



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

The Complexities of Improving Learner Performance in South African Public Schools: Where Do We Start from? From the System to the Classroom or Vice Versa?

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore the complexities of improving learner performance in South African public schools by probing whether the starting point should be from the education system itself to the classroom or vice versa. This is done with the aim of informing policy and practice towards improving the accomplishment of learners. This is a purely qualitative research study which relied on existing literature to solicit data to deal with the subject matter of this study. The literature that was used for this research study was not confined to South Africa only. The experiences of other developed and developing countries were used to enrich the data. This study found that considering the state, teachers, and learners as the major stakeholders in the teaching and learning exercise, collaboration between them is necessary. The study established that the voice of the learners as recipients of the curriculum must form an integral part of the learner performance improvement strategy. Schooling is about the learners, and therefore, their feedback from the assessments must be taken into consideration for their performance and ultimate achievement to improve. A further finding is that there must be collaboration between all three stakeholders to nurture a culture that motivates learners to learn, teachers to teach, and the state to collaborate with the teachers and learners to put in place policies that work. This research study contributed to the area of policy by emphasizing that the learners are just as important in shaping the direction of the education system as the policy-makers themselves. Put differently, education and curriculum planning that does not take the voice of the learners into account is destined to fail.

Keywords: Learner performance, collaboration, stakeholders, school system improvement

1. Introduction

Improving learner performance in South African public schools is an issue that has occupied this country's educational, political and social agendas since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The restructuring of the education system from the old product-driven approach to the Outcomes approach to teaching and learning not only provided the country with a new curriculum delivery approach but also burdened the country with other restructuring agendas, such as school reform, which promoted critical thinking, inquiry-based science, and a need for the retraining of teachers. The capacity of this country to deal with these developments rendered this new approach unsustainable and, to the least, unsuitable; this led to it being scrapped in 2010 and several other changes followed thereafter. This article builds a case from the view that the effects of the several changes in the education system since the dawn of democracy had an impact on the performance of schools, from the changing roles of principals to the functionality of schools as organizations. In a large part, the changes brought about added responsibilities on the principals, which include management and leadership, social functions such as dealing with conflict between teachers, teachers and learners, community interference with the business of the school and lack of support from the school communities. The complexity of the business of the schools dictates that since the activities of the schools involve the participation of different stakeholders, these activities need to be coordinated and carried out in a planned manner that requires specific skills and expertise from the leaders of the school and the various stakeholders. Given the various stakeholders involved in the school and their different expertise, this article suggests that collaboration between the various stakeholders becomes an important ingredient of the learner performance improvement initiatives of the schools.

The writing-up of this article begins with reiterating the fact that the improvement of learner performance in South African public schools is a highly contentious matter that sits high on educational/academic, political, and social agendas today. Several voices of reason, research outputs and educated guesses have dealt with this matter in all forms of media and conference presentations. However, it seems that the more they talked about it, the more it remained unresolved. Institutions of higher learning and independent researchers are all out to venture into the terrain of school improvement with the hope of finding lasting solutions. However, the question is whether the right cause and source of

this problem is addressed. This article argues that to explain and find a solution to the problem of under-performance in schools, a holistic approach, which entails investigating the education system itself and what actually happens in the classrooms, needs to be adopted.

Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber (2010:1) argue that 'the fundamental challenge that leaders of the schooling system face is how to shepherd their system through a journey to higher student outcomes. This journey is all the more complex because system starting points are different, contextual realities vary, and system leaders face multiple choices and combinations of what to do along the way – a single misplaced step can result in system leaders inadvertently taking a path that cannot get them to their desired destination.' This statement propagates a view that, indeed, there is no single appropriate approach to improving the performance of learners and that the context of individual schools is important in crafting each school's improvement strategies. The researcher will explore the argument in this article by focusing on the following issues: correlates related to school system improvement, the starting point of school system improvement, the role of different stakeholders in the school system improvement enterprise, and the role of principals in school system improvement. The latter correlate will explore the leadership and management expertise of school principals by testing the veracity of the concept of 'time on task' and its contribution to the improvement of learner performance. Dealing with the 'time on task' theory and its application to improve learner performance will require the researcher to enter the project management terrain and find its locus in the complex learner performance improvement exercise.

2. Theoretical Framework

The improvement of learner performance falls within the scope of change management, and therefore, a suitable lens for this study will have to be grounded in the change theory paradigm. In support of this view, Evans, Thornton and Usinger (2012) contend that a firm grounding in change theory can provide educational leaders with an opportunity to orchestrate meaningful organizational improvement. In concert with the subject matter of this study, meaningful organizational improvement can contribute to an improved view of the system, and an improved system is a prerequisite for improvement in the classrooms.

The theory which I found to be appropriate for this study is the school improvement theory. There are two reasons for choosing this theory as proposed by James (2008); firstly, this theory has the potential to work towards genuine improvement in learner outcomes and organizational conditions in schools, and secondly, it challenges foreign improvement approaches, trends, and models that are not compatible with the local school circumstances. This theory is appropriate for this study in that it focuses on the learners' academic improvement and the betterment of the schooling system or the school. The central thesis of this study is to establish if there are any prospects for learner performance if the teachers are developed through workshops and in-service opportunities. However, the school buildings and other physical facilities in the school remain dilapidated. Fullan (1999) and Hopkins, 2001) agree with James (2008) on the toxicity of producing wide-ranging radical policy changes on the one hand and continuity of experience in schools on the other hand, and they argue that this results in the change being unhelpful as the circumstances of the schools remain the same.

Another interesting aspect of the school improvement theory is its emphasis on the importance of culture. Stoll (1999) and Narayan (2016) contend that cultural considerations are a powerful aspect of change that can determine a school's success or failure. In support of Stoll's (1999) assertion above, Dalin, Ayono, et al. (1994) and Hargreaves (1994) put the issue of policy on the back foot by indicating that policy cannot mandate what actually happens in schools and classrooms; the critical site of change is the classroom and the teacher. The consideration of school culture as a major determinant of learner academic development will be explored further in the ensuing sections of the study.

2.1. Correlates Related to School System Improvement

Before exploring the different correlates related to school system improvement, as proposed by different scholars and researchers, it is important to first indicate that different schools use different strategies to respond to the issue of improving learner performance. In many cases, the strategies show desperation on the part of the school, leading to such interventions becoming simply 'quick-fix' interventions. More often, quick-fix strategies do not have a lasting effect on the improvement agenda of the schools. It is the view of the researcher that schools need to develop school improvement strategies that would ultimately become part of the school's culture, improvement strategies by which the school will be known and defined. From this view, it follows that maybe schools that need lasting school system improvement strategies need to learn some lessons from the former model C schools in South Africa. Former model C schools do not need extra tuition time, such as teaching during school holidays, camps for learners during weekends and holidays, and tailor-made assessment activities designed for the sole purpose of responding to underperformance. The latter activities are what the researcher refers to as 'quick-fix' strategies, which do not become a culture of the school. What we learn from the former model C schools are the power of commitment and the will to craft lasting system improvement strategies that become defining features of the schools.

For school system improvement to be realized, schools need to develop a permanent culture of good performance and incrementally use this culture to achieve excellent performance. Edmonds (1981), Lezotte, Skaife and Holstead (2002) and Daggett (2005) suggested a number of correlates that could positively contribute to school system improvement, namely: strong administrative leadership, high expectations of student achievement, safe and orderly school atmosphere, pupils' acquisition of basic skills and frequent monitoring of learner progress.

Correlating strong administrative leadership is important for school system improvement and learner performance. However, Hargreaves (2010) argues that the scale, speed and sustainability of leadership development cannot be achieved by centralized action alone. What this means is that each school needs to have its own systems of leadership development. The school itself knows its leadership needs, i.e. the school has specific expectations from the

leader(s); therefore, it will be fitting for the school to "grow its own timber." Furthermore, for the school to meet its improvement agenda, the leadership must be compatible with the prevailing culture and circumstances of the school. The leadership of the school must be able to manage and provide facilities, ensure that there are enough personnel to teach the learners and manage the finances of the school in a manner that ensures that the teaching and learning programme and its goals are accomplished and that the professional development of the teaching staff is done continuously. While these leadership functions are sufficient for a school to be regarded as functional, DeMoss (2006) argues that they are not enough to support deep and sustained school improvement.

2.2. *The School as a Starting Point of School System Improvement*

As indicated in the abstract and introduction to this study, the education system of South Africa has undergone many changes during the past thirty years. It should be noted that these changes were not because the system has entirely failed but rather to have a system that would respond to emerging global trends that proposed higher education standards. The school, as the actual platform where the process of teaching and learning takes place, must be the place where system improvement must take place. Teachers and school leaders need to ensure that the curriculum is relevant to the context of the learners. School-based improvement initiatives must include a curriculum budget that will cater for school-based teacher development activities. When this is done, we start to observe the correlation of strong administrative leadership coming into play. In support of this view, Lezotte (2004) indicates that in schools where there is strong administrative leadership, there is a shift of focus from compulsory schooling to compulsory learning. There is indeed a difference between compulsory schooling and compulsory learning. The former suggests that all children of school-going age must be at school for seven hours a day. However, the latter is more important as it emphasizes that these learners must be actively engaged in the process of learning, and the evidence of learning will be seen in their acquisition of basic skills, such as the construction of knowledge. Teachers with the same strength need to know the difference between being present and being at work. When teachers are present at school but do not teach effectively, compulsory schooling becomes the core business at the expense of compulsory learning.

Compulsory schooling, for its own sake, cannot change the lives of the learners and their families. If it goes together with leadership and management that fosters the protection and observance of teaching time, then we are sure of some change in the lives of the learners and their families. It is important to note that when we talk about the school, we refer to both the buildings and the personnel, and both are very important for the improvement of the school system. I must emphasize that it becomes a fruitless exercise to engage teachers in curriculum-related development activities that will enable them to teach effectively without developing the school infrastructure and creating a safe and inviting learning environment. Teachers who teach in dilapidated classrooms without furniture for learners and other support materials are unlikely to improve the performance of their learners. Shannon (nd) provides a number of characteristics of high-performing schools and it is important to note that these characteristics are interlinked with the correlates of school system improvement identified above. The characteristics include, firstly, a clear and shared focus, which emphasizes the fact that the personnel in the school must know where they are going. A school must have a vision, and the focus of all in the building must be the achievement of the vision. It, therefore, becomes important for the leadership in the school to communicate the vision to all in the school.

Secondly, a high-performing school must set high standards and expectations for all learners. This characteristic must be anchored on the philosophy that all learners can learn in spite of the different learning barriers that some of them have to overcome. The school must set high standards and expectations for the learners, and these will, in turn, ignite a sense of ambition in the learners to perform at a high level.

The effective school leadership dimension means that the school, particularly the principal, must ensure that effective instructional and administrative leadership are implemented in order to implement processes of the school system improvement. Research indicates that effective leaders nurture an instructional program and school culture that is conducive to learning and professional growth. Kythreotis, Pashiardis, and Kyriakides (2010) define positive school cultures as being linked to learner and teacher motivation, improvement in learner accomplishment, teacher job satisfaction, commitment and collaboration, and school community building. Research by Rhodes, Stevens, and Anette (2011) about creating a positive culture in schools affirmed Kythreotis et al.'s (2010) assertion above by indicating that a positive school culture is dependent on the strength of the principal and teachers' leadership, including other social structures in the school. In a nutshell, different leaders in the school must perform in their roles and by doing so, there will be improvement in all areas of the school.

Given all the above about school culture as a component of school system improvement, Desson and Clouthier (2010), Tharp (2009), O'Donnell and Boyle (2008), and Rhodes et al. (2011) sum up the essence of a positive culture in a school by indicating that it provides a road map for the school to acquire its objectives and retention of skilled teachers; keeps the school attractive to the external stakeholders (parents, business, etc.) and ensures that the school takes sound decisions that culminate into stability, cohesion, unity, and visible reforms in the school.

The dimension of the school setting up high levels of collaboration and communication is the second characteristic of the school as a starting point for improvement in the school system. It is, in fact, about what needs to happen in the classroom between teachers and learners; therefore responding to the second part of the research topic. This characteristic implies that the school as a system will function maximally if there is teamwork among teachers across all grades. It is envisaged that if everybody in the building is involved and connected to each other, including parents and members of the community, they will be able to identify problems and work on solutions. Typical of this aspect of the school system improvement are different school cultures, which include staff having a shared sense of purpose and pouring their hearts into teaching by emphasizing learning (Peterson & Deal, 1998), ensuring collegiality, improvement,

hard work, and the school provides opportunities for staff reflection, collective inquiry, and sharing good personal practice (Peterson et al., 1998). Other trends which are strongly recommended in project management are the development of cross-functional teams and cross-organizational teams in schools. Cross-functional teams, according to Organ and Botorf (2022) and Pratt (2023), are a drift away from the traditional hierarchical structures with a top-down approach to management to a structure where individuals from various departments in an organization (the school in this regard), collaborate out of their 'silos' to enable them to see a bigger picture of the performance needs of the school. In this case, the teachers collaborate according to their different skills, bringing together different skills such as curriculum design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation, and assessment skills to assist each other in the various subjects.

Cross-organizational teams are about working in partnerships or strategic alliances with other organizations (Petersimons, 2018). Viggers and Kristensen (2023) add that cross-organizational teams have the potential to help organizations adapt to changes, explore new opportunities, and offer internal career growth. A typical example of this type of team in South Africa is the alliance of public schools with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) to boost curriculum delivery and tracking. This alliance has made a great difference in how teachers planned, taught, and tracked their progress and that of the learners. The different teams will ensure continuous communication between school managers from different schools about good practices and communication between teachers within and outside the school about matters of common interest along the value chain. It is important to emphasize that the business of schools is about communication. Teachers must talk to their managers, their colleagues, the parents of learners and other interested stakeholders in the community. Therefore, in the absence of communication, the businesses of the schools cease to exist, and the ultimate victims are the learners. Furthermore, celebrating learners' accomplishments, the creativity of teachers and parental involvement in the business of the school (Character Education Partnership, nd) can contribute immensely in the improvement of the performance of the learners in particular and the school in general.

2.3. Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessments with Acceptable Standards

The alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessment is the key component that ensures that learners perform at their best in their learning journey. Bunch (2012) emphasizes the importance of keeping these components and their interdependence in check by indicating that while curriculum drives instruction and assessment, it is also possible that instruction can provide feedback for improving curriculum and refining the formal assessments given to learners. It is appropriate at this point to clarify each of the three components of learning to enable the reader to have a clear understanding of each of them. According to Bunch (2012), curriculum refers to the written set of educational outcomes and associated content that learners have to learn. The curriculum encapsulates all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that learners must acquire and master after a period of instruction. Instruction includes what happens in the classroom, including at home and in the community. The home and the community teach certain values that the learners take to school, and these, together with what happens in the classroom, influence what the learner becomes after school. Assessment is the process of collecting, analyzing, and reporting about the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities after the instruction process.

For the purpose of this study, the focus is on whether the school system's improvement trajectory embraces the three and emphasizes that these are the lifeline of what needs to happen in the classroom, and the system itself must ensure that they do. For curriculum to be delivered, there must be teachers (human resource), there must be habitable classrooms and facilities such as chalkboards, overhead and data projectors, electricity (physical resources) and money to purchase other resources such as dusters, chalks, etc. (financial resources). The relationship that holds between what happens in the classroom and the state of the education system itself is beyond reciprocity and interdependence; it is a relationship where one of the players must do more to ensure that the other performs at acceptable standards. This implies that the system must provide all the resources and ensure workable conditions for those in the classroom to perform. In return, the system becomes motivated by up-to-standard performance and improves the standard of the resources in order to sustain the level of performance.

Further, regarding the acceptability of the standards of performance, the system must put content performance standards at the centre of its learner performance agenda. Though the choice of the school curriculum and standard in South Africa is usually the preserve of the state without prior consultation with the parents of the learners, such an exercise should consider what the learners should achieve as that ultimately reflects the nation or the country (Pamberton, Rademacher, Tyler-Wood and Perez Sereijo, 2006). According to Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe (1993), the state is the custodian of the curriculum standards, which are the goals of classroom instruction through which the state prescribes its explicit expectations for learners and schools and provides a roadmap towards the realization of these standards. It is, therefore, not enough for the state to communicate these standards along the value chain, but, as indicated above, the state must provide the necessary tools to achieve these standards.

2.4. Making the School System Improvement the Business of All Stakeholders Involved in Teaching and Learning

The discourse under this subheading emphasizes a view that school system improvement needs a concerted effort by all people in the school community. Rothstein (2000) contends that local school improvement teams must be established, and these teams must work collaboratively with principals to support the improvement goals and strategies that will provide all learners with an education that is comparable to that received by their counterparts, particularly those in the former model C and IIB schools (emphasis added). The school improvement teams must be formulated from the various stakeholders from the school community. Alomes (2023) defines stakeholders in education as people based on the knowledge that people are the heart of the education system. The stakeholders have the resources, information, opportunities, love, caring, and wisdom that are needed to support the goals of the education system. There is a grey area

that has existed for ages with regard to some stakeholders in the education system in South Africa. There is a difference between those who experience the learning outcomes of what they are taught and those who expect the outcomes. Learners are the primary stakeholders who are also the beneficiaries and participants of the taught curriculum with all the changes and expectations from them. However, their role as a primary stakeholder is often not given the same weight as that of other stakeholders. Teachers are the second stakeholders tasked with delivering the curriculum, and for the purpose of this study, the learners, their teachers, and policy-makers (as regulators) will be explored further.

As primary stakeholders, learners have a responsibility to provide feedback, suggestions, and insights on the curriculum and must, therefore, be taken on board to influence what must be taught and how. Tyler and Hlebowitsh (2013) and Taba (1962) argue that teachers, as stakeholders responsible for delivering the curriculum, must think about the scope of the curriculum, diagnose the needs of the learners, and use their prognosis as a platform to formulate objectives. Put differently, teachers and learners do not have to be given the objectives as a rigid prescription, but cognizance must be given to the fact that the curriculum is fluid, based on collaboration and shared decision-making among the stakeholders who deliver the curriculum and those who experience it.

The teachers and their learners can extend the scope of the stakeholders who can participate in the collaboration, but this, according to Porter et al. (2020), must be done after conducting a thorough SWOT analysis to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the potential stakeholders. It suffices at this point to indicate that teachers must be at the centre of what is taught and the objectives to be met, and the learners' input with respect to their experiences of what was taught must be prioritized in the quest to improve their academic performance. The role of the system, which includes policy-makers in this regard, must be to support the teachers and learners with all resources and continue to engage with them to deal with challenges that may emerge. The policy-makers must consult with the learners and teachers to understand their needs, expectations, and perspectives on curriculum changes and formulate and implement policies that enable, support, and monitor curriculum delivery. A further role of the policy-makers as the third stakeholder is to regulate and promote curriculum development through funding, accreditation, recognition, and dissemination of best practices.

3. Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find the starting point or point of departure towards addressing the complex learner performance improvement, given that in the mix, there is the classroom and the state. The classroom represents the learning environment, the furniture, the teaching and learning aids, etc., while the state is seen as the provider of all that is needed to ensure that teaching and learning take place. The role of the state includes providing qualified teachers for all subjects and habitable classrooms with all the necessary equipment and resources. The researcher asked a rhetorical question to find out if there was any purpose served by training teachers and providing excellent teacher development activities without improving the facilities of the school, including the classroom as the basic unit of the school. The study concluded, among other things, in concert with Alomes (2023), that the voice of the learners must be heard, and the more it is heard, the greater the success. The opposite is true; if the learners become consumers of the learning content without adding their voices, the outcomes can be disastrous.

According to Kythreotis (2010), collaboration between school leaders, the learners, and other stakeholders, including the state, will help to build and nurture a culture that will motivate learners to learn and teachers to teach, therefore leading to improved learner accomplishment. The change theory, which was used as a lens for this study, as proposed and supported by Thornton and Usinger (2012), also confirms how the state, in concert with the teachers and learners, can contribute towards meaningful school improvement, thus improving the status of the state. In summary, an improved education system is a prerequisite for improvement in the classroom. Therefore, a logical conclusion for this study is that the three stakeholders: the learners, teachers and the state, as the custodians of the schooling system and the policies thereof, must coexist and collaborate to make teaching and learning happen, thus leading to improved learner performance and accomplishment.

4. Recommendations Drawn from This Study

This study acknowledges that ensuring sustained, meaningful learner accomplishment is a complex exercise. Therefore, the state, teachers, and their learners, as the major stakeholders which were identified for this study, need to do the following to ensure that the outcomes of the teaching and learning enterprise improve:

- Continuous consultations must be held between the three major stakeholders (teachers, learners, and the policy-makers/state) to brainstorm on areas that need attention and improvement in the teaching and learning process. This will ensure that, as proposed by Ananda (2003), there is a continuous review of the policies to align with trends that emerge from the inputs of the learners and teachers.
- Each stakeholder must present feedback on their experiences in the appropriate forums and jointly seek solutions.
- From a research point of view, the following areas related to improving the performance of learners need further investigation:
- The contribution of the other stakeholders, such as administrators in the school, members of the public, business people, and faith-based organizations to the improvement of learner performance;
- The importance of dialogue and collaboration in ensuring successful teaching and learning outcomes; and
- The contribution of cross-functional and cross-organizational teams to the improvement of learner performance.

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