

The Illusion of Education in South Africa by Dr. Moeketsi Letseka



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Abstract

South Africa's constitution is hailed as 'liberal and egalitarian' because 'it values human dignity and frames human rights at its heart' But the country's public education is 'a national disaster' that is 'essentially dysfunctional'. In this paper I sketch this 'essential dysfunctionality'. I appeal to the notions of 'redesigning' and 'reengineering'. Employed sensibly 'redesigning' and 'reengineering' can generate dramatic improvements in critical performance measures such as cost, quality, service and speed. I argue that 'redesigning' and 'reengineering' can enable South Africa's public education to efficiently deliver 'education for all' to the majority blacks who were previously disadvantaged by apartheid policies.

1. Introduction

South Africa is a liberal democratic state that boasts of a constitution that enshrines a variety of rights and freedoms for the individual. Indeed South Africa's constitution has been described as 'a model liberal democratic constitution',¹ 'a constitution of classic liberalism',² and a 'state of the art document',³ that is 'widely hailed as liberal and egalitarian'⁴ because 'it values human dignity and frames human rights at its heart'⁵. Yet

- 1 Jordan, P. (1996). Harmony, an elusive objective. In *The Star and SA Times International*, June 12
- 2 Vilakazi, H. W. (2003). Africa and the problem of the state: Can African traditional authority and the Western liberal state be reconciled? *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 2(2), 27-36
- 3 Mattes, R. (2002). South Africa: Democracy without the people. *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (1), 22-36
- 4 Deveaux, M. (2003). Liberal constitutions and traditional cultures: The South African customary law debate. *Citizenship Studies*, 7 (2), 161-180
- 5 Robinson, M. (2012). Freedom, truth, democracy: Citizenship and common purpose. Tenth Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, delivered at Cape Town City Hall, August 5

the country's education system is so dysfunctional that the above constitutional ideals seem more like a mere pipedream.

In this article I briefly sketch the dysfunctionality of education system and propose ways in which it can be resolved. I find solace in John O'Looney's corporate concept of 'redesigning'⁶ the work of education and Michael Hammer's notion of 'reengineering'⁷ work. Both 'redesigning' and 'reengineering' require sectors like public education to break away from outdated rules and fundamental assumptions that underlie the way work is done and embrace radically new approaches to doing work. South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) needs to rethink its provision of public education to the African peoples, who were excluded from educational opportunities by the apartheid system.

2. South Africa's Education Crisis

South Africa's education system has been described as 'a crisis', 'a national disaster' that is 'in tatters', is 'inefficient and makes ineffective use of resources', and is 'essentially dysfunctional'.⁸ The system performs poorly and lags behind even much poorer countries which spend less on education than South Africa functionality.⁹ The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) posits that "vulnerability, alienation and a lack of social cohesion characterize many of the township and rural schools".¹⁰

Dysfunctionality impacts negatively on the right to basic education. Most learners in dysfunctional schools do not develop the requisite skills and attributes necessary to master reading and mathematics. As a result the dropout rate is high. Teachers are either unqualified or under-qualified; they do not spend enough time in class teaching.¹¹

Chisholm et al define actual teaching time as "time during which the teacher was engaged in teaching and learning activities".¹² But even when teachers do spend time in class they use old methods of teaching; they are ill-prepared to implement the new curriculum because the classes are overcrowded, or they [the teachers] are disconnected from the communities in which they teach.

Research on education in South Africa from 1998 to 2002 shows that "learners' scores are far below what is expected at all levels of the schooling system, both in relation to other countries (including other developing countries) and in relation to the expectations of the South African curriculum".¹³ This is worrisome given that South Africa is a regional power in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

David Macfarlane, education editor at the *Mail & Guardian* reported on shocking levels of literacy and numeracy

6 O'Looney, J. (1993). Redesigning the work of education. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 74 (5), 375-381

7 Hammer, M., & Champy, J. (2003). *Reengineering the corporation: A manifesto for business revolution*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, and
Hammer, M. (1990). Reengineering work: Don't automate, obliterate. *Harvard Business Review*, 2-8

8 See, Fleisch, 2008; Bloch, 2009; Monare, 2010; Simkins, Rule, & Bernstein, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Bloch, 2010

9 Van der Berg, S. (2007). Apartheid's enduring legacy: Inequalities in education. *Journal of African Economies*, 16 (5), 849-880, Also
Van der Berg, S. (2008). How effective are poor schools? Poverty and educational outcomes in South Africa. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 34, 145-154

10 South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). (2006). *Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education*. Johannesburg: SAHRC

11 Chisholm, L., Hoadley, U., Kivilu M., Brooks, H., Prinsloo, C., Kgobe, ... Rule, S. (2005). *Educator workload in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press

12 Ibid, p168

13 Taylor, N., Muller, J., & Vinjevd, P. (2003). *Getting schools working: Research and systemic school reform in South Africa*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, p14

in South African schools following the DBE's release of the *2011 Annual National Assessment (ANA)*.¹⁴ The ANA tested 6 (six) million learners between grades 1 to 6. The national literacy average performance of grade 3s was 35% while in numeracy it was 28%. Grade 6 national average performance in literacy was 28% while in numeracy it was 30%. But as Macfarlane points out, these findings simply confirm the DBE's own assessments in 2002, 2004, and 2007.¹⁵ They are also consistent with results from other international tests and evaluations in which South Africa participated.

The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) conducts research that supports the important role textbooks play in maximizing pupils' reading literacy. Launched in 1995 to ascertain the quality of pupils' reading literacy and mathematics scores in primary schools in Southern and Eastern African school systems, SACMEQ is a consortium of 15 Ministries of Education: Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zanzibar and Zimbabwe.

Only six (6) education systems [Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Seychelles, Swaziland, Tanzania] achieved above the SACMEQ's pupils mean score of 500 in both the 2000 and 2007 assessments (see Table 1). Eight (8) education systems [Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zanzibar] have consistently performed below the SACMEQ's pupils mean score of 500 during 2000 and 2007. Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia were substantially below the SACMEQ average for both reading and mathematics in 2000 and 2007, while Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, and Zanzibar had "mixed performance levels" (SACMEQ, 2010a).¹⁶

Fleisch reviewed various studies on reading and mathematics achievement - the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA, 1999), the Early Reading Workshop (ERW, 1999), the Quality Learning Project (QPL, 2001), the District Development Support Program (DDSP, 2001), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 2003), the Family Literacy Project (FLP, 2004), the SACMEQ II 2005, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2006).¹⁷

The PIRLS 2006 assessment showed that the Russian Federation was the highest performing country, while South Africa was the lowest performing country¹⁸ South Africa scored lower than countries such as Kuwait and Morocco.¹⁹ For Fleisch while the above studies used different 'standards' to measure achievement, they all point to the predicament of extremely low average primary education achievement levels.²⁰

14 Macfarlane, D. (2011). The damage schools do to children. Mail & Guardian, 1-7

15 Ibid

16 SACMEQ.(2010a). What are the levels and trends in reading and mathematics achievement?SACMEQ Policy Issue Series, 5

17 Fleisch, B. (2008). Primary education in crisis: Why South African schoolchildren underachieve in reading and mathematics. Cape Town: Juta& Co

18 Mullis, I V. S., Martin, M. O., Kennedy, A. M, &Foy, P. (2007). PIRLS 2006 International Report: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in Primary Schools in 40 Countries, TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Centre, Lynch School of Education: Boston College

19 Ibid, p42

20 Op Cit, Fleisch, B, p130

Table 1: Levels and Trends in pupils achievement for SACMEQ countries

	Pupils Reading scores			Pupils mathematics score	
	2000	2007		2000	2007
Botswana	521.1	524.6	▲	512.9	520.5
Kenya	546.5	543.1	▾	563.3	557.0
Lesotho	451.2	467.9	▲	447.2	476.9
Malawi	428.9	433.5	▾	432.9	447.0
Mauritius	536.4	573.5	▲	584.6	623.3
Mozambique	516.7	476.0	▼	530.0	483.8
Namibia	448.8	496.9	▲	430.9	471.0
Seychelles	582.0	575.1	▾	554.3	550.7
South Africa	492.3	494.9	▾	486.1	494.8
Swaziland	529.6	549.4	▲	516.5	540.8
Tanzania	545.9	577.8	▲	522.4	552.7
Uganda	482.4	478.7	▾	506.3	481.9
Zambia	440.1	434.4	▾	435.2	435.2
Zanzibar	478.2	533.9	▲	478.1	486.2
Zimbabwe*	504.7	507.7	▾	xx	519.8
SACMEQ	500.0	511.8	▲	500.0	509.5
<p>▲ Increased by 10% or more</p> <p>▾ minimal change less than/more than 10%</p> <p>▼ decreased by 10pts or more</p>					
<p>*Zimbabwe did not participate in the SACMEQ II Project (2000). Its value is from SACMEQ I Project (1995)</p>					

The DBE in 2012 released the report titled *National School Monitoring Survey*, whose survey was conducted in

2000 schools nationally. The survey considered factors that radically influence education quality.²¹ Seven of the quality indicators that were intensively investigated included: 'curriculum coverage', 'access to textbooks and workbooks', 'school libraries', 'school management documents such as budget plans', 'school funding', 'physical infrastructure', and support district offices offer schools'.²²

The report notes that coverage of the curriculum is uneven across the school. This is not new. Research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found that generally South African teachers spent less time in class teaching.²³ Actual teaching time was conceived as "time during which the teacher was engaged in teaching and learning activities". Chisholm et al note that "educators spend less than half the total time that they spend in school-related activities on teaching: the average total time spent on all activities is 41 hours, whereas the average total spent on teaching per week is 16 hours".²⁴

Regarding to textbooks, the report notes that only 38% of the learners nationally have access to language textbooks. Some schools do not receive textbooks at all, and if they do, it is often too late or the books supplied are not enough. The report is clear that the absence of textbooks exposes learners to fragments of the curriculum, presented through standalone worksheets or isolated short exercises.

At the time of writing (July 2012) the DBE was embroiled in a scandal over failure to deliver books to schools in the Provinces, something that should have been done in January. Education research recognizes the importance of the availability of textbooks to learners' educational achievement. SACMEQ posits that when pupils have textbooks their teachers can make effective use of class time by avoiding tasks such as copying text onto the chalkboard.²⁵

Textbooks permit teachers to utilize a wider range of teaching strategies such as: assigning reading exercises to the whole class while providing more focused teaching to slower learners; stimulating classroom discussions about material that has been read by all pupils, and providing reading homework and associated questions that reinforce classroom lessons. In developing countries' schools "textbooks can play a central role in defining a more structured approach to what subject matter is taught and how it is taught".²⁶

With regard to school libraries the vast majority of schools do not have libraries. Out of 24717 public schools in the country, 19465 (78.7%) do not have libraries. With respect to school management documents the report notes that 58% of the schools were able to produce adequate management documents such as budget plans, attendance rosters, and mark records of students or annual reports. Yet only 34% of school principals reported that they received 'satisfactory' support from district offices.

The report notes that the function of district offices is to provide an enabling environment for schools to function. District offices are supposed to assist school principals and teachers to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Schools cannot function well when their essential support structure is inadequate.

With respect to schools physical infrastructure the less said the better. It was noted above that South Africa produced 71.7 % of SADC's GDP. Yet primary schools learners in some provinces still study under trees, in

21 MacFarlane, D. (2012). Damning report fails Motshega. Mail & Guardian, 13-19

22 Ibid

23 Op Cit, Chisholm et al 2005 and Makola, C. P. (2005). Factors affecting teaching and learning in South African public schools. Report presented to the Education Labor Relations Council. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

24 Ibid, p92

25 SACMEQ.(2010b). How successful are textbook provision programs?SACMEQ Policy Issue Series, 6, p1

26 Ibid

thatch houses or in shacks that leak when it rains.

3. Can the Situation be Salvaged?

That South Africa's education system is 'a crisis' does not necessarily mean it is beyond salvaging. Neighboring countries like Mozambique²⁷ and Angola²⁸, which have just emerged from decades of civil war, with enormous loss of human lives are developing education systems that are responsive to their specific contexts with manifest aspirations for competitiveness.

South Africa has a vibrant education research community and is a regional economic power, having become a member of the BRICS countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa]. The World Bank in 2011 classified South Africa as an upper-middle- income economy along with countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, Argentina, Portugal, Malaysia, Chile, Panama, Russian Federation, and Portugal, to mention a few.²⁹

South Africa's DBE acknowledges that the education system performs badly.³⁰ What the department lacks is the capacity to implement the recommendations of this body of research. Visser argues that "the senior management of the department just does not have the experience, competence, ability or capacity to manage a massive system consisting of a bloated national education department, nine provincial departments, 81 district offices, 26 000 schools and 530 000 teachers providing learning to 12 million pupils, while it expends 20% of the total national budget".³¹ Jansen concurs: "The task of collapsing 19 education departments into a single, national department of education with nine different provincial departments was completely underestimated".³² It can therefore be inferred that the DBE needs to return to the drawing board to 'redesign'

Presumed in the discourse of 'redesigning' and 'reengineering' is a radical shift from outdated modes of thinking to a completely new, often uncertain ways of doing work. O'Looney argues that "at the heart of redesigning any education system is the notion of changing outdated rules and fundamental assumptions".³³ He further argues that "redesigning does not mean cutting fat or automating existing ways of doing things. Instead, it means re-examining assumptions and shedding rules of work that are based on outdated notions about technology, people, and organizational goals".³⁴ O'Looney suggests that "essentially, redesigning the process of creating and transmitting information within schools would empower teachers to teach the whole child. Specialists could be called in on very complex problems but would more generally be used to update and adapt the expert systems as circumstances and new knowledge dictates".³⁵

Similarly Michael Hammer advocates a notion of corporate transformation which he calls 'reengineering'.³⁶ Teaming up with James Champy in their bestselling book: *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for*

27 Pridmore, P., & Yates, C. (2005). Combating AIDS in South Africa and Mozambique: The role of Open, Distance, and Flexible Learning (ODFL). *Comparative Education Review*, 49 (4), 490-511

28 Moreira, P. (2009). The city of red sands: A school/political centre in the Musseques of Luanda, Angola. *Florianópolis*, 2 (2), 62-75

29 The World Bank. (2011). Improving the business environment for growth and job creation in South Africa: The second investment climate assessment. Washington, DC

30 See, Bloch, 2009; Fleisch, 2008; DoE, 2007a, 2007b; Carnoy & Chisholm, 2008; Chisholm et al, 2005

31 Visser, C. (2012). Textbook shambles has been a long time in the making. *Mail & Guardian*, 13-19, p39

32 Jansen, J. D. (2003). Can research inform education policy in developing countries? A South African experience. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 23, 85-95, p91

33 Op Cit, O'Looney, J. (1993), p376

34 Ibid

35 Ibid, p379

36 Op Cit, Hammer, M. (1990)

Business Revolution they define 'reengineering' as the fundamental rethink and radical redesign of business processes to generate dramatic improvements in critical performance measures – such as cost, quality, service and speed.³⁷

Hammer argues that “at the heart of reengineering is the notion of discontinuous thinking - of recognizing and breaking away from the outdated rules and fundamental assumptions that underlie operations”.³⁸

Notice the similarity with O’Looney notion of ‘redesigning’ above. Hammer argues that ‘reengineering’ is an all-or-nothing proposition with an uncertain result.³⁹ He writes: “instead of embedding outdated processes in silicon and software, we should obliterate them and start over. We should ‘reengineer’ our businesses by using the power of modern information technology to radically redesign our business processes in order to achieve dramatic improvements in their performances”. This is because “reengineering strives to break away from the old rules about how we organize and conduct business. It involves recognizing and rejecting some of them and then finding imaginative new ways to accomplish work”.⁴⁰

It was noted that the DBE is a massively bloated bureaucracy. Hammer would argue that such a bloated bureaucracy is a “breeding ground for tunnel vision, as people tend to substitute the narrow goals of their particular departments for the larger goals of the process as a whole”.⁴¹ He would argue that it is “burdened with layers of unproductive overheads and armies of unproductive workers”.⁴² He would encourage the DBE to ‘obliterate’ outdated structures and processes and replace them with new, revolutionary approaches that are more focused, outcomes-driven and more accountable. The point I am arguing is that such a streamlined structure would not only deliver on its education mandate, but would also be more accountable for its shortfalls.

4. Conclusion

In this article I grappled with South Africa’s dysfunctional education system, which has been described as ‘a crisis’ and ‘a national disaster’ that performs poorly and lags far behind systems of much poorer neighboring African countries that spent much less on education. My agony is against the backdrop that South Africa boasts of a constitution that has been described as ‘of classic liberalism’, a ‘state of the art document’ that is ‘widely hailed as liberal and egalitarian’.

I made a case for South Africa’s DBE to be ‘redesigned’ along the lines suggested by John O’Looney and to be ‘reengineered’ along the lines suggested by Michael Hammer, and Michael Hammer & James Champy. Both ‘redesigning’ and ‘reengineering’ call for a fundamental rethink and a radical redesign of business structures and processes to generate dramatic improvements. There is no doubt that South Africa’s DBE needs to change. It needs to ‘redesign’ and ‘reengineer’ itself if it is to deliver quality education to the majority of previously disadvantaged African peoples who were systematically excluded from educational opportunities by the apartheid system.

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37 Op Cit, Hammer, M., & Champy, J. (2003)

38 Op Cit Hammer, M. (1990), p4

39 Ibid, p2

40 Ibid

41 Ibid, p4

42 Ibid, p8

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