

Johan Beckmann

The Non-recoverability of an Education System and the Resetting Option: Case South Africa

Abstract

The theme of the conference seems to assume that most countries had functional and well-performing education systems before the COVID-19 pandemic. All they need to do now is to recover and restore their systems to their former glory. Evaluations of the South African education system between 1994 and 2022 have been extremely negative. The question arises whether all systems could be restored and whether there are systems simply not worth restoring and needing a complete mind shift and a new start to begin to be able to provide quality education. I surveyed the South African school education system and the degree to which it complies with the legal framework that regulates it. I also consulted published material on education quality. I came to the conclusion that the system is performing extremely poorly and is probably not worth “recovering”. I then turned to the suggestions of prominent economic and education policy specialists. It became clear to me that an education system not worth recovering needs a mindset change in its leaders to be reset and begin over. Certain education systems will probably need to be reset and not merely recovered. I explain briefly what the literature suggests about resetting a system and then list a number of steps that might be taken to reset an education system.

Keywords: recovering, recoverability, non-recoverability, system inertness, system reset, resetting actions

Introduction

The 2023 BCES conference focuses on the recovery of school education systems after COVID-19. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “recovering” as “to get better after ... a period of difficulty or trouble” and “to get back something lost or spent”. Both meanings seem applicable to countries that had well-functioning systems before the pandemic. This also begs the question of whether all education systems merit recovery following the cataclysmic event.

After studying information about the state of the South African school education system after 1994, it appeared to me that it did not merit “recovering” as defined above. In this paper, I will discuss the standard of education in South Africa that informed my opinion.

When evaluating the system, it needs to be remembered that the South African system after 1994 was a product of the constitutional negotiations between opposing political parties about a constitution to determine how the country would be governed. The interim Constitution of 1993 (later finalised in 1996) was a product of these

negotiations and preceded South Africa's first democratic elections of 1994 and the first democratically-elected government led by the late Mr. Nelson Mandela in 1994.

As with all documents emerging from such negotiations, the Constitution contains compromise decisions and provisions open to different interpretations. The influence of the negotiations can also be seen in the education laws and policies promulgated after 1994. Different interpretations of management and governance provisions (for instance about the powers of school governing bodies vis-à-vis the professional management functions of school principals) could foreseeably lead to disputes and contestations. Together with the inertness of the system, these could impede and delay the creation of a stable system focused solely on the provision of quality education for all that would annul the hurtful inequalities and discrimination of the previous "Apartheid" system.

Disputes understandably also make the system somewhat unstable. Many issues are still being debated when decisions have to be made.

There have been very negative assessments of the standard of South African school education over a number of years by authors like Spaul (2013) and Van der Berg et al. (2016). Organisations like the World Economic Forum (WEF) and BusinessTech and various regional and international assessment studies like the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEC), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have all provided conclusive evidence of the poor state of education in South Africa: it has been ranked the 3rd worst in the world by the WEF and the performances of its learners and educators have been found to lag far behind those of comparable systems spending much less money on education (Beckmann, 2021, pp. 755-757).

I summarised the findings of studies and other publications (Beckmann, 2021, pp. 755-757) that all painted a bleak picture of South African education and detected only paltry improvements over the years.

Education in South Africa after 1994

Introduction

The education system in place at the onset of the pandemic replaced the much-maligned apartheid system in 1994. Part of the intentions of the new government was to undo the injustices of the previous regime and replace it with a dispensation that would treat all citizens equally and redress the injustices of the previous dispensation.

Jansen (2002, p. 199) based his "construct of 'political symbolism' ... as a first step towards developing a more elaborate theory for explaining one of the most intractable problems in policy studies: the distance between policy ideals and practical outcomes" on seven empirical studies. Jansen's study convinced him that, in a situation such as the one in which South Africa found itself after 1994, the primary aim of new legislation and policy seemed to be to signal that a new government had taken over command and not necessarily that the system would be improved. Some of the problems of the new system may have arisen from such an aim.

The legal framework for the new system

The legal framework regulating a system can serve as a lens for assessing a system. The framework I used for the new system was conceptualised from the results of a qualitative study consisting of 14 semi-structured interviews with high ranking

education department officials, legal advisers to the education department, attorneys specialising in education law, teacher union officials, members of the legal team of the Minister of Education and professors of law specialising (Beckmann, 1997). The participants in the study all agreed that a framework for the provision of quality education should:

- define the educational standards and values consistent with constitutional principles such as the rule of law and a human rights culture;
- provide for adherence to constitutional provisions;
- clarify who has to or may receive education and who should provide it;
- define as clearly as possible the rights, duties, competencies and obligations of the various interested parties (stakeholders); and
- regulate the relationship between the various states and other stakeholders involved in the provision of education.

In practical terms, such a framework should:

- regulate the deployment and optimal utilisation of human and other resources;
- ensure consonance with the Constitution of 1996 by embedding, entrenching and giving content to the various rights to, and obligations concerning education;
- provide guidance to the various parties regarding the balance of their location in the system and their responsibilities towards the education system. The state should not be allowed to establish an educational dictatorship;
- be articulated unambiguously to avoid confusion over rights, competences and obligations and relationships. Provisions susceptible to more than one valid interpretation are likely to lead to a plethora of frustrating and system inhibitory disputes and court cases that could put urgently needed activities on hold;
- balance freedom (discretion) and control by not being too prescriptive or dogmatic nor too vague, thus preventing the stifling of progress and the erosion of accountability respectively;
- anchor education in the reality of its religious, linguistic and cultural diversity and create room for compromises to reconcile differences peacefully;
- enable the successful pursuit of the explicit business of education namely to optimally develop all the human resources of a country; and
- make it possible to enforce the law on people who transgress it.

What did the system after 1994 set out to achieve?

To obtain a more nuanced assessment of the success or failure of the post-1994 education system after 1994, it was necessary to establish what its explicit aims were (Beckmann, 1997; Spaull, 2013). Some of the aims set out were to:

- establish a single department of education under one minister while simultaneously making provision for significant local control over, and accountability for the provision of education at local level. Centralised and decentralised control measures had to be balanced and more coherence of central coordination vis-à-vis local control was contemplated;
- treat all clients of the education system equally and to eradicate unfair discrimination and reinstate supportive educational and ethical values; and
- provide education relevant to the economic, developmental and social needs of the country.

Why can the 1994-2022 system not merely be recovered?

In the section below, I will briefly discuss some of the apparent serious failures of the system where it does not comply with its legal framework and creates the conviction that it cannot be recovered or overhauled in a willy-nilly fashion instead of in a well-planned, well-considered, well-researched and facts-based manner. The prescribed format of this paper prevents me from acknowledging all sources I used to compile the list below but authors such as Spaul (2013), Van der Berg et al. (2011), Van der Walt (2023), Le Cordeur (2023) and Prince (2023) provide a usable picture of the state of education.

Various conspicuous aspects of the system which need to be addressed urgently and dramatically for the system to achieve its intended aims have been identified, including:

- The system is still characterised by inequality and backlogs. The gaps between previously economically advantaged and disadvantaged communities have not been significantly reduced since 1994 partly due to the inertness of the system.
- At the 55th national conference of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, President Ramaphosa said (Van der Walt, 2023) that education is an important instrument with which to end poverty. He made exaggerated references to progress made since 1994. This type of statement is typical of neo-liberalist techniques to make government look good and, in the process, failures and problems are downplayed. The President said among others that:
 - a. Access to early childhood education (ECE) has improved considerably (it is now included in the formal school structure running from ECE to grade 12). However, Van der Walt (2023) points out some problems that are yet to be addressed such as the lack of trained educators, the lack of classrooms for ECE enrolments, the lack of quality programmes and the lack of money to pay the educators involved.
 - b. The grade 12 (called “matric” in South Africa) pass rate has improved steadily. Van der Walt (2023) raises serious and well-known concerns in this regard: less than 50% of grade 1 enrolments progress to grade 12 (signifying a totally unacceptable drop-out rate of more than 50%), the spectrum of subjects offered does not correspond with the needs of economic and industrial development, there are not enough enrolments in subjects linked to desperately needed scarce skills, the value and standard of matric qualifications is under suspicion and the unemployment rate for people between 15 and 24 years seeking employment is 59%. Current school education qualifications do not seem to open employment opportunities, leading to a sense of hopelessness among graduates from the school system.
 - c. Access to higher education and training has grown dramatically and should benefit the economy and the country in the long run (Van der Walt, 2023) provided that much-needed reforms take place that will solve the problem of a scarcity of properly qualified university personnel and the confusion about the languages of teaching and learning policy in higher education in view of the language diversity in the country.
- Political leaders and senior education often resort to expressing optimistic views about the status of education and to making promises about education delivery to the country. They gloss over statistics and fail to address problems about which government has done very little in the past 28 years. Recently, there has

been a notable increase in politicians even hiding their failures behind conspiracy theories (Mavuso, 2023).

- The above paragraph is typical of a lack of government transparency and communication, which is exacerbated by what is viewed as a disjointed relationship between the elite of the country represented by politicians and education officials and ordinary citizens. The elite seems to be ignorant of, or chooses to ignore the educational needs of the country, the economy and industry. Over the years, government has failed to constructively respond to parents and other stakeholders' requests and representations made to:
 - provide enough spaces for learners (Prince, 2023). In Gauteng Province, 4682 learners had not been placed in schools by 3 February 2023 (Nienaber, 2023). There are worrisome backlogs in the provision of new schools and classrooms;
 - maintain existing facilities and to address serious problems such as the absence of laboratories, computers and sports facilities in schools;
 - not lower pass requirements to ensure "better" pass rates;
 - address the fact that there are still about 4000 schools in the country that do not have appropriate ablution facilities. At least two learners have recently drowned in pit latrines despite court orders to education authorities to ensure proper ablution facilities at schools to respect learners' dignity and protect their bodily integrity (Cf. the judgment in the *Komape and Others v Minister of Basic Education* (2018) case). If nothing else, these cases point to an absence of skills to obey court orders and a disregard for the dignity and lives of learners;
 - curb unacceptably high teenage pregnancy rates;
 - stop corrupt practices manifesting as financial mismanagement, unlawful interference in appointment practices (a cause of the poor quality of teachers), the "deployment" of ANC "cadres" to leadership positions and the proven buying and selling of posts. Corruption by politicians in the form of "state capture" also pose a serious threat to the provision of education and thwarts efforts to curb these practices;
 - prevent and act decisively in case of proven incidents of racism, sexual abuse of learners (by learners and teachers); violence and assaults (even murders of learners and teachers); gangsterism; drug abuse; vandalism and conflicts between government, and SGBs and principals (Krugger, Beckmann & Du Plessis, 2022); and
 - address the four binding constraints on education (Van der Berg et al., 2016): weak institutional functionality, undue union influence, weak teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skills and wasted learning time.

Few reasons for "recovering" education (getting back something valuable that has been lost) can be found.

A leadership change of mind: resetting a system

If "recovering" is not a viable option, what could be? The conceptualisation of new education systems based on the "resetting" (analogous to but much more drastic and far-reaching than the resetting of a cell phone that has stopped functioning) of the minds of leaders (Schwab & Malleret, 2020) appears to be an option.

Education must first be put on a par with the economy and everyone must buy into the idea of a re-design of education. In Finland, for instance, education was officially made the first priority of the country in 1978 and their system is now consistently ranked among the world's top performers and their economy has shot up through the ranks.

A “reset” education system necessarily involves:

- a united vision for the country and education not based on SWOT analyses but rather on optimising educational institutions (Berkhout & Wielemans, 1999);
- a new set of appropriate statutes and policies;
- a curriculum with fewer subjects and greater emphasis on the development of the skills and knowledge a country needs to perform well economically;
- the availability of essential services including electricity and transport, social and health services (including the provision of nutritious meals);
- the availability of professional, competent educators and officials and teacher trainers;
- the adoption of different school management and governance models reflecting schools' performances to ensure that schools that need extra support receive it and that well-performing schools are allowed greater management and governance autonomy (Du Plessis & Küng, 2019);
- clear and binding ethical behaviour guidelines;
- an emphasis on quality rather than quantity;
- more determined efforts to eradicate social problems complicating school management and governance like child abuse, drug abuse and gender-based violence;
- an improvement of state transparency and an end to misleading the public. Because government on its own cannot solve all the problems in education, other stakeholders could discover opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the education system; and
- the government considering an end to the tripartite alliance approach to the ruling of the state by two political parties and some labour unions (known to interfere in, and block reform efforts).

Conclusion

The need for a fundamental resetting of education in South Africa is obvious. It is unlikely that South Africa is the only country in such dire straits education wise. Education must have the best human and other resources and be characterised by a new vision making it a top national priority.

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Prof. Dr. Johan Beckmann, Research Fellow, University of the Free State, South Africa