to **think mathematically** and to infuse their own teaching with a mathematical thinking approach.

Ibid: 3

The products of the groups will be integrated into new curriculum for primary school teachers in training.

The overall outputs of the project are:

Teacher graduates from the strengthened BEd programmes are able to competently work with children to develop language, literacy and mathematical competences at the appropriate level.

Ibid: 2

The project is led by DHET, with financial support from the EU. While its goals are ambitious, and likely to be inhibited by a paucity of capacity and the complacent culture which dominates a number of education faculties, the success of the project is a prerequisite for moving our school system from the marginal improvements which have begun to emerge, towards a true tipping point where South African becomes known for the excellence of all its public schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two reports being released today are both valuable contributions to my third tipping point, which is the movement to providing a more scientific foundation for pedagogy. The Binding Constraints Report provides insights into the problems which continue to inhibit the nurturing of high level knowledge in our schools, and the interest in today's meeting from this wide range of researchers, bureaucrats and delivery agents is testimony to the high regard in which the work of RESEP is held. The Zenex Report is inserted at the very heart of schooling – how to teach early literacy – and its insights will be invaluable to the working groups labouring under the auspices of the TLDCIP. I look forward to the presentations and discussions which lie before us today.

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