UNIVERSITEIT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

APPENDIX C

IMPROVING SCHOOL FUNCTIONALITY

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON NUMERACY AND LITERACY IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE

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A REPORT FOR THE GRADE 3 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH, SUPPORTED BY THE WESTERN CAPE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AND THE WESTERN CAPE PROVINCIAL TREASURY

August 2010

Version: 10 August 2010

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`A teacher who works systematically, a home environment where the school work is overseen and strengthened, and a school where learning is valued are essential ingredients of a young child's formal education life. When children fail to learn to read it is almost always because school, or home, or both have failed them.'

(Henning 2010: 46)

INTRODUCTION

Achievement levels in numeracy and literacy at primary school level have been a matter of concern for many years now, and remain low in many schools. The focus of this research is on the identification of school and classroom factors that contribute to (or detract from) learner performance, and of possible policy interventions to improve numeracy and literacy achievement in the Foundation Phase.

As part of this study, a number of interviews were conducted with stakeholders (mostly school and circuit staff). Areas focused on during the interviews were in part derived from classroom observations conducted under the auspices of the University of Stellenbosch and the WCED, and in part based on earlier research and a literature review by the author.

Following an overview of the main problems experienced by staff at poorly performing schools, other factors that influence the functionality of schools are discussed under the following headings:

- School leadership and management;
- Teacher induction, motivation and accountability;
- Curriculum issues; and
- Departmental support and monitoring.

In most of these areas, problems were identified which are seen to relate to underperformance. A total of 21 people were interviewed face to face, including 12 Foundation Phase heads and teachers, two principals, six departmental and circuit staff and one parent. Another department staff member and the head of a literacy agency were spoken to over the phone. Most of the schools involved were listed as `high priority' schools, while one was a low priority school and another one a medium priority school. At one school, written comments were obtained from an additional five teachers, which have been included in the discussion below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POORLY PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Learner achievement is influenced by factors inside and outside the school environment. Although the focus of this research is on the internal school environment, a brief mention is made of those outside of the control of schools since they have a significant impact on learning. These include the often abysmal state of the black family, high levels of unemployment and poor educational attainment among family members, crime and substance abuse. As Fataar (2006: p607) found in a study of schools in a township outside Cape Town, these factors often place limits on what a school can achieve, and force staff to deal with a host of non-schooling issues in their response to the local dynamics of their

school. The pastoral and welfare function of teachers `in effect becomes the primary organising principle of their professional lives', and the schools `serve to ameliorate the worst consequences of poverty and hardship'. (Ibid: p608)

During interviews, poor performance was attributed first and foremost to two factors: parental lack of involvement in the school and their child's education and the lack of school readiness. This was exacerbated by the fact that the medium of instruction was often not the home language, by large classes and insufficient teaching and learning materials. As a consequence, achievement by learners was poor.

Lack of parental involvement

The lack of parental involvement in the school and in the education of their child (including assisting with homework) was generally seen as primarily responsible for poor achievement. The reasons tended to be that parents either work and come home late, hardly seeing their children, or that they are not literate enough themselves to help their children. Some parents simply refuse to get involved, saying `you're the teacher', `I consult parents to help them [learners] but they did not help them'. The lack of interest is also evidenced by the fact that at some schools, parents had not even collected their child's report card from the previous year by mid-2010. Thus there is little or no support at home to support teaching and learning in school, and teachers do not have access to parent skills either.

At well-functioning schools, on the other hand, regular reporting to parents occurs, meetings are well attended, and solutions to possible learning barriers are discussed with parents. At two such schools, there is `buy in from the parents; `parents are very involved, they are literate, they stimulate their children and can stimulate their children... they have the facilities at home, electricity etc.' Asked whether children from poor backgrounds do well at their school, it was telling that in cases where the child had background support (i.e. parents who worked with the child at home and were interested) they did well and where this was not the case, they did less well. Even so, the general experience was that children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds could do as well as others in better resourced schools because of committed staff who spend extra time with them.

At dysfunctional schools, parent meetings are generally held once a term and are not well attended. Some parents, however, cannot afford to take half a day off to come to the school, even on Saturdays. The children of parents who do come tend to do well; `we preach to the converted'. This lack of interest and co-operation was mentioned time and time again. At one school, the teacher mentioned that only one out of five parents of children who were repeating the grade came to a meeting to discuss the situation with her. At another school teachers similarly said that even when they phone parents and ask them to come to discuss their child's progress very few come, and the ones who do come are grandmothers; `young mothers don't come'. Many of these learners' parents live in squatter areas, are illiterate and don't understand the codes on the report card, but also do not attend meetings where these are explained, resulting in teachers having to explain to individual parents what they mean. Asked whether the school offered any literacy support to these parents, teachers said there was an adult school nearby, but few parents go and even fewer complete the course. Another school tried to offer homework classes, but learners were not interested.

A parent spoken to said however that she doesn't think the school does enough to involve parents; `meetings are only about money and hardly ever about the kids'. More generally, she had no idea why so few parents are interested in getting involved in the school. That it is possible to motivate parents to get involved is evidenced at one school where achievement is poor; interested parents have started participating in parenting skills workshops initiated by circuit staff which aim to show parents how they can help their child with homework and literacy, etc.

The lack of parental involvement has implications for accountability and involvement in school governance. As a WCED official pointed out, `unless there is strong parental engagement there is no strong accountability'. At some schools `the SGB doesn't do much… the choice of parents is not always great'. Ishmael Mkhabela, a community development practitioner and professional community organiser, noted that SGBs are often used `to achieve external objectives and in some instances they are politically manipulated'. (Mkhabela 2010: 64)

In an in-depth study of a township outside Cape Town, Fataar found that `parental participation in and around school governance processes… ranged from what can be described as the passive reception of the formalities associated with school governance, to its use within the township's constitutive networks… Instead of parental sovereignty it is the principals of the schools… who reign over the school governance processes… It is the alliance between the principals and the compliant parent members that has determined the functional character of school governance. It is clear that parents participate minimally in the formal deliberations of their SGBs, mostly serving to ratify the leadership styles and decisions of the principals… That their participation in meetings is mainly dominated by questions of clarification would suggest that they have difficulty accessing much of the deliberations.'

Fataar found that most SGB parents had not completed high school, but after attending departmentally sponsored training workshops some started to play a more deliberative role in governance processes. (Fataar 2007: p609) He also found that granting the SGB authority to recommend appointments turned it into a decisive power broker in the school and community, especially with regard to temporary employment opportunities (painting, repair and maintenance work, food kiosks, etc), leading to interested members of the community lobbying SGB members to gain entry to entrepreneurial opportunities. (ibid: p610) In other words, governance processes have served as a conduit for money-making opportunities.

Lack of school readiness

A key problem area is that at schools with poor literacy and numeracy results, many children come into grade 1 without having attended grade R or any other form of early childhood education. Even if a primary school offers a reception year, it still does not mean that all children are or can be accommodated. At schools visited, the number of grade R learners often represented less than half the grade 1 intake. Especially at under-performing schools, there tended to be only one or two grade R classes and four to six grade 1 classes.

Another problem is that at the `no fee' schools, a fee is commonly charged for grade R and teachers said that as a consequence, parents were inclined to put their 5½ year olds in grade

1 where there is no fee. At one school, teachers said that if their grade R teacher were to leave or is transferred, she would not be replaced and they would lose that class altogether.

Part of the reason for charging a fee is that there are no departmental posts for grade R teachers and salaries are not standardised. (Die Burger 1/10/09) According to a circuit official, the WCED pays teachers' salaries and R17 per grade R learner per day. This, together with the fact that fees are charged to parents, leads to grade R being viewed `as a cash cow for schools', as she put it. She furthermore mentioned that many grade R teachers only have M+3, and `don't know teaching methodology'. At some schools, there is also no linking of curriculum between grade R and grade 1, leading to `a mismatch between what is being taught and how'.

Not surprisingly, at the schools visited, the proportion of children in the Foundation Phase who had attended grade R ranged from one sixth at under-performing schools to close to 90% at schools where good literacy and numeracy results were achieved. All staff noted the difference in achievement between children who had attended some form of school readiness education and those who had not. Comments about children who had not had any form of pre-primary education were that `many have no basics like colours, left and right', `they don't even know their mother's name', `it's a big problem'.

At a well-performing school, on the other hand, `Learners do not progress to Grade 1 unless they are mature enough for more formal learning'. As one principal commented: `Grade R must become compulsory. It creates unnecessary gaps between the haves and have nots'.

Learning in a second language

The fact that many children learn to read and write in a language that is not their mother tongue also has a negative impact on achievement. Some schools take measures to address this, for example by having a Xhosa teacher helping out in grade 1, or introducing a Xhosa-medium class in an English medium school where almost all children come from homes where isiXhosa is spoken. One of the schools visited has Xhosa-medium up to grade 3 and then switches over to English from grade 4 onwards; its literacy results are quite good compared to other schools in the area. Even so, teachers say that children battle with English in grade 4; `They can read but can't write'; `they can't read a question and understand it'; `they mix consonants'; `wrong spelling even if they copy on the chalkboard'. One teacher therefore said `I think additional language should be introduced and home language from grade 1'.

Another problem was retention of English over long holidays, when children use little English. One school mentioned that working parents tend to send their children to the Eastern Cape over the holidays and `English is quite foreign to them when they come back'. The school is English medium, which is what parents want, and which `is also the reason why parents don't send them to schools close to home'. The problem was less acute with children who had attended English-medium grade R classes at their school; `they start with English and they learn very quickly… The problem is children who come in higher grades from a Xhosa-speaking school… their comprehension is poor'. An additional problem is that in poorer areas, where households often do not have reading materials at home, children may not be allowed to take books home as they come back damaged or are lost.

It is a complex issue; a parent mentioned that her children, who come from an Afrikaans-medium home but attend an English-medium school, `struggle with Afrikaans'. A circuit staff member who worked with schools in Manenberg until recently said that until 20 years ago, Afrikaans speaking parents would send their children to Afrikaans medium schools. The perception now among these parents is, however, that English is `the academic language needed for tertiary education', and they think that English medium schooling will help therefore. `For many parents social issues override the language issue, the language issue is a non-issue to them and they actually think they're doing a good thing'. She said that as a consequence, `kids are always trying to catch up; there is no consolidation and comprehension of the first language… parents don't understand that; they don't realise how second language learning works.' She feels strongly that the department should be telling parents how important it is to have mother tongue instruction up to grade 6, as at present there is `no advocacy of how language acquisition happens'.

Margie Owen-Smith, who manages the Home-Language Project on behalf of the SGBs of five English-medium schools in Johannesburg, points to a solid body of research which `tells us that a second-language needs six to eight years of well-resourced teaching before it can be successfully used as a medium of teaching and learning. Yet our system ignores this and the grade 4 transition to English-only continues year after year in the face of damning performance indicators.' She points out that the WCED `recently acknowledged the need for considerably more HL [home language] as a medium, to allow concepts to be taught effectively through a language children understand while at the same time giving them double the time (six years) to prepare their English for the transition.' (Owen-Smith 2010: 32) However, a major weakness of this policy is `that it too easily leads to the separation of children into what amounts to ethnic groups'. (Ibid: 33)

Elizabeth Henning, Director of the Centre for Education Practice Research at the University of Johannesburg, points out that `The process of learning to read is also slowed down when young children do not know the language in which they learn to read well enough, or when they are exposed to many languages and have to decode different systems of rules of phonics.' (Henning 2010: 47)

Tshepiso Matentjie, an educational psychologist, says that many learners come from bi- or multilingual family environments, and that when the medium of instruction presents as a barrier scholastic progress is poor. `These learners struggle to decode words, their awareness of sounds is poor... they struggle to distinguish between similar sounds... they struggle to associate the sound of letters with their written format… to remember sight words when reading and spelling', etc. She finds that these difficulties `often present as attention difficulties, incomplete work, untidy work, disruptive behaviour, low motivation for learning, poor participation in group and/or class activities'. (Matentjie 2010: 38/39) These problems are identical to the ones raised during interviews with staff at under performing schools, which are discussed in the next section.

Unfortunately, in respect of the African languages, their standard written forms `have not yet been developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively… even at the Foundation Phase. This weakness undermines the opportunity to develop a strong foundation in mother tongue, which in turn sets a poor foundation for developing English as a second language by grade 4'. (Ibid: 39-40) Matentjie states that `even in mother tongue we find that the higher-order thinking skills are poorly developed

because performance in the spoken aspects of the language are over-emphasised at school and at home'. (Ibid: 41) In other words, proficiency in the mother tongue is the foundation on which English proficiency is built, and she stresses the importance of parents encouraging their child to develop proficiency in their home language through a variety of methods.

Poor achievement and motivation

Teachers at poorly performing schools often complained about the poor level of attainment in literacy and numeracy. Part of the problem is that children are only allowed to repeat a year once per phase and many proceed to the next class without the necessary numeracy and literacy skills. Typical comments were: `Numeracy is a struggle, learners has [sic] a tendency of forgetting what has been taught'; `Learners not learning according to their level… [They have] difficulty in learning and expressing in their first additional language'; `Learners have difficulty completing assignments'; `Learners cannot count properly… they get confused in 3 digit numbers'. Another grade 3 teacher said she just spent two weeks doing the calendar, which is grade 1 work: `They forget everything'.

In the poorly performing schools, discipline and motivation to learn seemed to be a big problem. Several teachers said they found it difficult to get kids to focus. A grade 3 teacher said `They don't want to go into smaller groups… they stare out the window when they're supposed to work… some sell pencils in class'. Another teacher wrote: `You can repeat so many times still struggling in reading and writing, lost [sic] of memory... they are short span [sic]… less intrested [sic] of everything'; `They fiddle around, don't focus'. Others complained of learners not doing their homework. As was mentioned earlier, many of these problems may be related to language issues.

Teachers thus found it difficult to keep children focused and felt unsure of how to discipline children. Although schools must have a disciplinary policy containing the rules of the school pertaining to learners, teachers and parents, the abolishment of corporal punishment has in many schools not been replaced with other means of maintaining discipline. At one school, teachers said that with the new curriculum, they were told that `The child can do what they want at their own pace… if a child says no it's no… teacher dignity, authority is gone, "ons hande is afgekap", educators have no rights, we can't even shout at kids'. They blamed it also on the lack of discipline at home: `Some parents don't discipline their kids'; `Parents also don't care'.

A school's circumstances can also place limits on possible forms of discipline. One school has a disciplinary committee and transgressions are dealt with at school, but as children are bussed in they cannot give detention as `the taxis don't wait'. A principal also said that `You can't always keep children after school because they have to walk home together'.

Teachers themselves also set an example, however, both positive and negative. An official pointed out that at some schools, `Teachers teach children bad habits, they come late, are not prepared and you often don't know what goes on in the classroom'. Another teacher said that `If the principals and teachers have vision, commitment, etc the children see that and it motivates them… Accountability needs to be installed in children as well'. A circuit official said that teachers `need to give clear instructions – you must set out rules of the class'.

Some teachers made recommendations, including `use a variety of aids to help learners. Your reaction has a great influence on how hard they will try to become good readers, be sure to give them genuine praise for their efforts'; `Give learners incentives for example for attending, these must be consistent'. At a well-resourced school, an Intervention Learning Support Team had been established, comprising certain staff members. If there are problems with a child, they discuss it and try out certain suggestions or methods. If those do not work, they discuss it with the parents and/or other professionals.

Even rewards for good behaviour may be ineffective, however, as teachers at one school said: `Kids don't care; they'll say "you can keep the button" or sweet and they don't even mind getting detention'. Very likely, this attitude results from a lack of achievement and frustration, and is probably associated with the language issues discussed earlier.

Henning also comments that if initial reading is not successful, `the sense of failure tends to inhibit self-directed reading and their motivation often diminishes as a result.' It requires consistent practice and teachers must be trained in the systematic teaching of reading. (Henning 2010: 47) In respect of numeracy, children have to master the signs of reading the knowledge system of mathematics as well. She attributes failure in mathematics in our schools to the fact that `teachers have not been educated in the complexities of the different signing systems involved for young children'. She recommends that teachers be given a set syllabus with work plans and lesson plans, so that they can spend more time on interacting with the learners. (Ibid: 48-49)

Overcrowding

In all the under-performing schools visited, Foundation Phase classes were very large with figures ranging from 40 to 52 learners per class. Comments from teachers were that `Some kids never focus'; `We have equipment but it will never make a difference. Progress will be much better if we have at most 35 kids… Class size is much more important than language'; `Class sizes are a problem on the Cape Flats, especially with crime, etc'. A literacy expert said that while one can manage with a bigger class of up to 40 children, `if it's in the fifties it becomes impossible to engage all children'.

Sometimes, however, overcrowding is caused by the school's intake. At one school, the principal took in more children and employed SGB-paid teachers. However, fewer parents could afford to pay fees during the recession and they had to let these teachers go resulting in `terrible overcrowding'. Similarly at another school, they `made classes bigger to get an additional teacher', but this has not happened. An underlying reason suggested by one interviewee is that a principal's salary is determined by the school size.

Shortage of LTSMs

At under-performing schools, teachers mentioned insufficient resource materials, including reading materials, library books and numeracy equipment. `The SMT kit is insufficient especially in a class of 40 to 45 kids'; `We need things to read'; `We need more books at the appropriate level'; `We have 11 classes in the Foundation Phase but we get only five resource packs… they have birthday cards, etc in there and it's not enough'. Schools receive

an allocation from the WCED to buy books, but this is also not enough especially as after two years `the older books fall apart', as teachers at one school said.

Even if there are sufficient materials, a key factor is how the materials are integrated into teaching; i.e. the capacity to use them efficiently. At one school it was said that `teachers don't always use learning aids'. Although the WCED provides resources to poorly resourced schools and trains staff in their use through the Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme (QIDS-UP), the impact of this programme on literacy and numeracy achievement has not been assessed and information is mainly anecdotal. The WCED intends to focus on providing sufficient quality text materials as part of its strategic plan. (Die Burger 25/11/09)

The shortage can be alleviated to some extent by the use of ability groups, so materials can be passed on from group to group. Teachers at one school also suggested that the problem could be alleviated by having teachers `teach different subjects at the same time and swap materials according to their availability'; for example half the class reads while the other half does maths. Another option, as a circuit official suggested, is for teachers to write their own stories, which is what she did when she was teaching.

OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE & FUNCTIONALITY

During interviews, a number of areas were discussed that relate to the functionality of schools. Asked about the characteristics of dysfunctional schools, in addition to what has been discussed in the previous section, interviewees mentioned `Lots of vandalism at the schools, especially during the summer holidays, so money [for repairs] is always a problem'; `In the Cape Flats there are many dysfunctional schools because many kids and their parents are on drugs… the schools have no role models and the children are frustrated in school'. An official added socio-economic circumstances to this, as well as gangsterism and poverty. Other characteristics of dysfunctional schools were `no culture of reading'; `Learners are not performing… It manifests in a range of areas [such as] a lack of responsiveness [by teachers] to resource materials'; `There is no predictability… the timetable isn't ready, and if it rains, the kids don't come'.

School leadership and management

Many regard the quality of instructional and managerial leadership by principals as probably the most important indicator of a school's outcomes. Comments were: `A good principal makes a big difference… she or he leads by example'; `A good principal asks a lot from teachers and expects a lot. He is forward-looking and doesn't wait for things to happen but initiates things', such as bringing in outside agencies which offer extra programmes.

Departmental officials also described the role of the principal as being `pivotal… they drive the whole thing [i.e. the school]… leadership must come from him or the tail wags the dog'. They felt that `democracy is abused in many schools [and there is] no cohesion'; instead, `the principal and SMT must develop a plan and present that to staff... you can't have 40 teachers all with their own ideas'. A circuit official also said that a principal's management

performance determines the functionality of a school, and he needs to be supported in this by the SMT and the Staff Development Team.

It may be a necessary condition, but as a departmental official commented, even where there is a strong SMT and a good principal, a school can have poor results because of the socio-economic environment, while on the other hand, sometimes there is no culture of learning at home but the school still performs well. A circuit official similarly said that even at well-managed schools in Manenberg systemic results are still poor.

With regard to the principal's role, one principal described it as being responsible for making sure all plans, timetables, etc are in place from day one. They are responsible `for the leadership of the school and the direction you want the school to go in', `for providing access to the information needed for learners and teachers', for management and providing support. Furthermore, `you need to know the needs of your community as it impacts on your school; the school reflects what's outside', and he has regular meetings with other principals. Lastly, he also mentioned the importance of teaching learners social graces (greeting everyone, etc). At another school where literacy achievement has improved, teachers said that the principal `has been more strict with teachers, concentrating on language, and on learners who have problems', and now the focus is turning to improving numeracy.

Other comments were that `our principal makes sure the teachers go to workshops' and is involved in team building. Teachers also felt that it is important that the principal communicates about progress and knows how to respond when there are problems or issues raised by staff regarding learners.

While discussing lesson plans and differentiations by level, a circuit official said that in a number of schools `principals are worse because they don't go to workshops and they can't control the work… HoDs are also still grappling'. In these schools, principals are thus not able to assist teachers with their lesson plans. The lack of leadership was also notable at a school where teachers made a number of suggestions to improve literacy and numeracy achievement involving internal dynamics (for example, `literacy and numeracy committees should meet monthly to iron out problems'; `give more numeracy homework'); had the school been functioning properly these strategies would have been discussed and implemented.

With regard to accountability, there was a general feeling that schools and principals should be held accountable to parents, but many were unsure of how this could be done. Some teachers felt that accountability `needs to come from the top'; i.e. from the department downwards. An official said that there was `nothing really' in place to hold principals accountable, although circuit officials check whether there are policies in place in the school and whether these have been work-shopped with learners, teachers and parents. They also look at how supportive the Heads of Department are of the principal, and how the staff involves parents, the community, and whether they offer extra lessons. Principals have meetings to discuss and share what works, etc.

In addition, one of the WCED's focus areas as part of their strategic plan is having principals sign performance contracts for improving learner achievement and monitoring this quarterly. (Die Burger 25/11/09) According to a circuit official, this would indeed be the way to hold principals accountable.

Teacher induction, motivation and accountability

Another crucial input is the quality and effectiveness of teaching in the classroom, which includes teacher knowledge and the skills to use resources effectively. It is widely acknowledged that there is a shortage of quality teachers, especially in certain subjects, and it was recently reported that more than a third of public schoolteachers have only a three-year diploma or less. (Cape Argus 18/11/09) Acting director general of the Department of Basic Education Bobby Soobrayan said in February 2010 that many teachers would fail the tests for which they are supposed to be preparing their pupils. (Die Burger 4/2/10) As evidenced during interviews, the level of verbal and written English among teachers at English medium schools with poor achievement also leaves much to be desired.

Another problem area mentioned at a CDE workshop is when teachers come straight out of college, do not interact with their peers and do not have examples of excellence. They therefore recommended mentoring newly qualified teachers, providing incentives for performance and penalties for lack of delivery. (Cape Argus 18/11/09) The lack of examples of excellence could also apply to teachers and principals who have been at the same school for 30 years, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Among the former, staff mentioned that they know the learners and the community, and teachers in higher grades can discuss any problems they may have with the learners' teachers in lower grades. However, possible disadvantages include a lack of experience in different school environments and cultures, which could be beneficial. One principal spoken to had worked in different schools and noticed the difference in things like parental support, and the beneficial impact this has on learner achievement, fundraising, etc. In other words, staff who remain at the same school may never have experienced a well-functioning school. This may also lead to a lack of innovation and improvement; `If you do what you always did, you will get what you always got'. (Steyn 2010: 254)

None of the poorly performing schools had a proper teacher induction process, and they seemed to operate on the assumption that if a new teacher needs help they'll ask for it. Thus at one school, the SMT helps new teachers (as well as any other staff member) if they have any problems and at another school, the HoDs assist new teachers, and more generally, preparations with grade teachers are done in groups. Teachers in another school said `there is no time to train new teachers' as they are only done after 3pm, and then `everyone wants to go home'. New teachers will ask for help from other staff, however, when needed. They also mentioned that new teachers should have more practical training in `real schools'. At the better-resourced schools visited, there is a proper teacher orientation process as well as support.

A parent mentioned absenteeism among some of the school's teachers, with some absent for a week without an explanation being given to parents; nor are there other teachers available to oversee the class. The cost of absenteeism can be high; according to a World Bank chief economist, one day of teacher absenteeism a month led to a 4%-5% decline in test scores. He suggested addressing this by paying teachers only for the days they worked. (Business Day 16/3/10)

Asked whether good teachers can cope even in a dysfunctional school, opinions varied. At one school, staff commented that `Good teachers can change others', but sometimes `others point fingers and say "she wants to shine" and the teacher will stop or stay in her

classroom and do her own thing'. Departmental officials also found that good teachers can function in a dysfunctional environment; `Some schools have functional subjects due to good teachers and dysfunctional ones [subjects]'. A principal said that `Good teachers try to cope in dysfunctional schools, but if there is no response they reach burn-out', and a literacy expert similarly thought that `Good teachers can't teach optimally in the long term in dysfunctional schools'.

In respect of motivating teachers, most seem to support carrots rather than sticks. As one teacher said, there should be a reward system, but `morale is quite low so no sticks'. In other words, there need to be improved incentives to motivate teachers. Staff at one school said that `achievement needs to be acknowledged'. At their school, `one teacher did something extraordinary' and the principal promised she would organise a celebration. A circuit official suggested that every term, schools should select a teacher who has achieved something that can be celebrated. Teacher morale especially in poorly performing schools in some areas is also affected by the fact that parents and the community `have no respect for teachers'.

In respect of teacher accountability, a principal said that it was not always easy to hold teachers accountable. `You need to put tools in place… have moderation processes for quality assurance. The learner must be at the centre… you need to workshop this [and] it must be more developmental than punitive [and you should] follow it up regularly.' At another school, teachers also said that management (principal and department heads) must monitor teachers; this must be `structured, planned monitoring' and `they must be seen to be well informed of the subject that the teacher is teaching'. A departmental official said that the principal should set tasks for teachers, and each school should hold internal moderation or assessment meetings weekly (grade and phase meetings). Similarly, HoDs appoint grade heads who delegate responsibilities.

A teacher said that one should take account of a teacher's qualifications and experience and look at performance in terms of children to see how effective that teacher is. This teacher also mentioned the need for many teachers to brush up on their skills. Nick Taylor of the Joint Education Trust also highlighted the need for teachers to develop themselves, and to take responsibility for their own knowledge and the performance of their pupils. (The Times 3/3/10) Similar concerns were expressed by a circuit official, who said many teachers `are not lifelong learners; they don't do research before lessons on how to teach something, for example how can I teach about money'. She also said that many teachers are `teaching down, not up' and they `need to improve their pedagogical knowledge, how children learn'. She feels `the first port of call [for any intervention] is methodology in the classroom'.

It seems that many teachers struggle with the requirements of the new curriculum and teaching methods. Another circuit official said that while teachers must plan to assess, a lot don't. Also, `teachers are not trained to intervene', with the result that all learners are given the same activity. `Teachers must differentiate and do interventions… they can't do "one size fits all"… but they don't know how because they don't do it'; they ask `how many plan levels must I do?' These and other curriculum-related issues are discussed below.

Curriculum issues

A common complaint among staff at all schools concerned the many changes in the curriculum, the requirements in terms of teaching methodology (lesson plan development and interventions) and administrative requirements.

At under-performing schools large class sizes, poor levels of school readiness, etc compounded the problem. As one grade 3 teacher said: `My whole class needs intervention'. She has 46 learners, and the ELSEN teacher has taken the six worst, but for another ten weak ones she has to do classroom intervention. `But I don't have the time'. In this school, the grade 1 teacher has 52 children in her class, and also said that the planning of lessons is a big problem; `You don't know if your plan is right', and both teachers said they were confused; they have work schedules but `We don't know what we're doing… We want lesson plans'. Similar problems were mentioned at another school by the Foundation Phase head: `We have a lot of learners with special needs, but our special needs teacher can only work with code 2 learners… what about code 1 and code 0 kids?' The circuit psychologist can only see about one to two children per term, and some wind up going to special schools. The school has an intervention policy for special children, who are tested at the beginning of the year, but the principal also said that `We have far too many special needs learners'.

Others also complained of the workload. `Admin is throwing us out [from teaching]… why must we work out policies for assessment, discipline, etc… The system was the same across schools in the past, now it's open, different… OBE doesn't work for all kids'. The two teachers who made these comments said that they have ability groups and focused on the weaker learners, but then the circuit said `what about the other groups'; now `we have to do intervention for the whole class and write reports what they do for each child'. They are looking for answers; `cut out admin, bring the old system back with tests at the end of the term… we are tired of endless changes'. At another school, teachers also said that the changing curriculum is a problem, and has led to uncertainty. `We neglect the clever learners because we have to focus on weak learners'; the education department asks `why is a learner failing, they must get evidence, etc, etc. The department must take away much of the extra paperwork.' A grade 3 teacher was rehearsing times tables with her learners as they did not know them, something she blamed on OBE `because the children could use whatever they wanted… calculators, their fingers, etc'.

A circuit official agreed that following the changes to OBE through to the NCS `teachers are not always sure what to do… nothing was consolidated through training; they don't understand the assessment standards, how to do activities, plan lessons', and said there had been no workshops on interventions.

Departmental support and monitoring

In order to ensure that the teaching environment is such that it promotes teaching and learning, regular monitoring and inspection are seen as important. Minister of basic education, Angie Motshekga, recently also said that classroom visits are the only way to determine what challenges teachers face, and that she wanted to start using the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit at under-performing schools, although it is not ready yet. (Rapport 31/1/2010)

As Jane Hofmeyr of the Independent Schools' Association of Southern Africa pointed out, private schools have to meet a number of conditions before receiving a subsidy and are quality assured by Umalusi, but no public school is monitored and inspected as frequently and as formally. (Mail & Guardian 19/3/2010) Thus public schools that provide a poor service continue to receive a subsidy, and it is up to departmental officials to try and improve the quality of education in such a school.

In November 2009, the WCED outlined a number of focus areas as part of their strategic plan, including compulsory external tests for grades 3, 6 and 9 and informing parents of the school's as well as the provincial and national results; monitoring the management of schools at district level; quicker response and support by the WCED; and improving teacher morale by reducing administrative tasks and providing opportunities for training and development. (Die Burger 25/11/09)

The Cape Teachers' Institute runs regular workshops for teachers in numeracy, literacy and life skills. A circuit official said that teachers tend to attend one workshop per year, where `we mix up the teachers [from different schools] so they are able to share… sharing of good practice is very useful'. Some teachers felt that the department's workshops (usually lasting three to four days) were not long enough, while others expressed a need for more explicit support in the form of demonstrations and ideas of what works. Teachers at one school told of a circuit official in the past who `would come with all the tools and demonstrate how to teach' a certain curriculum component `which is what we want…not just groups and endless ideas discussed by each and every teacher… at the end we still don't know what works'. A circuit official also suggested that `perhaps we need to sit down with teachers and do planning', and also identified a need for ELSEN staff from the circuit to hold workshops on interventions.

These problems do not apply to the better resourced schools visited, however, where teachers felt that the `Upgraded guide for literacy' provided by the department was very explicit. More generally they were also happy with the support provided by the department `but if teachers have problems implementing materials they should give workshops'. A circuit official also said that the guides given to teachers `are very explicit… the onus is on the teacher to be mediator, facilitator of learning, etc… The government can't take over that role, the teacher has to do that'. According to this official, `Some in the department feel too much is being given to teachers; you miss the boat by giving them all these products… reading books, illustrated maths, work schedules, foundation for learning campaign, etc'. She said that while most schools have internet access and many have Khanya laboratories, `teachers don't use it', illustrating the lack of responsiveness among teachers at some schools.

There was also an impression that some EMDCs are better in terms of providing support than others, as two schools indicated. At one school, the previous circuit office under which they fell was too far away; but the new circuit they fall under `keeps us on their toes… and also supports us… They give worksheets, which are very useful' and because these go to all schools it means `there is uniformity across schools'. A principal similarly said that the department sends teams to her school, they provide work plans, etc; these assist them `and keeps us on our toes'.

In respect of monitoring, Foundation Phase circuit officials have detailed sheets for class visits, focusing on different aspects of the learning environment. It lists specific requirements, and officials then note recommendations for support and a follow-up is done in the next term. Basically, `the department wants to see progression'. They also look at classroom management, and focus on high priority schools in their circuit. `Education Management Support goes out there first as a team, strong.' At the circuit office there are also two people dealing with institutional management governance who deal with school governance and the running and management of schools. This official also said she runs workshops for heads of department to explain the process of appointing grade heads and delegating responsibilities, and then she follows up. If a school needs assistance they phone the circuit.

At some of the under-performing schools visited, NGOs assist with literacy training. These include ABC for Life, where volunteers work intensely with weaker children. According to Foundation Phase teachers `it helps a lot… If they see a child for one year results can improve dramatically'. Other such programmes are Wordworks, which operates in ten south Peninsula schools; Shine Centre, which provides books and works with grade 2 and 3 learners; and `Learn to Read', which works with learners in grades 4 and higher.

Some schools have developed their own supplementary programme for literacy and numeracy, targeting learners who are being taught in a second language, while another has developed a detailed, structured Foundation Phase programme for the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

School staff seemed to be generally non-committal about unions; one official who had taught for 20 years said that at one point they `were forced to join a union but I never had any support from them'. Some teachers were positive, saying that both Sadtu and Naptosa held workshops as well. According to a departmental official, `curriculum experts can't go into classrooms to assess and help teachers', which he blamed on Sadtu. He said that teachers in the UK are also heavily unionised but their power in schools is curtailed because parents `have taken charge of education'; if results drop they remove their children or demand that a teacher is replaced, for example. A circuit official knew of one principal who refuses to let circuit officials into the school; `he says no and hides behind the union but the teachers do want them [to come]'. Another circuit official also mentioned one school where `we can't go in, the teachers don't want them and the union backs them', even though the circuit is there to assist staff.

CONCLUSION: HOW CAN POLICY IMPROVE SCHOOL FUNCTIONALITY & ACCOUNTABILITY?

From discussions with stakeholders, it is clear that several areas require urgent attention if literacy and numeracy achievement is to improve, with parental involvement, language medium and school readiness topping the list.

Parental support & involvement

Strong parental engagement is needed both to support learning at home and for strong accountability. Whereas in the past, as an official pointed out, teachers tended to grow up,

train and work in the same community, this is no longer the case in many schools, which may have contributed to a decline in community and parental involvement in schooling.

Many teachers stressed the need to improve parental involvement: `Parents are the key'; `Parents must be knowledgeable about their children's progress'; `The department must make strong parental engagement possible'; `More parental involvement is crucial'. A circuit official mentioned that the WCED has two programmes that aim to improve parental involvement: SNOCS (Schools as nodes of care and support), which looks at social ills and tries to get parents and the community involved with at risk learners, and family literacy programmes, which show parents how to help their children with the curriculum and how to assist teachers.

Three ways of improving parental involvement were mentioned: parental workshops, relevant meetings and a campaign targeting parents.

With regard to workshops, Henning recommends that programmes be developed that will enable parents, grandparents and community structures such as churches to partner child and school in the development of the foundation for reading. `Especially where there is a deficit in parents' or grandparents' own educational and literacy attainments, they need to be reassured that they have a crucial role to play in their children's learning, and given tools to enable them to play it.' (Henning 2010: 49) This fits in with `strong evidence emerging from the literature which indicates that school results improve in low achieving inner city schools when educators, parents, education officials and particularly school principals all work together as a team, to improve education.' (Mkhabela 2010: 64) A principal suggested a focus on mothers (`empower mothers and support them'), and at two schools that had in the recent past held parent workshops (one involving circuit staff and one an NGO) these were said to have resulted in a small but enthusiastic group of mothers becoming involved in supporting their children at home. A continuing effort also needs to be made to provide training to SGB parents, so that they can play a more decisive role in school governance.

School meetings need to be held on a regular basis and deal with issues that are relevant to parents. Meetings need to concern the children's education, such as how they can assist their child with homework, with literacy development, etc.

Finally, a principal said that the department must play a role in motivating parents and roll out a campaign to involve parents `like the recent immunisation campaign… a "beehive activity"'. The immunisation campaign involved intensive advertising and press coverage, and was deemed a success in creating awareness among communities about the importance of having children immunised; a similar campaign should be held to stimulate parental involvement and show them how they can help with numeracy and literacy development at home. Another suggestion was that the WCED should have a media directorate that keeps parents informed about educational issues, including the importance of learning in one's home language.

Improving school readiness

School readiness/grade R is essential and must be made compulsory. As Jos Horwitz (director: early childhood, United Herzlia Schools, Cape Town) pointed out, serious attention needs to be given to the training of preschool teachers so that all children can be accommodated in Grade R classes. (Sunday Times 4/10/09) Especially at no-fee schools,

departmental posts must be made available and grade R must be provided for free. This is also vital at schools where the medium of instruction is not the home language, as problems appeared to be less acute among children who had attended Grade R classes at the school. In addition, children should not progress to the next grade until they have mastered the basics, as problems become insurmountable in higher grades, with negative consequences for learner motivation.

Another suggestion is the offering of Grade R programmes on SABC aimed both at children and parents; the latter should be drawn in by showing what is wanted and needed.

Promoting first language instruction

In view of the many problems associated with second language learning, both in terms of achievement and in terms of motivation and behaviour, it was recommended by several interviewees to have an advocacy campaign promoting home language learning up to grade 6 and explaining the issues involved. A second language should be taught simultaneously from grade 1, to prepare learners for the transition to another medium.

Improving school management

In view of the crucial role of school principals and the SMT, support and training by circuit staff cannot be overvalued. The WCED intends to have principals sign performance contracts for improving learner achievement and having this monitored, but each school's particular conditions will need to be taken into account. It will also be useful to expose principals and SMTs to well-functioning schools, either by mentoring or twinning schools, so that innovation and exchange of ideas can take place.

Exposing staff to well-functioning schools

`Teachers also need role models, and when you twin schools they can see functioning schools'. This is especially important both for newly trained and for more experienced teachers who have not worked in different school environments, so that they are exposed to different methodologies and ways of functioning. Mentorships could also play a role here, where staff (principals and teachers) from functioning schools spend a certain amount of time with their colleagues in an under-performing school. Retired educators, including those who took voluntary severance packages, could be willing to assist here in exchange for certain tax benefits.

Reducing class sizes

All teachers in under-performing schools identified a need for smaller classes: `We can raise literacy and numeracy if we had fewer learners' or, by implication, more teachers. As the latter is difficult in view of budgetary constraints, a teacher suggested offering tax perks for retired teachers (and those who took VSPs (voluntary Severance Packages)) to come back to help out in classrooms or mentor teachers; in other words providing tax perks for a form of community service. Another suggestion was to employ teacher assistants in large classes, as these receive a lower salary.

Developing reading and textbook materials

Materials need to be developed in African languages that develop a strong foundation and proficiency in the mother tongue, especially in its written form, in order to lay a foundation for developing English as a second language by grade 4.

More generally, under-performing schools need to be supplied with sufficient reading materials, library books and numeracy equipment. It would be useful to monitor the impact of training and resources supplied through QIDS-UP on literacy and numeracy achievement.

Assistance with lesson planning and teaching methods

Teachers at under-performing schools expressed a need for more explicit and regular assistance with and demonstrations of teaching methodologies (how they can teach the syllabus). Areas that need to be addressed include lesson planning, assessment standards, and workshops on interventions. The provision of worksheets to teachers in under-performing schools has been found useful and needs to continue.

However, teachers themselves need to improve their knowledge continuously, they need to have high expectations of their learners, make use of available resources and practise ability group teaching. In this regard, the need was also mentioned for schools to discuss the teaching of the curriculum across grades; as one official said `schools have ten meetings about fundraising but none about teaching the curriculum'. Incentives need to be considered for teachers who manage to achieve improved results in their subjects.

Stability with regard to policies and strategies

What is needed is consistency in policy; `not new strategies every time there are new people'. There needs to be consolidation of policies, particularly with regard to the curriculum, teaching methodologies and assistance with their implementation, also with regard to developing in-school policies such as a disciplinary code.

Collaboration with practitioners

A forum for consultation with practitioners outside the department needs to be established, as these often have valuable insights into some of the issues discussed as well as suggestions as to how these can be addressed. Here one thinks specifically of collaboration with literacy organizations that function in some of the under-performing schools.

STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY

Schools should basically be accountable to the department, their employer, and to parents, their clients. With regard to the former, inspections and circuit staff who monitor and support schools on a more regular basis play a key role.

The role of inspections

With regard to inspections, a principal said that: `You need to assess a particular school and then assist. Some schools had a mentorship where a principal went in. If there are other reasons [for poor performance] you will need to assess and see who is responsible.

Ultimately the front desk [i.e. the principal] is responsible.' Rather than using sticks, he felt that an inspectorate must be developmental. `The needs of individual schools must be identified and then they must address those.' Finally, he pointed out that the inspectorate must be knowledgeable in areas that they are going to deal with, but felt that many are not (`nepotism, etc').

While some schools receive good support from committed and professional departmental staff, Nick Taylor has also noted that the principles used by government to recruit, promote and discipline its employees is antithetical to building a professional service. In some provinces, there is a practice of appointing and promoting public servants according to their political credentials rather than their expertise. This has led to a culture of impunity, inefficiency and contempt for authority among the majority of well-meaning teachers and officials. He says that under these conditions, programmes designed to get teachers to be more effective are likely to have only marginal effects. (The Times 24/2/10)

Schools should have processes in place to monitor and assess the performance of staff, and most felt that this should be developmental. Internal moderation and management is seen as important, and the principal must know what is happening in the classrooms.

In general, it was felt that carrots should be used rather than sticks, in large part because morale is poor. A circuit official felt that performance agreements were the only way to sort out under-performing schools. Teachers suggested acknowledging achievement, and giving awards for schools that show initiative, such as organising workshops for parents, getting business sponsorships for excursions, developing their own supplementary programmes, etc.

The role of grade 3 and 6 assessments in improving accountability

With regard to accountability to parents, communication of assessment results were generally seen as important, although not all schools provided these to parents. In the UK, they publish league tables in newspapers, which allow parents to take action if they are unhappy with the results achieved at their child's school. They can put their child in another school or request that a certain teacher be removed, for example. Here, grade 3 and 6 results are not published for other schools, however, and schools receive only their results and those for the circuit/district and province as a whole. A department official said that while comparisons are important, it is a difficult issue: `Do you name and shame principals? The department is undecided… and unions won't allow it either'. The matter is complicated by the fact that children here often do not have choices in the sense of going to another school. The head of a literacy organisation also said that `results must be used with the bigger picture in mind; some schools experience a sudden influx of refugee children for example and you can't blame the school for poor performance'.

The results are useful to circuit staff because they give an indication of the start and the end of the learning process. A circuit official said that `the department should publish the results like they publish matric results so parents can start exerting pressure'.

Most under-performing schools visited do not give out assessment results to parents, presumably because they are not very good. A parent who has had children and now grandchildren at the same school said that she has never seen the school's assessment

results, and she feels they should be given out. At another school, the Foundation Phase head said they did not give out results but `we intend to inform parents'; and that they did tell parents at a meeting about relatively good grade 6 literacy results.

At another school the Foundation Phase head also found the tests useful, but felt that the way they are conducted is not satisfactory as 8 and 9 year olds are taken out of the class environment to get tested in the hall without their own teacher, `which throws them, kids react differently'. At this school they did give the results to parents, although they were not very good.

The schools that achieve good results do publish them for parents, and in general found them useful for setting targets. One teacher knew that not all schools publish the results, in part because the context in some circuits is vastly different. Even so, she felt that schools should let parents know, and then together with parents set targets; `There must be transparency… schools must publish grade 3 and 6 results to improve accountability'. In that respect, she added that where schools under-perform, the principal should be required to write a report and list the factors responsible; `he must explain why results are poor, and then devise measures to improve performance'; in that way accountability could be improved.

The role of school fees

The payment of school fees can have a number of benefits. These include that it is a way of making schools more accountable to parents, under the assumption that the latter feel they have some influence on the type and quality of education that their children receive. In addition, if a school relies in part on fees, then it is likely to strive to improve in order to keep on attracting fee-paying learners; to provide `value for money'. It also introduces a measure of competition between schools, which might be a good thing; they need to maintain a good reputation.

Nearly all the poorly performing schools have become no-fee schools, although some still ask for a voluntary contribution. At most of these schools, fees tended to be low to begin with, and it seems not many parents were able to pay fees. One school used to charge R250 a year, and only about six per class of about 40-45 children would pay. Another charged R30 a year and used to fundraise to obtain additional finance. Now, `we are not struggling anymore to get books and teaching aids' as they get enough from the department. Another inner-city school still charges R500 a year as they employ `quite a few' SGB-paid teachers, but less than half the parents were able to pay, mainly because they have to spend about R360 a month on transport. In view of the low fees charged and small number of parents who pay them, it is unlikely that fee payment translated into accountability at under-performing schools.

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