

Educators' Perceptions of School Effectiveness and Dysfunctional Schools in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Teacher Effectiveness. Effective Management. Leadership. Education System

ABSTRACT Based on international comparisons and annual national assessments of reading and mathematics achievement levels it could be stated that the South African education system is to a large extent ineffective. Large numbers of schools are considered to be dysfunctional. This study aimed at investigating practitioners' perceptions of effective schools and ineffective or dysfunctional schools within the specific context of South Africa. It is argued that the root causes of dysfunction must be discovered in order to develop a coordinated and structured strategy in turning dysfunctional schools around to become effective again. On the basis of an in-depth literature review and a qualitative investigation it was found that practitioners' perceptions show a great deal of similarity with school effectiveness models developed elsewhere. Various root causes for dysfunction came to the fore including ineffective management of the education system on various levels of management, an ineffective teacher corps and limited mother tongue instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, school-effectiveness research (SER) has produced a voluminous amount of studies on school effectiveness and the characteristics of effective schools. However, the opposite, namely ineffective or dysfunctional school organisations, are not widely studied in educational leadership. There is little coverage in the existing literature of the specific characteristics of low-performing schools (Pretorius 2014). This is due to the fact that SER has historically taken a very different route to that of applied sciences such as medicine in that it has studied schools that are 'well' or effective rather than those that are 'sick' or ineffective (Reynolds and Teddlie 2001).

Furthermore, the key feature of SER methodology is that it is mainly quantitative. It seeks to make generalizations and to work in partnerships with practitioners. It values the views and perceptions of teachers, students and parents because these are vital keys that help to illuminate our understanding of the experiences of schools (Sammons 2006). However, a great deal of qualitative investigation is needed over and above the statistical analyses of SER methods to ensure a better understanding of school performance and how it can be improved. Thus, due to calls for more qualitative research from the side of critics of SER, case studies and mixed-meth-

od approaches are gaining importance (Teddlie and Reynolds 2001). A qualitative approach was therefore adopted for the purpose of this study. The focus was on practitioners' views on and perceptions of effective schools but respondents' perceptions of dysfunctional schools were also probed because analyses done in the last few years indicated that approximately 80 per cent of South African schools are essentially dysfunctional (Taylor 2006; Afrol News 2012; The Economist 2012; Pretorius 2014). This problem will be further considered in the ensuing section.

The Context of This Study

Besides the afore-mentioned grim finding, various indicators have shown since 1994 that South African education is actually in a crisis (Masondo 2014). Although Government has doubled investment in education over the past 17 years (Burger 2011) the point where education accounts for 21% of the national budget and 7% of GDP, which is more than the yearly spend on any other sector, the President nevertheless stated in a 2009 speech to school principals: "Our wonderful policies that we have been implementing since 1994 have not essentially led to the delivery of quality education for the poorest of the poor. Results remain perpetually poor in black communities. We need to turn the

situation around” (Business Week January 4 2010).

Over the last decade South Africa fared poorly in international assessments by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). For example, South Africa is rated the lowest among developing countries with only 22% of learners passing the low PIRLS reading benchmark (cf. TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre 2004; SACMEQ 2011; Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2011(a)). Using the combined TIMSS and/or PISA assessments, Newsweek estimates of 2011 ranked the South African schooling system fourth-last in the world (97th out of 100 countries) and lower than African countries such as Mozambique, Tanzania and Ghana (De-Klerk-Luttig 2012).

Besides the indicators based on international comparisons, the Annual National Assessments (ANA) of six million South African learners in 2011 confirmed that the percentage of learners performing at adequate levels in literacy and numeracy is unacceptably low. The ANA report (DBE 2011(b)) shows that Grade 3 and Grade 6 learners scored averages of 35% and 28% respectively in literacy/language tests, and 28% and 30% in numeracy/mathematics. Overall, 58% of Grade 3 learners and 70% of Grade 6 learners are not achieving expected levels in literacy. Only one out of three Grade 3 learners can read at the expected level.

Furthermore, learner dropout rates are alarmingly high (DBE 2011(c)), this despite the reported standards of education being so low that any prospect of failing the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations has been all eliminated (Jansen 2012). A learner could graduate from school by achieving a mere 40% in three of the seven subjects, provided one is an official language, and a mere 30% in three other subjects (DBE 2012). At higher education levels the indications are that school leavers just don’t have the knowledge and skills to enter the higher education system with viable prospects of success.

The Research Problem

It is evident from the above that the South African education system is largely grappling in

vain with the need to provide good quality education for all. Based on the indicators emanating from international comparisons of reading and mathematics achievement levels, as well as from national assessments, it must be concluded that the education system is not coping with its basic mandate. Large numbers of schools are deemed justifiably dysfunctional. Although the media and ministerial task teams and others have ascribed this situation to a plethora of reasons, the root causes should probably be sought at a deeper level. Finding these causes is a critical step in understanding the true nature of the problem and the key to the improvement of processes.

To that end the research under review was guided by the following questions:

- ♦ What, according to practitioners’ perceptions, are the distinguishing characteristics or hallmarks of an effective school?
- ♦ Why are so many schools ineffectual or dysfunctional, and what are the root causes to which this phenomenon should be ascribed?

School-Effectiveness Research: A Literature Review

SER is a highly varied field that has undergone several changes during the course of its development in different countries (Teddlie and Reynolds 2001). In a paper of this kind it will be impossible to give a full rendition of the development of SER and all divergent views and strands, and also the criticisms against it. Thus, a brief synthesis will be provided of considerations of prime importance for this study.

Since the well-known Coleman report of the 1960s, which concluded controversially that schools don’t matter and that the socio-economic status of students and their familial setting, rather than school-based resource variables, had an overriding influence on their scholastic achievement (Christie et al. 2007; Teddlie and Stringfield 2007), SER developed into three main, clearly definable branches (Teddlie and Reynolds 2001). First, effective-schools research concerned itself with the processes of effective schooling, and the cumulative results from this research culminated in detailed descriptions of effective school characteristics across a variety of contexts. School-effects research, on the other hand, involved the study of specific properties of school effects, such as the magnitude,

and the consistency and stability, of school effects. The first strand focused on educational processes, while school-effects research focused on educational products (Teddlie and Stringfield 2007). Thirdly, school-improvement research (SIR) examined the processes whereby schools could be changed through sophisticated models that have gone beyond the simple application of school-effectiveness knowledge. There are numerous sub-branches within these three fields (Teddlie and Reynolds 2001).

Contrary to the findings of the Coleman report and other studies of the 1960s, Sammons (2006) is convinced that the central focus of SER concerns the idea that 'schools matter, that schools do make a difference, and that the simple question of 'How can we measure the influence of schools and of teachers on their students?' lies at the heart of SER.

According to Murphy (in Townsend 2007) there are four factors which could be denoted as the legacy of SER, the first being the fundamental reflection that, given appropriate conditions, all children can learn. SER also rejected the historical perspective that good schools and bad schools can be thus classified according to the socio-economic status of the area in which they are situated (that is, that socio-economic status is decisive for such a classification). Thereby, SER examined student achievement not in absolute terms, but in terms of the value added to students' abilities by the school, rather than factors outside the school. Furthermore, SER found that the better schools are more tightly linked together, structurally, symbolically and culturally, than less effective ones, and that a greater degree of consistency and coordination exists where curriculum, teaching and internal school organization are concerned.

School Effectiveness

Although many definitions of effective schools have been documented, the most widely accepted one among SER researchers is defined as follows: "An effective school has been identified as one in which students progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake". Thus, an effective school adds extra value to its students' outcome in comparison with other schools that serve similar intakes (Sammons 2006).

Initially, a five-factor model of school effectiveness (strong principal leadership, pervasive instructional focus, orderly school climate, high expectations and consistent measurement of learner performance) was very influential in the history of SER. However, a myriad of lists of the common features or characteristics of effective schools – many of them with a great deal of similarity – have been documented by researchers in the field. Although the traditional mapping of the features of effective schools was restricted to vague and general guidelines without specific prescriptions for management and leadership, researchers made substantial progress since the early 1980s in synthesising nine complex process areas of effective schools. These are the following:

- ♦ The processes of effective leadership, such as being firm and purposeful, involving others, exhibiting instructional leadership, and frequent personal monitoring
- ♦ The processes of effective teaching, such as unity of purpose, consistency of practice and collegiality and collaboration
- ♦ Developing and maintaining a comprehensive focus on learning by concentrating on academics and maximising school learning time
- ♦ Producing a positive school culture by creating a shared vision and an orderly environment, and by emphasising positive reinforcement
- ♦ Creating high and appropriate expectations - for students and staff alike
- ♦ Emphasising student responsibilities and rights
- ♦ Monitoring progress at all levels – the school level, the classroom level, the student level
- ♦ Developing staff skills with site-based actions which are integrated with ongoing professional development
- ♦ Involving parents in productive and appropriate ways by buffering negative influences and encouraging productive interactions with parents (Teddlie and Stringfield 2007).

Sammons (2006) highlights the probabilistic nature of SER findings since the above are tendencies and not certainties. But schools which embark on the things that research suggests make a difference and tend to get better results. However, SER researchers are critically aware of the fact that there are no magical answers and no quick fixes in improving less effective schools,

especially those serving students from low-SER environments (Teddlie and Reynolds 2001).

Furthermore, there is growing awareness of the complexity of studying school effectiveness (Sammons 2006). SER has provided strong evidence that schools are differentially effective for certain kinds of students and in various subject areas, and that the school effects may not be stable over even short periods of time. This evidence of differential effectiveness brings the consideration of using single-feature measures to determine effectiveness into question. In this regard, Kyriakides (2007) cautions that the concept of school effectiveness has been encapsulated in a generic, "one size fits all model" on the assumption that effective schools are effective for all students, in all contexts and in all subjects. Consequently, context variables such as the SES of students attending a school, the community type being served, the grade phases of schooling and the governance structure of the schools, were elevated as critical issues in SER (Teddlie and Stringfield 2007). The lesson learned was that what needs to be done and how it should be done is context specific (Wendel 2000).

Various studies have sought to quantify the magnitude of school effects. A review of several studies by Teddlie et al. (2000) has led to the conclusion that the size of school effects accounts for 5-18% of the achievement differences between students after control for initial differences. Teddlie and Stringfield (2007) report that the size of school effects was estimated at between 8 and 16% of the variance in scholastic achievement, depending on a number of factors such as grade level and the country in which the study occurred. Although the school-effects factor might be considered trivial at first glance, effect sizes are generally found to be greater in studies conducted in developing countries. In addition, classroom level or teacher effects tends to be a substantially larger factor than school effects with the combined school and teacher effect estimated at 15-50% depending on the outcomes and sample studied (Sammons 2006). Similarly, Townsend (2001) reports the findings of a study which shows that the percentage attributable to the classroom is around 40 to 50%. Due to this critical role that teachers play in school effectiveness, the focus of many SER researchers has shifted from schools to effects at classroom and teacher level.

Dysfunctional Schools

In their reflections on the critics of SER and beyond, Reynolds and Teddlie (2001) identify the study of dysfunctional schools as one of the 'cutting edge' areas of disciplinary advance to which SER is reorienting itself. As an object of study dysfunction has a long history in the social and medical sciences. However, 'dysfunctional schools' is not a widely used phrase in education literature (Green and O'Sullivan 2009). A range of other concepts such as low-performing schools, ineffective schools, failing schools and at-risk schools are being used to denote underperformance in education.

As with other organisations, the word dysfunction in educational organisations can mean different things and take different forms in different schools and different contexts. However, Brown (2010) states that the signs of a dysfunctional workplace remain similar across industries and organisational types. Researchers have identified a variety of "syndromes" or characteristics of organisational dysfunction.

From an extensive review of the literature (for example, Wendel 2000; Teddlie and Reynolds 2001; Jones 2008; Green and O'Sullivan 2009; Brown 2010; Bergman et al. 2011; Krotz 2011 etc.) on the characteristics of organisational dysfunction Pretorius (2012) has synthesised dysfunction in education as follows:

Schools are places of teaching and learning. A school becomes dysfunctional when, due to abnormal or impaired functioning, it fails to accomplish the true purpose of teaching and learning for which it was instituted. Dysfunctional schools are characterised by unstable management conditions, inappropriate or lack of leadership, lack of vision, an unhealthy school climate and culture, and low staff and learner morale. Various communication barriers cripple general performance and the functioning of the school. Staff members have lost confidence and trust in the school leadership. They tend to violate educational norms, policies, or internal values with respect to minimum quality and quantity of work. Absenteeism, unauthorised extended break and lunch times, excessive socialisation, intrusion of personal problems into the school, not following standard operating procedures and guidelines, and low time on task are the order of the day. There is a lack of high expectations, academic cohesiveness and rigour. Due to inap-

propriate monitoring and lack of instructional leadership, classroom instruction is generally unstructured and intellectually unchallenging with improper curriculum coverage. Among learners, poor discipline and understanding of rules are apparent. Learners generally underperform in assessments. Many learners leave school early and significant numbers finish compulsory education without acquiring the skills needed to enter and hold their own in the labour market. In the words of Kovacs (in Wendel 2000), they are "marginalised, unemployed, or work in low-income jobs".

Furthermore, schools and their leadership teams do not operate in isolation. School practices and outcomes are affected by the functioning of the entire education system on national, provincial and district levels, and by the way all relevant societal structures are involved. Thus, dysfunctional schools are the symptoms of the impaired functioning and decisions of the education system. Dysfunctional schools lack vision and structured support from above. They lack appropriate and dedicated parental involvement. They lack the support of other interested parties such as employment sectors, and they are at the mercy of teacher organisations and their pernicious influences (Pretorius 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Typical of a qualitative approach, this research used a variety of data sources to gain an in-depth understanding of the prerequisites for school effectiveness and of the underlying problems attributable to dysfunctional schools. In addition to a thorough review of the existing SER literature and relevant reports on the state of South African education, a qualitative survey was devised and implemented to collect data from a wider sample than could be reached by personal interview. A survey with broad questions related to school effectiveness was necessary in order to afford participants the opportunity to consider their answers carefully and provide duly considered written responses. Participants were therefore purposefully sampled to probe the perceptions of experts as well as practitioners from a variety of educational contexts in order to probe perspectives of participants of prestigious urban institutions to teachers of far away rural areas. Teachers, school principals, teacher educators and officials of education

departments participated in the investigation. Structured data obtained in the latter way were analysed, seeking confirmation for views and perspectives expressed in the informal interviews.

In order to gain more depth, the survey was combined with informal interviews with various educational experts. Due to his position as subject adviser and teacher educator the researcher also had the opportunity to visit various schools in urban and rural settings and observe the lessons of novice and experienced teachers in both schools regarded as effective, and schools categorised as under-performing. In all instances the researcher built trusting relationships prior to the research getting under way by working towards voluntary informed consent and informing participants of the aims of the investigation and anonymity of their participation. For school visits and lesson observations the necessary permission was obtained from school principals and interviewees, as well as those teachers whose lessons were observed. To ensure trustworthiness, the data collected during interviews and classroom observations were personally discussed with the participants to ensure validity and accuracy of their perspectives. This research falls into the category of grounded theory with deductions based on observations and gathered data. In grounded theory, collection, coding and analysis of data go hand in hand throughout the whole research project. It is longitudinal in nature with the researcher continuing to analyse data and shape conclusions as further data are gathered and new information becomes available from ongoing interviews, classroom observations and more.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following section presents the main findings of the investigation against the background provided by the literature and the information gathered from the empirical investigation. The data share a great deal of similarity with the lists of common features or characteristics of effective schools and teachers as developed by SER researchers from elsewhere. This confirms the viewpoint that no matter what the circumstances are, in the words of one of the practitioners, there are "those basic teacher qualities and skills that have stood the test of time, that are basically universal and applicable everywhere. New

developments, modern technology and wider horizons require additions to and extension of the knowledge and competencies of teachers, but cannot and should not replace qualities so essential to the successful education of our children” (Burger 2006).

In proceeding to answer the question: “What makes an effective school?” the first step would be to divide practitioners’ perceptions into the following process areas:

Effective Management

Respondents agree that a school has to be well-managed to be effective. They emphasise the importance of proper execution of the management functions of planning, organising, leading and control and of the processes by which these functions relate to each other. There must be a “well-established academic culture” and “ethos”, a healthy school climate, and an orderly and safe environment that characterise the school as a place of “serious teaching and learning”. A chief director of education expresses his perception on a well-managed school in the following way:

You sense it, see it, hear it and feel it within half an hour of stepping into the school premises.

Respondents emphasise the importance of adequacy and stability of resources. School management must ensure that the school is “well-equipped with well-qualified teachers and administrative staff” as well as other resources such as learning support materials and technological equipment to enhance teaching and learning. Effective management warrants, and largely hinges on ethical financial management and efficient use of school resources.

An Effective System of Monitoring and Assessment

In the words of a practitioner, effective schools have established effective systems of “continuous monitoring and support to ensure that every teacher does what he/she is supposed to be doing every day and achieve the set educational targets.” At the classroom level teachers apply a variety of formative and summative assessment strategies according to the school’s assessment policy utilising measured achievement scores to determine trends and apply

corrective teaching measures. They develop effective systems of record keeping in order to monitor the progress of each individual student. Also, on the basis of assessment information, they are able to reflect on their teaching practice and determine deficiencies in order to continuously improve their teaching strategies. One of the respondents aptly expresses his/her view in this regard:

The process is such that learners’ performance in the classroom is monitored. Teachers have up-to-date records of learner performance and inform and involve learners in the process. The learners will get to know the areas of their work in which they are succeeding and the areas that need improvement. The parents are regularly informed about the progress of their children.

Assessment of learner performance is a vital process in ensuring quality education. However, respondents caution that continuous formative assessment, “potentially a powerful tool is mostly sub-standard in its demands and leads to inflated year marks which do not correlate with formal external examinations”. To be effective, therefore, schools use assessment “wisely” by ensuring that it assists the teacher in “identifying and correcting misconceptions and gaps in learning, and by providing continuous feedback which serves to help and motivate learners”.

Fair and Consistent Discipline

Although recently much emphasis has been placed on the freedom and basic rights of learners, and although “the concept of discipline has become unfashionable”, respondents nevertheless insist that “no real teaching and learning can be achieved in a disorderly environment”. As an integral facet of management, fair and positive discipline must be maintained for schools to be effective. Practitioners express their arguments as follows:

Well, one of the basic rights of a child at school is the right to be taught and to learn unhindered by disruptive behaviour of other learners or even his or her own indiscipline.

The school community should feel safe from both physical and psychological harm. The school should be characterized by rules and regulations. The learners should participate in the formulation of school rules, especially those who are in Grade eight and upwards.

The Department needs to come and work with the learners on discipline in and outside the classroom, because no learning can take place without discipline.

It follows, therefore, that to be effective schools need to respect learners' constitutional rights and their diversity; and with these principles in mind they need to manage learners with a view to cultivating mutual respect between learners, teachers and school management teams. Clear codes of conduct for staff and learners must be laid down and enforced while learners' responsibilities must be clearly spelled out to them. The upshot of these measures should be that it is not surprising to hear that. "Effective schools' students are known for their good behaviour."

Strong Leadership

For a school to be effective, the school principal should not only be a good manager but also an "inspirational and purposeful leader". It is common cause among educators and educational specialists that a clearly communicated vision, common goals and clearly defined roles of practitioners are essential with everyone striving to achieve these goals. A general spirit and ethos of teamwork should exist. For example:

An effective school has a staff which is united in their goal to deliver excellent education and united as a team working towards the realisation of the vision and mission of the school.

Democratic leadership and shared decision making are core values with "the leader creating opportunities for educators to participate in a variety of leadership roles and responsibilities within and outside the school". All teachers are valued as individuals with specific strengths and needs, and the voice of every one of them is important.

Committed Teachers and Learners

Emanating from good leadership practices, to be effective schools should be characterised by "committed teachers who are highly motivated and ready to walk the extra mile. There is low staff turnover and low teacher absenteeism". In general, staff members exhibit "real affection and concern for children, they deeply care about them and never give up on a child". The same holds true for the learners. Effective schools have learn-

ers who are "self-confident". There is "that learning drive and commitment to achieve high standards" and comply with the expectations created for them.

Effective schools and their teachers have high expectations of their learners and communicate these expectations clearly to the learners and set challenges that match these expectations and then assist the learners to meet them.

Time on Task

One of the characteristics of an effective school which is continuously reiterated is maximum time on task. What is deemed necessary is "a high level of activity – no wastage of time anywhere". Teachers and learners should always be punctual.

If it were a motor-car, the whole school will be running at 5 000 revs, near the red line. This is the ultimate and essential requirement for every teacher to ensure the time available is optimally and efficiently utilized for effective teaching and learning.

Such schools make maximum use of learning time and place an emphasis on mastery of basic skills and the development of an achievement orientation.

However, teachers complain about "various interferences" during lessons. Administrative duties assigned to be done during lessons, intercom interruptions, learners being called out for purposes unrelated to the relevant teaching task, et cetera, all contribute to precious time being wasted.

Continuous Review and Improvement of Practices

In order to be effective a school should constantly endeavour to improve on operations for the specific purpose of improving the quality of the education it offers. Some comments in this regard are:

The school is open towards ongoing reflection and reviewing of its practices and prepared to adjust and adapt to new circumstances or developments.

Teachers let their colleagues observe them while teaching to get feedback and hence improve their profession.

In this regard participants stated that to be effective schools should be characterised by

high levels of interaction and collaboration among staff members, particularly with regard to reviewing processes, mutual planning for grade levels and subject fields, teaching and assessment strategies, solving problems, sharing ideas and knowledge, and creating additional learning support material. Furthermore:

Effective schools also establish close working relationships with other schools and in this sense not only being a resource for other schools but also creating opportunities for their own teachers to further improve their skills and expertise.

A Structured and Sustained Professional Development Programme

With a view to ensuring that every teacher performs his task effectively every school should have a plan for the continuous professional development of its teaching staff in place. "This must be supported by practices such as instructional leadership, mentoring of novice teachers, ongoing supervision, mentoring and coaching of teachers". A respondent points out that there should be a focused professional development plan for every teacher which is used to inform the development of the school's overall plan.

High Levels of Parental and Community Involvement

The respondents agree that to be effective schools should be characterised not only by committed teachers and learners, but also by committed parents and communities. "The community takes care of the school" and contributes to develop a school that does the community proud in every way. "All parents and carers feel welcome and valued as significant partners. Their participation is invited and their expertise important."

Although the home environment is not always conducive to teaching and learning in rural areas and informal settlements – accommodation is overcrowded with no electricity and no quiet place to study, as well as pressure on learners to perform many household tasks – the perception of respondents are that parents can participate in a variety of ways.

Parental involvement is an important characteristic of an effective school. Except for school governance and various educational

activities such as supervising homework and helping their children learn, parents can assist with extra-mural activities and accompanying children on school trips.

In our school, parents are involved in cultural activities such as 'Tshigombela', 'Malende' and 'Tshifasi' (traditional dances). All these have an influence on learner achievement.

Furthermore, in the specific context of the country it is also argued that to be effective a school has to be a community centre where parents, caretakers and others participate in life-long-learning practices that are supported by the school.

The Centrality of the Classroom

As noted above, the assertion was made that a well-established academic culture must be in evidence. In this regard one of the respondents commented as follows:

What happens in the classroom is at the core of education and ultimately determines the outcomes of education, the attainment of educational goals and the quality of education in each school and the system as the whole.

Many interrelated factors contribute to effective education, "but without consistent, good teaching and learning in the classroom, all would be in vain". Thus, "every other contributing factor basically exists for one reason only—to ensure that good teaching and effective learning takes place at the classroom level."

An Effective Support System

Schools cannot survive on their own. To be effective they need to be supported by a system that is functioning effectively. In this regard education departments, district offices and governing bodies play a key role in providing the relevant structures and support services which both teachers and learners need to enhance the quality of education. To be effective, therefore, a school needs to maintain "good relationships with departmental officials at district offices, and to support ongoing liaison with them".

In response to the question: "Why are so many schools dysfunctional with so many teachers failing to be effective?" practitioners listed a multiplicity of reasons, such as curriculum complexity, the absence of a common vision among role players, lack of commitment, lack of a sense

of accountability, low teacher morale, poverty, violence in schools, sexual abuse, malnutrition, absence or inadequate transport to schools, and lack of facilities and resources such as books, desks, libraries, laboratories, electricity, running water and classroom space. It is apparent that the causes for dysfunction are varied, complex and deeply rooted in the history of educational development but also societal problems and ongoing education reforms. The Minister of Basic Education explained to the National Council for Provinces that the contributing factors for so many underperforming schools in the country include the following:

- ♦ Lack of leadership that should be provided by principals; more particularly inadequate supervision of teachers' and learners' work
- ♦ School management teams' failure to understand their roles and responsibilities and being unable to monitor curriculum delivery
- ♦ Vacant and unfilled teacher posts hampering curriculum delivery
- ♦ The prevalence of teacher absenteeism, limited teaching and lateness
- ♦ Learner absenteeism, truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, ill-discipline, teenage pregnancy and habitual late arrival
- ♦ Poor curriculum planning, resulting in inappropriate subject offerings and combinations, as well as poor time-tabling
- ♦ Gaps in teachers' subject knowledge
- ♦ Lack or shortage of textbooks and relevant learning and teaching support materials
- ♦ Lack of support by school governing bodies and the parent communities (Mohlala 2010)

DISCUSSION

Considering the varied responses from participants, backed up by a thorough literature review as well as school visits and classroom observations, the following synthesis of the findings on the root causes for dysfunctional schools is provided:

Inappropriate Management of the Education System

It is significant that the above reasons for underperforming schools, as explained by the Minister of Basic Education, are virtually all causes

of ineffective management. There are various indicators of inappropriate management on different levels of the organisational structure. Firstly, the problems are evident at the national level. For example, the implementation and management of the new outcomes-based curriculum, Curriculum 2005, had dire consequences for the country's education and had to be revised several times. It was a radically new approach to education which the DBE itself acknowledged "was never researched or properly trialled, and there was inadequate preparation and consideration of whether teachers, pupils and the system in general were prepared for such a fundamental change over such a short space of time" (DBE 2009).

Mismanagement and maladministration are also evident at provincial level (Bloch 2006). According to Jansen (2005), immediate evidence of mismanagement of resources is overwhelming. Furthermore, at the district level things are not any better. District offices fail to lend adequate support to schools under their care. Most of the district offices across the country lack organisational capacity to provide the necessary academic and logistical support to schools under their jurisdiction (Mohlala 2010).

At the school level management is often weak and lacks leadership and commitment. Due to the lack of capacity among parents and members of society, school governing bodies (SGBs) do not accomplish the purposes for which they were instituted by the South African Schools Act of 1996. Examples of respondents' views expressed are the following:

Most likely, the principal will be found behind a closed office door, or frequently away on urgent business to regional office, etc.

Every person does as he/she wishes – lack of communication, lack of respect from the learners and teachers, misuse of resources at school, mismanagement of funds, SMT and teachers do not respect time. The environment is not conducive to teaching – dirt and papers everywhere, broken windows, broken doors, no gates, no toilets. Nobody cares what is happening to the school. The parents and governance body don't care for the beauty and management of the school.

There is a shortage of teaching and learning materials. This is normally blamed on the 'department' but frequently due to school management's own lapses and failure to act in time and to follow up.

The above laissez faire management approach is reiterated in many ways by the respondents and shows that vast numbers of managers on different levels of the provisioning system were never suited or prepared for their roles as managers.

The Teacher Corps Ineffective

Contrary to the above findings of the literature review regarding the importance of effective teachers, various statements are made regarding the ineffectiveness of the South African teacher corps. Teachers are blamed for their inadequate subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. In black public schools their time on task is low with teachers teaching an average of 3, 5 hours a day compared to 6, 5 hours in the former white “Model C” schools (The Economist 2012). Absenteeism, strikes, alcohol and drug abuse, habitual lateness and teachers running their own businesses are common practices. The following expressions confirm this:

Learners are de-motivated. The teachers come late to school. Teachers have affairs with learners. Absenteeism is high. There is no culture of learning and teaching.

Teachers battle to cover all aspects of the curriculum thoroughly.

The educators and learners are not committed to their school work. Educators are always late without a valid reason. The Department needs to change the management of the school. The management must always come early at work.

The staff is not working collaboratively. A high number of teachers and learners are always absent or late for school. Teachers who are always in conflict and do not attend their classes even if they're at school.

There is a general feeling of discontent among teachers.

Thus, teacher morale is low. Teachers have become dispirited, demoralised, under-performing but angry due to a variety of teacher issues (Bloch 2009). Furthermore, an investigation by the Ministerial Committee on a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 2009) found that teachers were tired of reforms.

Teachers alone cannot be blamed for all the ills of the education system. Poor teaching results more from poorly functioning systems than

from individual shortcomings (Futernick 2010). Since the possibility of removing all incompetent teachers will not solve the larger teacher-quality problem, the education system will have to devise urgent strategies to train and further develop the teacher corps in order to render the system effective.

Professional Teacher Development Unsuccessful

Although respondents were not asked to provide their views on teacher education as such, various responses point at the inadequacy of weeklong in-service training workshops and the ineffectiveness of ongoing professional development at schools. Especially interventions aimed at the implementation of the new curricular approach were experienced by many teachers as haphazard and too short without any follow-up and strengthening by means of sustained mentoring, coaching and support at school. A respondent summarises as follows:

Nowhere has more money been wasted than in the area of in-service training of teachers in Africa. The shelf life of short training courses, workshops or other periodic interventions has proven to be minimal, with little or no lasting impact. In basically all cases the missing element is the follow-up, support and monitoring which must follow in-service training. The basic lessons are that in-service training only works if courses, workshops, et cetera are followed up by experienced teachers in school or cluster schools, or a visiting subject advisor or an inspector.

Some Paradigms Need Consideration

In a study by Price (2009) it is claimed that there are six roads to dysfunctional schools of which a variety could be traced in South African society and in the national curriculum with its notions of the teacher being a facilitator, learning by discovery and group work (cf. DBE 2009).

Firstly, an ostensibly harmless “self-esteem” approach requires that teachers give praise even when students don’t make an effort. There is pressure against having high academic expectations because failure will damage learners’ self-esteem. Various responses so far reiterate a deeply ingrained problem manifesting as learners’ ill-discipline, not being committed and not making

an effort, aggravated by the risk that teachers might violate learners' human rights.

Secondly, constructivism, which is popular in curricular approaches, claims that children must invent their own new knowledge. The teacher becomes a facilitator while learners might need hours or days to construct a page of facts. Then there is the "rote memorisation is bad" syndrome claiming that learners should actually have empty heads because they can look up the knowledge they need. A practitioner expressed the following perspectives in this regard:

We all subscribe to and welcome the shift away from rote learning and towards self discovery by pupils and 'learning-with-understanding'. Unfortunately, many schools and teachers misunderstand the concept of learner centered education. They actually stop teaching, try to do 'group work' even at inappropriate moments and generally appear to believe that arranging pupils' desks in clusters or in a circle constitutes good 'learner centered education'.

Fourthly, according to collectivist theory the main object of teaching is to create cooperative children who play and work well together. Work is performed by the group. There is no individual achievement, only group achievement, and learners never learn to think for themselves or act by themselves. Problems in this regard are highlighted as follows:

The teacher must ensure that groups do not become the hiding place for the lazy and incompetent who ride on the backs of their more industrious friends to achieve good group marks – while actually not learning anything.

A further point is emphasised:

The old methods of lecturing and rote learning actually demanded lower class management skills from teachers. Now, with the teacher as a facilitator of learning, self study by pupils, group work and other learning approaches can only succeed if the teacher is an accomplished classroom manager.

Furthermore, mathematics curricula mix advanced, complicated math with elementary arithmetic instead of mastering the basic arithmetic first and then advancing to the less simple, then the intermediate and so on. Lastly, there is sight-word reading which requires that learners memorise a language one word at a time as graphic configurations and not phonetically. 'Whole Word' is prima facie impossible and a paradigm of bad education (Price 2009).

Surely the aforementioned frameworks need investigation regarding their applicability in South African education and the implications for teacher education and curriculum methods.

False Impressions of Success

After being erratic since 1994, rising and falling over the years, a matric pass rate of 70.2% was proudly announced at the end of 2011. However, this "achievement" was put in perspective when critics started to analyse the low standards of achievement necessary to obtain a matric pass. The university entrance requirements are appallingly low. One criterion which is consistently expressed as an essential requirement for effective schools is high expectations for all involved (DBE 2009). This failure to appreciate that there is something terribly wrong with our expectations and standards, will lead to thousands of students leaving school without the basic skills to enter the labour market or to benefit from higher education – marginalised, unemployed or working in low-income jobs.

There are many other examples of statistics being used to emphasise the successes in the transformation of education. For example, a recent DBE (2011(a)) Macro Indicator Trends in Schooling report highlights that there were significant improvements in the qualifications of educators since 1990. "In 2010, 95% of educators were appropriately qualified compared to 64% in 1994." To be appropriately qualified and registered with the South African Council for Educators a teacher needs a NSC with three years of professional training. However, there is extensive research indicating that a critical deficiency among South African teachers is an inadequate base of subject-matter knowledge. This is regarded as perhaps the single most important inhibitor of change for the better in education quality (South African Human Rights Commission 2006).

Blaming the Past

It is true that education is deeply rooted in its past. Many of the systemic weaknesses of South African education lie in the faulty and ideological processes of the past education dispensation, as well as the social and economic context of deep inequalities. Ramphela (in Morgan and Dale-Jones 2011) correctly affirmed that

our dysfunctional education system is one consequence of a “deep woundedness in our society”. Many teachers too are so deeply wounded that they cannot function. However, can we afford to blame the past for the state of the country’s education ad infinitum? The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) in the Eastern Cape said: “Colonialism and apartheid created miserable conditions in the schools; until there is redress and equality, there is nothing we can do.” Graham Bloch (in Business Day 2010) of the Development Bank of Southern Africa replied: “Are we such victims of the past that we cannot ever move beyond our circumstance?” Blaming the past for ever will not bring this country’s education forward. What is needed is hard work, dedication, a unified vision by all involved and refusal to tolerate dysfunction.

Limited Mother-tongue Instruction

Much has been written on the advantages of mother-tongue instruction. However, language in South Africa is a contentious issue due to the country’s history of racism perpetuated through language. This has had an influence on how language usage has been dealt with since 1994. Currently, the language policy in many schools determines that learners are taught through the mother-tongue during the first few years of schooling after which they switch over to the foreign medium of instruction which is English. A variety of serious issues in this regard became evident from hearings conducted by the South African Human Rights Commission (2006), and from information from interviews. Teachers find it difficult to teach through a foreign medium while learners struggle to grasp complex concepts and information. Also, in poor rural schools, where it is difficult to obtain and retain teachers, learners often do not understand their teachers who are not speakers of the dialect being spoken in the area. Given that clear communication between teacher and learner is the most indispensable element of good teaching, the language policy and its role in dysfunctional schools need urgent investigation.

CONCLUSION

This investigation aimed at exploring practitioners’ perceptions on school effectiveness and the appallingly high percentage of dysfunction-

al schools in the South African education system. Based on the findings of a qualitative survey, interviews with practitioners, and school visits, backed up by a thorough review of relevant literature the researcher managed to clearly identify the characteristics of effective schools as well as providing a synthesis of the features of dysfunctional schools. Moreover, the research identified various underlying or root causes of dysfunction in education, thus achieving adequate and appropriate answers to the research questions. Significant indicators of dysfunction relate to ineffective management of the education system on national, provincial and local levels, an ineffective corps of teachers, ineffective continued professional development of teachers, inappropriate curricular approaches, limited mother-tongue instruction, and more.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that the reasons for dysfunction are varied, deep-rooted and complex. The causes of dysfunction as identified in this paper and other related matters need further investigation in order to create a coordinated and structured effort in turning dysfunctional schools around to become effective again. If dysfunctional schools were to be turned around, the South African education system should spend vast amounts and time on training managers at all levels of the system. Education is as good as the management thereof. In addition to this starting point, each and every action in education must be geared towards placing effective teachers in all classrooms. For that purpose a united effort by all functionaries needs to be orchestrated by involving all managerial and administrative structures, the schools and other educational institutions, relevant support services and all parties with an interest in education including the parent community, business and industry and other employment sectors. This is to ensure that all schools display the characteristics of effective schools as identified above.

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