

# **What's wrong with our schools and how can we fix them?**

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## **1. Introduction**

There are many teachers and schools who provide their learners with the opportunities to become skilled and confident citizens able to sustain their families and contribute to building a new society. While most successful schools are clustered in the more affluent suburbs of cities and towns, a good proportion of very good schools are spread through all socio-economic neighbourhoods and across all regions of South Africa. This is the good news about schooling: quality education can be achieved even under the most difficult conditions.

Unfortunately, schools which nurture even a fraction of the talent of their learners are very few and far between. The majority squander the potential of the country's children and ultimately the nation: they exhibit practices which indicate that they have little understanding of the role school knowledge plays in developing the intellectual capacity, and hence the life chances, of the children entrusted to their care. Some 80% of the country's schools fall into this category.

This paper outlines the three main shortcomings in the system, attempts to understand why these problems are endemic in South African schools, and suggests a way forward in the interests of putting all schools onto a more productive path. In particular, we argue that the roots of the malaise which afflicts our schools is that insufficient recognition is given to expertise as the key to improving quality in a knowledge-based enterprise such as public schooling. And the low status accorded to expert knowledge as the primary criterion for allocating opportunity, leaves the field wide open for a variety of nepotistic practices to become the main principles of social organisation.

## 2. Problems in South African schools

Three features of our school system combine to undermine effective teaching and learning: poor time management, insufficient attention to text, and very low levels of teacher subject knowledge. The accumulating evidence indicates that with respect to these three factors, our teachers and schools are significantly worse off than those of many of our much poorer neighbours in the region.

### 2.1. Time management

A national survey of schools in 2003 revealed high levels of teacher absenteeism and latecoming. This problem is particularly widespread in the 4 poorest quintiles of the system, where 97-100% of principals reported it as a problem, but a substantial proportion of schools in the most affluent quintile (26 per cent) also report experiencing the same problem. This has been shown to have a high statistical correlation with poor learner performance on tests which compare scores across a number of SADC countries. Since the problem is widespread across both rural and non-rural schools, it would seem that it is not attributable to transport problems and long distances.

Furthermore, when teachers are at school they are not necessarily in class. Empirical studies have indicated that many South African teachers spend less than half their time teaching. This finding was identified in an HSRC study in 2005, which concluded that:

- Teachers work an average of 41 hours per week, out of an expected minimum of 43
- 41% of this time is spent on teaching, which translates to 3.4 hours a day
- 14% of in-school time is devoted to planning and preparation
- 14% is spent on assessment, evaluation, writing reports and record-keeping

In strong contrast to this lackadaisical picture, two studies on poor schools that perform well, including the Ministerial Commission led by Pam Christie last year, found that time is a highly valued commodity in successful institutions: not only is punctuality observed during the school day, but additional teaching time is often created outside of normal hours. Ensuring the effective use of time in any institution is essentially a leadership responsibility, and it would appear from the available evidence that it is a responsibility which the majority of South African principals do not exercise effectively.

There is also a policy dimension to the problem of time management. The HSRC study, supported by a recent OECD report on South Africa, indicates that much time is spent by teachers during school hours

completing forms which appear to serve little purpose other than bureaucratic compliance, such as formalistic planning documents, and extensive and frequent assessment reports on the performance of individual learners, supported by boxes of evidence for the latter. Yet, research commissioned by Umalusi indicates that the 'continuous assessment' scores gathered in this way for Grade 12 learners bear little correlation with their Senior Certificate exam scores. This is a classic example of how regulations can be self-defeating: designed to improve curriculum coverage and assessment, the onerous paperwork serves to distract teachers from the core task of teaching, thus effectively undermining curriculum completion. Poor management skills at provincial and district levels quickly lead to mindless paperwork which frustrates and exhausts teachers and officials alike. Such counterproductive forms of regulation recall the observation that one characteristic of a good leader is to protect her staff from bad policy. It is also quite obvious from the Umalusi research that many teachers have no idea of the standard to which they should be teaching.

Ostensibly time provides the space for the study of school knowledge. It certainly does this and in most of our schools there is simply too little time available to cover the curriculum, because of the very loose approach to time management by principals and staff, which is widely condoned by district officials. However, the regulation and effective use of time serves a far more fundamental function, without which learning is not possible. I am referring to the socialising effects on a young person of spending 12 very formative years of her life in an institution which values the optimal use of time. This experience inculcates the same habits in the child. Internalising the habitus evident in a well functioning school builds the attitudes needed for life in a modern society. An absence of these habits in school leavers breeds monsters like the Department of Home Affairs, where time means nothing to the officials who staff the Department, and where bribery is often the only way to get a passport in less than 6 months. And of course the biggest monster of all is our school system which perpetuates the cycle, producing large numbers of the kind of uncaring, incompetent and often corrupt officials which choke large chunks of the state machinery and inhibit the delivery of services.

## **2.2. Focus on text**

School knowledge is about understanding ideas, and manipulating concepts using the symbol systems of language and number. It is studied through text, whether this is written or spoken, and whether it is encoded on the page or in electronic form. Text is the carrier of knowledge, and schooling is essentially about acquiring progressively greater proficiency in a number of specialised literacies: history, mathematics, Xhosa literature, and the like. Reading and writing of complex texts is the essence of

schooling. This process teaches us to reason inferentially, to understand the past and plan the future, to appreciate art, and to undertake the technical tasks demanded by a modern economy. And through these activities citizens acquire a specialised identity, as bricklayers or engineers, as nurses or brain surgeons. South Africa is failing in this task, because most of our teachers, principals and bureaucrats do not understand the role of school knowledge in building and maintaining a developed society.

The paucity of attention which teachers give to text is revealed in an analysis of learner workbooks. In one study JET Education Services (JET) did in a sample of rural primary schools, we found that in the majority of Grade 3 language and maths classes children engage in writing exercises no more than once a week. What little writing is done consists predominantly of exercises composed of isolated words; sentences are seldom seen, while longer passages are virtually non-existent. This study paid particular attention to the number of extended passages written by children, which consists of writing of paragraph length or longer: stories, descriptions, expressive passages, or transactional writing such as letters. We assume that, because extended passages contain relatively complex thoughts, expressed through relatively complex grammatical structures, this is the primary vehicle for developing children's cognitive processes and extending their literacy skills. In literacy classes observed in this study two thirds of the classes had completed fewer than 3 extended passages over the year. Other studies across the country show very similar results.

### **2.3. Teacher knowledge**

In the same rural study described above short tests in literacy and mathematics were administered to Grade 3 teachers. These instruments were constructed by selecting items from tests designed to assess the knowledge of Grade 6 learners. The average score on the maths test for 25 teachers was 67%. One teacher scored 100% while 3 scored below 50%. The average score on the language test for 23 teachers was 55%. The test involved a comprehension exercise based on a short essay story by Roald Dahl (*The Upsidedown Mice*). 12 of the 23 teachers scored less than 50%, with a lowest score of 21, 7%. Only one teacher scored higher than 75%.

These results have been replicated in schools across the country in language, maths and science, in both primary and high schools. It is clear that most teachers do not have the knowledge which the curriculum expects them to teach their children.

### 3. Analysis

How do we understand the features of SA schools that I have outlined briefly here? I turn to one of the most famous teacher trainers of the late nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim, who drew a distinction between two distinct forms of social organisation. On one hand, in pre-industrial societies, there is a low level of labour differentiation, while in industrial societies there is an ordering and sorting of jobs, each depending on a specific kind of expert knowledge for its execution. In pre-industrial societies - hunter-gatherer or pastoral communities for example – there is some differentiation, but nothing like the degree of specialisation which distinguishes, say, an airline pilot from a doctor in a modern society. For Durkheim, any form of state in a pre-industrial society is commonly held together by high levels of militarisation, such as happened in ancient Rome or Shaka's Sulu kingdom. Subjects in such societies exhibit what Durkheim called **mechanical solidarity**, with the broad mass of people thinking alike and exhibiting a collective consciousness.

In contrast, in secular industrialised societies, such as the one SA is trying to become, citizens are interdependent: the airline pilot depends as much on the expert knowledge in anatomy and physiology held by the doctor, as the doctor depends on the navigational skills of the pilot. This interdependence Durkheim called **organic solidarity**, the term deriving from the fact that the division of labour is organised and directed toward a broadly common set of values and economic goals.

Under colonialism and apartheid, the full advantages of industrialisation were withheld from the majority of the population, excluded from the vote, land ownership and participation in professional and political life. Deprived of mass schooling until the late twentieth century, most South Africans were precluded from differentiating their skills and becoming citizens of modernity. They had no option but to fall back on mechanical forms of solidarity. And it was the mechanical solidarity of the population, as much as the slow strangulation of the economy by a shortage of skills, that brought about the end of apartheid.

How can these ideas be used to explain what is happening in our schools today? Under apartheid, teachers never got to develop high level skills, through a combination of state prohibition, and a lack of expertise in the colleges of education. Thus, post 1994, most teachers did not have the intellectual resources to act as individual citizens with specialised expertise and the professional comportment which characterises modern citizens. They had nothing to fall back on but mechanical solidarity – an injury to one is an injury to all. And today, while there is differentiation of job **function** in the system –

for example, the job description of a Head of Department (HOD) is quite different to that of a teacher – there is little differentiation of **skills** in the teacher population. Skill levels of teachers cluster around a very low level of knowledge proficiency. Under these conditions, the modern criteria used to allocate first entry jobs and promotion posts – based on expert knowledge – are not applicable. And where the ordering of staff is not based on expertise, the preferred method of job allocation, indeed the only method remaining, is nepotism.

What evolves through this process is a society in which knowledge has a low status, and getting ahead depends on who you know, and which political party or union you belong to. In short, a society ruled by patronage. The most damaging aspect of this situation is that such a society is unable to grow the skills needed to bootstrap itself out of poverty. The form of social organisation in South Africa prevents us from following the paths of countries like Singapore, Ireland and Malaysia in the second half of the last century: they valued expert knowledge and built the schools and teachers needed to induct young citizens into their growing industrial economies. South Africa is on the wrong development track: because of a failure to prioritise expert knowledge as the key to success, we have allowed debased criteria to dominate in distributing opportunity to citizens. Everyone even remotely involved in schooling has had a personal experience or heard first hand a story of how patronage and corruption permeate the system: of how teachers stand together to resist one of their number being disciplined for gross acts of incompetence, dereliction of duty, and even criminality; of principals and teachers who bar district officials from entering schools in large parts of the country; of officials in an acting capacity being ordered to stay at home by platoons of teachers; and how national policy is simply overturned by diktat of the local union office. This is mechanical solidarity in its most lumpen form and it is a very significant factor inhibiting the country's development.

#### **4. What to do?**

If this analysis is true, then what should we do to order our society differently? For me, the process would start by elevating the status of expertise as the principal mechanism for organising society. It is through the acquisition of subject knowledge that differentiation and specialisation occurs; through which mechanically solid, unskilled subjects are individualised into modern citizens who can make their own way in the world, through exercising a professional identity and practicing specialist knowledge. Specialisation of knowledge is the process that transforms a child from a very poor home into, for example, a maths teacher, with an interest in her subject, a professional comportment, and a set of networks which transcend boundaries of race, gender and geography. Typically, the system fails to

provide children with this orientation to expertise, and many leave school fit only to join the ranks of the unemployed, the criminal classes, or the civil service. A lack of skills among managers at all levels breeds disrespect for authority, and a culture of impunity seeps through society.

The overriding priority, therefore, for South Africa's school system must be to rehabilitate the importance of expert knowledge. And this must start with teachers. It is self evident that teachers cannot teach what they do not themselves understand. A teacher cannot be a teacher if she does not know her subject, however much OBE jargon she can speak, and whichever union card she carries.

And the comfort of mechanical solidarity among teachers – an injury to one is an injury to all – does not incentivise them to exhibit professional attitudes and to extend their knowledge skills. As a result, learners do not acquire good work habits in most of our schools, do not learn a facility with written text, and receive little intellectual stimulation from teachers. Mechanical solidarity in the school system is directly exacerbating the horrendous inequalities in SA society, because it is poor children who are mostly stuck with teachers who lack the values and knowledge resources required to behave as teachers.

## 5. How to do it?

The key question is: if subject knowledge is the key, then how do we get teachers to value it more highly and to acquire more of it? There seem to me to be 3 options. First, we can appeal to their better natures. While this works in a minority of cases, unfortunately where teacher development programmes do measure their effects on teacher knowledge, the results, while not discouraging, do not elicit rave reviews. Second, we can try coercion, but you can lead a horse to water but if it's not thirsty no amount of coaxing or beating can make it drink.

This leaves incentives as the last option. What about making entry into the teaching profession, and qualification for any promotion post dependent on passing a test in the knowledge required for the job? Let's have the massive training programme that is currently being proposed by teacher unions. But this will be another weak and ineffectual intervention if teachers are not required to pass a test at the end of the training in order to qualify for exemption from the next 3 week programme run during the June school holidays. First-time teachers should have to pass a test on the knowledge they will be teaching: while good subject knowledge is not always sufficient to be a good teacher, it certainly is necessary, and therefore certifying teacher knowledge is the first and most important step in screening new entrants into the profession. This may sound like a low bar to set for teachers, but it is painfully obvious that we

assume too much when we expect teachers to know their subjects well enough to teach them. This is not to assume that teachers do not have the capacity to learn, but at present they have no need to do this, and until we send a strong message that subject knowledge is a prerequisite attribute of any teacher, they have no incentive to take this issue seriously.

Similarly, promotion to posts such as school head of department or district level subject advisor should be dependent on candidates being able to demonstrate subject expertise at even higher levels than the teachers they are supposed to support. First-time principals should be trained and certified knowledgeable about industrial relations and educational law, and competent in balancing the school's books, and use of the computer to run the administration system. The Minister has been talking for some time about a training and certification system for principals: this is a very positive development, provided the process results in improved knowledge and skills, and where the certification process is based strictly on expertise and not merely on attendance at yet another Advanced Certificate of Education (ACE) programme through which teachers are rendered 'qualified' without acquiring the wherewithal to improve their management practices.

There is also a Ministerial Commission in operation at present, which is investigating the feasibility of establishing an inspectorate. My own view is that this is an urgent necessity and should be set up as soon as possible. I think it should be entrusted with three functions, which address the three biggest problems in the school system described above. The first of these would be to monitor the management of time in schools. This would best be done by undertaking unannounced, random visits to schools. Teachers not in school or in class with a satisfactory reason should be warned, and disciplined and ultimately dismissed if they cannot learn to be punctual. Principals who do not discipline their teachers and learners to be punctual, or allow the school day to be disrupted at the drop of a hat – such as preparing for the matric farewell, a choir competition, athletics practice, in-service training, or more than one or two special funerals a year – should be disciplined. This is a function which the overwhelming majority of districts do not perform at present, partly because it is not important to them, partly because they see their teachers and principals as comrades, partly because they are intimidated by the unions, partly because they lack the specialist knowledge required to carry out these tasks, and partly because their days are bogged down in crisis management.

The second function of the inspectorate should be to exercise quality assurance of teacher in-service training, certifying those found to be competent in their subjects, and advising on the mentoring of

those who are not. There is an argument that this second function should be undertaken by the current district offices, but in my view these institutions are so hopelessly compromised by the nepotism and lack of expertise that characterises the rest of the system, that the only solution is to start again with a new institution, entry into which is strictly controlled on the basis of expert knowledge. While districts need to improve enormously their own capacity, and the quality and extent to which they support schools in delivering the curriculum, it makes sense to separate the roles of monitoring and support, and place the former function with the new inspectorate.

The third function of the inspectorate will be to assess the quality of teaching and learning. This is another area which has become unnecessarily time-consuming, complex and bureaucratic, to the extent that instruments such as Whole School Evaluation (WSE) and the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) obscure the important issues. We need rather to focus on a limited number of indicators which are easily measureable and are most closely related to the quality of teaching and learning. We suggest that the two most important indicators in this regard are annual or biannual tests in literacy and mathematics at the end of each phase, and an analysis of a sample of learner writing and language and mathematics in key grades in each school.

## **6. Conclusion**

The division of labour in a successful society, such as the one South Africa is attempting to transform itself into, is highly differentiated. The specialised knowledge required to achieve and maintain such a society is accomplished primarily at school, through the inculcation in children of conscientious attitudes and proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic. This is tragically failing to happen in the majority of our schools. I have argued that the first step to turning around this situation is to shift public perception from one which promotes mechanical solidarity – one for all and all for one – towards one which values knowledge and skill as both the passport to individual advancement and the key mechanism for eliminating poverty. In the first instance, this is a political task: we need to promote a public debate, initiated by leaders at all levels of society, which elevates the value of expertise as the primary ordering principle of the new South Africa. This is not only to argue for a general campaign about the importance of hard work and ethical behaviour, but about preparing the ground for the specific measures described above, aimed at achieving a more effective and equitable school system. The key question is: are there any politicians out there with the courage to start this debate?

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