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SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS OF
**RESEARCH
IN BASIC
EDUCATION**
IN SOUTH AFRICA

PREFACE

I am delighted to have been asked to write a few words about a book that is likely to constitute a significant basis for informing school improvement in the South African Basic Education sector and beyond. Although South Africa leads the way in terms of knowledge production on the African continent, the knowledge bases tend to be in disparate places, as little attempts are made, not only to evaluate the strength of the underlying evidence, but also in terms of bringing the knowledge together in accessible forms to inform evidence based practice and policy development in the sector. In addition, much of our knowledge production tends to be small in scale, based on isolated case studies and institutional driven imperatives. This makes it extremely difficult for policy makers and practitioners to develop informed decisions about school improvement.

Led by Professor Maringe, a team of scholars, largely based at the Wits School of Education but also drawing from many universities across the country agreed to search, analyse and synthesise the best evidence we have available about important topics affecting educational performance in the South African context. In 2018, the team met at the Wits SoE in a day long workshop facilitated by Professor Patricia McInerney in the faculty of Health Sciences. Topics we selected which reflected some of the most intractable challenges faced by the Basic Education sector, but which also resonated with the research expertise and interests of the scholars. The team agreed to use the systematic review process as a shared methodology for pulling together what works and does not work in the South African Basic Education sector.

Systematic reviews have their origin in the medical field, where practitioners have to utilise the best available evidence to inform decisions about caring and treating patients. In this sector, evidence based practice is a matter of life and death and systematic reviews are thus the golden standard for determining the best evidence available to determine patient practices and interventions and to inform broad policy interventions too. In education, the situation has never been considered in life and death terms. But it can be argued that, poorly educated citizens constitute a huge risk to the development of any country. Such citizens are unlikely to have the requisite skills, knowledge and understandings which would drive meaningful national development. In the work places, poorly educated citizens are a liability to both organisational and national development. Employers usually and with good reason, shun poorly educated citizens. Consequently, schools that do not churn out well educated citizens are complicit in the poor performance of their countries, in economic terms, in social terms and even in political terms. Systematic reviews retain their value even in this education context as it pulls and represent the best knowledge for the given time.

Acknowledgements

The South African Basic Education sector is arguably one of most well-funded systems of education on the continent and compares favourably in terms of per capita investment with some of the best performing nations in the world. Yet in terms of performance on a variety of scales, such as TIMMS, PIRLS, amongst others, the country is perpetually found at the bottom of the performance league tables. This is hard to explain. In addition, South Africa is also considered to be one of the most unequal societies in the world, with a GINI index of 0.65, way above the 0.2 level which represents equality in wealth distribution. Partly because of the legacy of apartheid, itself a most divisive and discriminatory ideology, and also because of many contemporary failures and systemic inefficiencies, South Africa's education system continues to operate as a bifurcated system catering to the needs of the privileged who attend in well-resourced schools which are efficiently led on one hand and to those of the underprivileged majority in under resourced and poorly led schools.

The book has 11 chapters. The first provides a well argued discussion of the context of Basic Education in South Africa and the importance of systematic reviews as a tool for gathering evidence which can be used for systemic improvement and policy revision. The second chapter assess the usefulness of post 84 educational interventions indicating why some have not been as impactful as intended. The third chapter explores the issue of poverty as an overarching challenge in schools for the underprivileged and also provides an analysis of the successes and failures of the poverty mitigations that have been introduced in South African schools since 1994. The fourth chapter is a meta-analysis of some of the most significant evaluations conducted in Basic Education in South Africa. In the fifth chapter, the role of school leadership and principalship is brought under focus in South Africa and identifies the challenges and weaknesses related to school leadership in the country. Chapter 6 focuses on the role of Teaching and Learning in South Africa and identifies some of the key impediments to successful and impactful teaching and learning in the country. In Chapter 7, the central importance of science teaching is illuminated through research on science teacher professional development. The issue of inclusion and disability is the focus of Chapter 8, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of various models adopted to develop an inclusive education systems in South Africa. In Chapter 9, focus turns to mathematics teacher knowledge in a subject which routinely experiences the worst examination performances year in year out in South Africa. In Chapter 10, the significant notion of literacy and reading in South African schools is tackled. The final Chapter 11 tries to synthesise the strongest evidence available in South African research on Basic Education, which could drive the next generation of school improvement strategies and new research in the coming decades.

Systematic Reviews of Research in Basic Education in South Africa

As Head of research at the Wits SoE, and as a keen scholar of school improvement, I strongly recommend this book to policy makers at the DBE, researchers in Schools and Faculties of Education across the country and to post graduate researchers undertaking doctoral studies in wide areas of educational development and more specifically on school improvement. I also recommend that the book more widely marketed outside the country as many countries, especially on the African continent, are likely to be experiencing similar challenges.

I would like to congratulate Professor Felix Maringe and his team for what I consider to be a substantial contribution to knowledge to the field of educational research and practice in South Africa.

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