

## **SUNDAY TIMES ARTICLE (13/01/2008) BY PROF MARY METCALFE**

*Draft copy*

Ten years is a short time in Education. It takes four years to train a teacher, seven years to pass through primary education, and many years for changes in curriculum intention to take firm root in classrooms. It may be that the annual matric media circus has focused our attention narrowly on the expectation that for this nation of 'miracles' there might be a quick-fix solution after the ravages of apartheid education; that our exceptionalism will mean that because we wish it, 'next year' will be better. The hard reality is that we are not making the progress we need in the two most critical dimensions of education performance: quality and equity.

The evidence of the quality deficit is clear and its cumulative impact is alarming. Every year on average for the last 4 years, of the learners who reached matric, only 17% of school leavers achieved the standard necessary to proceed to University, 50% passed but did not qualify to proceed to University, and 33% failed. Between the end of 2005 and 2007, we have ejected 535 000 young people out of school with no 'passing' certificate and into a very uncertain future. The majority of these will join the ranks of the unemployed and remain there for some time – young people between the ages of 20 and 24 comprise 14% of the labour force, but are over-represented (27%) in the unemployed. These individuals are likely to wrestle with a low self-esteem or a deep sense of betrayal.

This scenario is resistant to change – the quality deficit grows incrementally from the first years of school. Without decisive intervention, the prognosis for the 'matric' classes of 2010 and 2011 is not much better. When the class of 2010 (now in grade 10) was in Grade 3 in 2001, the national survey of performance showed that 30% did not achieve at the required standard in numeracy, and 54% did not achieve at the required standard in literacy. For the class of 2011, the 2005 Grade 6 Evaluation, showed that only 28% performed at the required standard in numeracy and for literacy, only 38%.

Patterns of school performance are significantly influenced by socio-economic context, and race and class coincide in South Africa. Thus we perpetuate historic inequalities in our schools. When schools were managed and differentially resourced by education departments organized on a logic of racial and ethnic divisions the matric exam was 'separate' (but never equal) for children of different races. For some the annual headlines trumpeted a 98% pass rate, and for others, the pass rate was never above 50%. We did not change these patterns with a single education system, nor by introducing a single matric exam. In 2003, almost 1 in 10 of the white cohort achieved an A aggregate for Matric, as compared to just over 1 in 1000 of the black cohort (and half of these were attending 'suburban' schools). Two-thirds of HG math passes are produced by a small minority (7%) of schools – and only 0.6 of these passes are produced in historically African schools.

We fail the most vulnerable through this perpetuation of the 'inequality of quality' and its vicious cycle of unemployment and poverty. Education is key to breaking this especially because the provision of quality education is most critical for children of the poor. Improvements in school quality make the most difference in achievement levels of the most disadvantaged children – the privileged 'get by' but even there mediocrity takes root in the complacency of comparative excellence.

How can we impact on achievement levels across the country? I have been asked to offer some suggestions as a contribution to a much needed national debate. This hopefully will provoke disagreement and more and different ideas. A good starting point may be to identify where we may have gone wrong, and what needs to be strengthened, and to suggest what realistic time frames might be.

1. **We have underestimated the time needed for educational change and we have not invested enough energy in building a national consensus that can sustain change:** Our national expectations have emphasized rapid deliverables. The challenges we faced were enormous, and it was imperative to make rapid progress in distancing ourselves from our apartheid past. But the pace and volume of change have not have allowed the system to absorb change, and we have in our haste failed to involve all necessary parties sufficiently in the process. Many communities feel bewildered by and alienated from the changes in education, and have lost their voice. Relationships between teachers and the state are dominated by labour relations issues, and seldom is there an inclusive national discourse that moves out of the frustration that provokes 'blaming' but focuses as it should on *what* education support teacher need and *how* to achieve quality improvement. We need to maintain robust relationships to improve the conditions of service of teachers – but we also need vigorous and inclusive debates about educational issues in national, provincial and local fora. Where is the National Education and Training Council envisaged in the National Education Policy Act of 1996? It has never been established. Education debate has been marginalized.

*How long will this take?* It is possible to get the forum established (and replicated at provincial and local levels) and a substantive national debate on track during 2008.

2. **We have not sufficiently differentiated between the needs of different teachers:** The most significant factor affecting learner performance is teacher quality, and the effect is greatest for the children of the poor. The research is unequivocal: the conceptual knowledge of our teachers is low; teachers have a poor grasp of the subjects they teach; there is a high level of teacher error in the content and concepts presented in lessons; and teachers have low expectations of learners (particularly poor learners) who then achieve to these low expectations and motivation and challenge is reduced. Whether curriculum changes that have been introduced are 'good' or 'bad' is less important than building the professional confidence of teachers, and excellence in teaching. How do we improve quality? The most important investment we can make is to provide for teachers to select from a range of academically rigorous learning opportunities of high quality that are credible and useful to them and which will build their own literacy and confidence in the subject matter they teach; which will deepen their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy; and which will excite them about learner potential. In pursuing these opportunities, they must have sufficient time to read and think and write, and to reflect on their practice. Teachers have different needs, and a range of alternatives must be provided.

*How long will this take?* Coordinating the academic and financial planning cycles of Higher Education Institutions (who are likely to be the major providers together with some NGOs) and provincial education departments (who are likely to be the funders of these programmes), and capacity building including course and materials development could result in programmes being ready for implementation in 2010, with a gradual annual roll-out depending on funding and capacity the quality impacts

of which will increasingly take effect from 2011 as participation grows. Until this happens we might see sporadic provincial efforts, hopefully benefiting some, and more importantly the development and consolidation of new teacher-led systems of continuing professional development which will take firm root ten years into the future.

- 3. We have not focused sufficiently on the core of literacy and numeracy:** Reversing the appalling performance of our children in the elementary literacy and numeracy skills that facilitate ongoing learning right from the first years of school has to be a national priority, and must be integral to teacher development programmes, and the provision and use of resources in schools.

*How long will this take?* Changing pedagogical practice must follow learning opportunities that help teachers rethink their practice. This has to be dependent on developing the options above and it will take five years (2013) or more (if budgets are already earmarked for this purpose and capacity exists to support teachers) before we reach enough teachers to start to make a difference in the foundation phase (and another 10 years – 2023 - or so for this to filter through to the school leavers). To prepare and distribute materials that would significantly improve teaching and learning could be done much more quickly with substantial impact - possibly in 2 years if the funding exists in provincial MTEF budgets for 2009/10 and intensive planning happens during 2008 using pre-existing best practice material. Excellent learning material that provides teachers with a comprehensive set of guidelines for lessons throughout the year could have a massive positive impact – but it will take 3 years to develop and get into classrooms.
- 4. We have made serious errors in relation to languages of learning and teaching:** The quest for access to the socio-economic power that appears to accompany fluency in English is causing communities to make decisions that are crippling children educationally. Where else in the world would there be a serious discussion about if we should teach learners in their first year of School (and teach them to read in particular) in a language they cannot understand? In multilingual communities the challenge of linguistic and cultural separation remains, but urgent action must be taken to promote instruction in languages that best support learning.

*How long will this take?* The Minister has this on her radar screen, as have most provincial education departments – but planning issues are as yet not well developed. We need more speakers of African languages training to be foundation phase teachers. We need high quality resource materials – particularly reading materials - in all languages to be developed and then to be selected by schools. We need teachers to be trained in the challenges of literacy and numeracy instruction in multi-lingual classrooms. We need the further development of a literary canon in all languages, and a book-buying reading public in these languages. We need teachers to become more confident in teaching both ‘first’ languages and the ‘second’ languages – and we need more teachers to more fluent in more South African languages. To do all of this? Maybe 6 years (2014) to be on our feet if we plan well, but longer than that to be running.
- 5. We have not invested sufficient resources rapidly enough to address the material deficiencies in learning environments:** This is an area we can get right within a few years. We now have a detailed national database of school needs, and the national treasury has committed R950m towards eradicating the backlog in building and servicing schools. Most provinces have developed the systems

needed to build and renovate schools (and where this is known not to be the case alternative action must be taken) so that we should be able to aim for the provision of at least basic minimum learning and teaching resources: libraries; toilets; staffrooms; offices; sickrooms; storerooms; netball courts; laboratories; fencing; unbroken windows; enough schools in densely populated parts of the country so that they are small enough for the principal to know the name of every child. All of this should all be possible.

*How long will this take?* The construction industry has the capacity and this project has job-creation and skill-development potential. If the planning expertise does not exist in provincial departments (working with local authorities) this could be bought in. If the spending of the allocated R950m is effectively managed, and comprehensive maintenance systems are put into place, we could see a difference by 2012.

**6. We have not differentiated sufficiently between the needs of different schools and their different states of readiness to implement change**

It cannot be stressed enough that our schools are not equal in their internal ability to respond to policy changes. The more complex the policy change, the more disruptive this has been to the fragile power relations and stretched resources of weak schools. The sad lesson of the last 13 years is that the schools most in need of improvement have been the least able to respond to new policy requirements. We need to support some schools more than others, and the support we give well functioning schools must simply be supportive of their efforts, and less about asserting control. Failing schools must be engaged and given additional material and education support – not demands for compliance but the establishment of compacts between the professional staff of the school, the community they serve, and the education department where firm commitments are made to behaviour change in exchange for support that has been identified as key to making a difference.

*How long will this take?* As long as it will take the individual officials supporting schools to establish the credible leadership needed to guide this process of identifying specific needs and managing change, and for fair processes that are open to public scrutiny to be established to allocate these additional human or material resources.

**7. We have not sufficiently developed leadership in teaching and learning at School and District level**

This is the most critical area. It is at School level that the detailed planning and monitoring of teaching and learning must take place – and this has been the weakest link. The routine planning of how the selected content is to be covered during the course of the year, the term and the months and weeks; planning and monitoring the use of school time and resources through the most appropriate timetable; use of learning support material; structuring of assessment; ensuring maximum use of learning time; reviewing of learner performance and modifying approaches in response to performance; provision of differentiated learning for learners of different abilities; agreement about performance benchmarks; and managing access to textbooks and readers. All of these require diligent and firm collegial support from heads of departments and school principals. In far too many schools there is no leadership in these tasks and no accountability. In too many circuits or districts, the officials appointed to support schools are themselves not confident in these areas or are denied access to school records that should document these activities. 'School

management' has not been focused enough on the leadership of teaching and learning. Roles and responsibilities are not clear, and where leadership is not credible it is ineffective. In some schools, what is taken for granted in the education endeavor contributes to a smooth flow of activity and a focus on teaching and learning as the centre of the School. In others, every decision is contested and inordinate energy is invested in negotiating management issues. This may be because leadership is weak and decisions questionable, but the more schools share a commonality of purpose as to the routine administration of teaching and learning, the more time can be devoted to the learners, to excellence in teaching.

*How long will this take?* The leadership of teacher, principal and subject specific organisations will be critical to making rapid progress. This must be separated from the vexed question of appraisal for remuneration purposes. All of the time frames above could be 'fast-tracked' if there was school- and circuit/district-led leadership of the processes of teaching and learning where school performance data was a subject of discussion about ways to improve, and if schools were given access to performance information gathered and held at provincial and national level that would help them make decisions to improve performance. Building on the many good examples that already exist, and on the basis of a national consensus, we could begin developing these ideas in 2008 and start making progress in 2009 – at different rates across our different school contexts.

#### **8. We have neglected the social and support mechanisms**

While teachers have clear pastoral responsibilities for learners, they cannot in addition play the roles of school social workers, community workers and psychologists. These are critical support functions in the schools serving communities ravaged by poverty and the HIV pandemic. Who do teachers turn to when faced with social fabric problems – often manifesting in discipline problems at schools. Schools no longer have librarians, sports and recreational activities are moribund at the majority of schools. We should select schools initially on two criteria: those serving the poorest communities and which are 'large' – possibly with more than 650 learners and provide them with if not direct, then immediate, access to school-based counsellors/ social workers; school media and literacy specialists; and school recreation officers (sport/ culture etc). This could be provided to clusters of schools and should be linked to community support services with an additional focus on out-of-school youth.

*How long will this take?* The budget provision is not substantial – but the human resource base (as inequitable as it was) has been eroded and will take years to rebuild. The training of school psychologists, school social workers, school librarians/ media and literacy experts and sports facilitators has been reduced to a trickle because there are no employment opportunities. If we can resuscitate training programmes, we might be able to get trained personnel into schools by 2013 or 2014

#### **9. We have ruptured the community base of education in urban areas**

The challenges facing schools in different demographic contexts vary greatly. In rural areas, schools might be more central to community life but suffer from education isolation and the difficulties of accessing resources. In urban areas, we have seen mass migrations of children out of localities where they live to what is perceived to be a 'better' education in towns and suburbs. This freedom of choice and movement and the consequent diversity of schools in less-poor areas is to be celebrated – but it is a tragedy that this has depleted poor communities of the resources that might make a difference to quality and to hope. Soweto is a case in

point. The vibrant economic growth and infrastructural development that is driving up house prices is not matched in education. Schools have emptied, many are closed, and young learners flood out of Soweto at dawn in mini-buses to various education destinations. The financial cost of the fees and transport (indicatively, R12 000 per learner per annum would total R12m for each unit of 1000 learners), and the potential value-add of parents committed to improving the education opportunities of their children if invested into schools in the township could have a huge impact. Despite Bantu Education, Sowetans were proud of the standards of excellence achieved in many schools and this needs to be reasserted. One way of doing this would be to enter into community partnerships where 'spare' capacity in empty township schools could be used for community driven quality innovations. *How long will this take?* Innovative pilot projects could be immediate. A project which pulls a community into discussion about what sort of public school they would like in their area, and what private resources could be diverted back into this public project could result in projects being up and running by 2009 – but these would have to be inclusive, community schools which accept that the capacity to contribute will differ between families.

#### **10. Our planning has been poor**

The suggestions above, and the rough indications of time frame illustrate that 'quick-fix solutions are bound to fail because of the complex interplay of actions between role-players that need to be carefully articulated step-by-step. It is not surprising that so much has gone wrong, and expressions of outrage and finger-pointing are not helpful. Given the magnitude of the progress we have made, and where we have come from, planning and implementation failures were to some extent inevitable – we are not exceptional. Consensus must be built regarding the factors that underlie our quality differentials and deficiencies; we must agree on what might be the key steps to address these; and we must plan carefully in a coordinated way across provinces and with responsibilities accepted by all stake-holders for the long term project of building excellence.

Quality in education is like running a marathon – not a sprint. We must set achievable and realistic goals and use our systems of governance to monitor education performance throughout the system, at every level. The annual expectation of an 'improvement in Matric' is a dangerous distraction.