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

CHAPTER 11

Imperatives for educational improvement in South Africa's basic education system

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Abstract

In this final chapter of the book, we attempt to synthesise the evidence for what needs to be done to enhance the quality of several aspects of basic education in South Africa. The enduring phenomenon of poverty that afflicts most schools in the country is an indictment of a systemic paralysis of unprecedented proportions in the sector. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the unabated widening of school and educational inequalities and deepening poverty differentials between schools that serve different racial and socio-economic groups in South Africa. While there is a substantial body of research on the impact of poverty in education, there remains a dearth of evidence that evaluates the impact of post-democracy interventions introduced to circumvent the effects of poverty on schooling.

The effectiveness of teaching and learning in mathematics, languages and science is also presented as a significant concern in South African schools. Challenges range from weaknesses in specialisation amongst educators, poor training, and inadequate resources, through to ineffective pedagogical approaches deployed by educators in schools. While the school system relies heavily on research undertaken by university academics, there is evidence that some researchers appear to lack theoretical robustness in their approaches. Research in the field of basic education, therefore, tends to be limited in size and scope, and more critically, is seldom adequately theoretically grounded.

Despite leadership being acknowledged as critical for school improvement and success, school leadership in South Africa remains devoid of training for incumbents. Although ongoing professional development for school principals takes place, much of it lacks approaches that are context-specific, and very little is known about the leadership roles and needs of middle managers in South African schools. There is also a shortage of broader research on basic education in South Africa. For example, we don't know enough about how teachers utilise teaching and learning time, how they present conceptual ideas, how children learn to read and write and how learners develop mathematical literacy, amongst other similar issues. This book also highlights the notion of professional development of teachers. While there is abundant evidence of a wide range of professional development programmes in schools, little is understood about how these are conducted, and

even less is known about how and if these programmes are having the desired impact.

Finally, the chapter presents evidence for the progress that has been made in promoting physical access in schools. The extent to which schools are sufficiently empowered to promote epistemological access remains a significant concern in many cases. The sector is thus presented as one with no shortage of good intentions, but with insufficient research capacity to influence much-needed change and improvement across all schools.

Evidence from the systematic reviews reported in this book

In Chapter 1, we provided the context of the state of basic education in South Africa. We argued that there is growth in evidence-based practice and research-led development that informs decision-making in education in general and basic education in South Africa in particular. However, despite the noted improvements, the legacy of apartheid continues to persist in education. The chapter identifies, in broad terms, aspects of the basic education system that are poorly performing. These tend to fall into the broad areas of poverty, inequality and socio-economic conditions, all of which, separately and collectively, interact to repress children's epistemological access.

Although the apartheid regime was discontinued in 1994, we highlighted the existence of two systems of education, one that serves the rich communities and the other that serves the underprivileged minority. We analysed the concept of the systematic review as a highly valued evidence-gathering process and discussed its usefulness as the agreed methodological approach for work presented in this book. Further, the purpose of the first chapter was to highlight the planned contribution to the knowledge base by the subsequent chapters: to conduct a systematic review in nine different areas in basic education. We argued that the methodology of the systematic review was most likely to provide the best evidence available in South Africa upon which school improvement and learning outcomes could be enhanced. The first chapter provided a synopsis of each of the subsequent chapters, outlining the purpose and how a systematic review was carried out in each.

In Chapter 2, Besharati, Fleisch and Tsotsotso conducted a meta-analysis of local studies that have not been captured in existing international reviews, providing insights into the impact of various programmes and policies on language, mathematics and science learning in South African public schools. They concluded that international reviews are biased because they give prominence to studies from the global north. The meta-analysis revealed serious weaknesses in the South African education system, despite twenty-five years of reform effort. The chapter plays a significant role in highlighting and discussing the three major areas of research, policy and methodology, and how context and study design

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have huge impacts on the effect reported in various programme evaluations. The authors suggested that more empirical evidence is needed in the context of South Africa's education sector, particularly the use of rigorous counterfactual evaluations. Moreover, reflecting a bias for quantitative research, they recommended that local researchers should pay more attention to sampling processes and to qualitative studies.

In Chapter 3, Chikoko and Mthembu discussed the notion of poverty and its impact on basic education in South Africa. They found that poverty remains one of the most significant barriers in learners' attainment of basic education milestones. They acknowledged a range of government interventions that have been implemented to mitigate the impact of poverty in schools. Key interventions include:

- Free school uniforms for poor children
- Free school meals for poor children
- Fee-free education for poor children
- Supervised homework in school

More targeted literacy development programmes have also been introduced in schools, with variable results. For example, some steps taken such as reading literacy and other landmark education policies, have failed due to poverty and difficulties in fully implementing the policies owing to poor contexts. The authors recommended a framework that aims to eradicate two barriers simultaneously. The first struggle should be against poverty and the second should be concerned with crafting and implementing ways to improve the quality of education. They also advocated a drastic shift from deficit-based to asset-based thinking.

In Chapter 4, De Clercq and Shalem critically examined eight reviews and evaluation studies, noting two significant factors, amongst others. Firstly, those studies did not engage sufficiently with the theoretical dimensions underpinning their interventions. The authors argued that theoretical frameworks are essential, especially when researchers seek to contribute to the knowledge base on successful intervention programmes and policies. Secondly, the authors discovered that factors outside the formal education system related to students' socio-economic status, as well as factors revealed by emergent cognitive neuroscience research, all play a significant role. The chapter concluded by suggesting a framework that engages with the limited role of learning in society, and learning theories that recognise the psychological processes of cognitive development and wellbeing for effective school improvement interventions.

In Chapter 5, Bush and Glover reviewed literature on school leadership with the aim of discovering how policy and practice are reflected in published research outputs. In their systematic review, they identified significant evidence about the

nature of school leadership in South Africa, through a critical review of twelve themes:

- School leadership policy
- Leadership styles and models
- Leadership roles, including principals, deputy principals and heads of departments
- School management teams
- Curriculum management and instructional leadership
- Management of finance and resources
- School governance
- Leadership and management of people
- Leadership and diversity, including gender, race and ethnicity
- Leadership culture and structures
- Leadership and student outcomes
- Leadership preparation and development

The authors considered four variables, namely context, differences, school type and relationships, which contribute significantly to understanding school leadership literature in South Africa. Their literature review revealed that the data is uneven, with some of the twelve themes remaining underdeveloped. For example, much research is conducted about school principals, but we know less about other leadership roles such as deputy principals, heads of department and school management teams. Furthermore, research is concentrated in Gauteng and the Western Cape, with little research in other provinces, particularly the rural areas. The authors presented critical recommendations on the need for more substantial research in two areas: firstly, on the themes and topics where there is limited evidence; and secondly on large-scale projects, comparative cross-cultural studies and observational studies of educational leadership practice. The chapter concluded by outlining a framework of evidence which suggests why South African schools underperform.

In Chapter 6, the systematic review by Dison and Kearney revealed two insights. Firstly, there is a lack of extensive research that examines teaching and learning in the classroom. Secondly, quoting Hoadley's (2012) review of South African primary schools, they highlighted the strengths and limitations of teaching and learning studies in terms of their methodologies and consistency of findings. Their systematic review of Basic Education and Training (BET) and Further Education and Training (FET) over a period of twenty-five years provides further insights, for example, instead of paying attention to the learning process and the inner

workings of student learning and engagement, research on learning tends to focus on the influence of external and internal factors such as:

- Socio-economic conditions affecting learning
- Culture of teaching and learning in schools
- Effects of curriculum change
- Teacher activities
- Learner activities

The authors bemoan the fact that they found it very difficult to locate research that deals with what it means to learn in a particular discipline, or how the nature of teaching and learning is understood in different discipline contexts. Some studies make it difficult to claim anything about the impact of learning because they are based on teachers' and learners' perceptions, rather than on empirical evidence about learning, or learners' actual achievement or activities. The authors concluded by recommending the need for large-scale longitudinal or mixed-methods research studies to understand learning and its processes to promote innovative teaching and learning.

In Chapter 7, Vhurumuku presented critical insights based on a systematic review of twenty articles. He noted that research on professional development has dwelt much on the quality and effectiveness of teachers. Although professional development is considered vital, it is not clear how it should be done effectively, nor what major features it should comprise. This chapter addressed the following two questions:

- Which professional development models have resulted in improving teaching effectiveness for science teachers?
- How have South African researchers determined the effectiveness of science teacher professional development?

The twenty articles reviewed were selected based on five themes designed to capture and answer the above questions:

- Professional development models used
- Methods of evaluating impact or effectiveness
- Methods of determining teaching effectiveness
- Measuring teacher competencies
- Determining student outcomes

The findings revealed that in general, professional development has a positive impact on participating teachers. Although most of the studies confirmed this, a few studies were either inconclusive or showed professional development to be ineffective. Findings also revealed a surfeit of concentration of professional

development on the teachers, at the expense of determining the impact on student learning outcomes, performance and achievement. As a result, the chapter recommended decolonising methodologies articulated through indigenous knowledge systems. Priority should also be given to assessing student learning outcomes to enhance professional development initiatives.

In Chapter 8, McKenzie, Watermeyer and Meyerson provided insights about access and participation for children with disabilities. The selected papers for review were based on six themes:

- Inclusive education discourse and disability
- Teaching and learning
- Parents' perspectives
- Disability, race and special education
- Human rights
- Teacher education

The authors discovered that research on children with disabilities has, to a large extent, concentrated on inclusive education, with less attention being paid to the other five areas listed above. They, therefore, advocated the need for further research in those areas, including research that highlights best practice in educational provision for children with disabilities. Moreover, teacher training and how to address the skills deficit should be treated as crucial. The authors noted that most people seem to be ignorant about inclusive education. Hence, they suggested processes to raise awareness regarding constitutional provisions for inclusive education, as well as the directives laid out in Education White Paper (EWP) 6.

In Chapter 9, Makonye explored how Ball et al.'s (2008) pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) analytical framework can be extended to the teaching of mathematics. Makonye argued that mathematics knowledge for teaching comprises six domains:

1. Common content knowledge
2. Specialist content knowledge
3. Horizon content knowledge
4. Knowledge of content and students
5. Knowledge of content and teaching
6. Knowledge of content and the curriculum

The author synthesised five significant findings:

- Research about teacher mathematics knowledge is deficient in some southern African countries and does not exist at all in others.

- Researchers lack the appropriate language to describe various teacher knowledges as exemplified in the six domains.
- Common content knowledge is the least researched, yet it is the most important, especially in affecting learner outcomes.
- There is a lack of mathematics education journals in South Africa and internationally.
- The concentration of articles in South Africa is in universities formerly occupied by whites only.

The author highlighted the need for more focused research on mathematics content knowledge according to the PCK framework, particularly specialised content knowledge (SCK), which is important in unpacking mathematical meaning for learners. He also recommended that more research should be conducted in the broader southern African region.

In Chapter 10 Motilal was concerned with the capacity to find, understand, critically appraise, share and act on evidence based on research conducted in the country. Through the scoping review, she answered three critical questions. Findings indicated that there are challenges in literacy and reading. She, therefore, recommended for extensive research to expound on the link between language communities, socioeconomic status, reading literacy, writing literacy, digital literacies and multimodal literacies, especially in the South African context where there are eleven official languages and wide socio-economic disparities. Secondly, she discovered that there is a mismatch between the social literacy practices of the different language groups and the education system that operates in the country. She advocated for drastic measures to be taken at all levels to improve the overall literacy and reading levels of all South African learners. Furthermore, she highlighted the need for robust and rigorous research to enhance the production of knowledge in all of these spheres of literacy and reading.

Conclusion

In summary, we began this chapter by reflecting on the role of education in development. We argued that a sound education is at the heart of the proper functioning of the three basic means of production i.e. the human, financial and land dimensions in any economy; thus education is at the centre of economic and social growth. We further argued that although South Africa allocates a large proportion of its budget to education, the country performs poorly compared to the rest of the world (measured via several international instruments), including countries with lower GDPs and those that do not invest much in education. As a result of this misalignment between financing and performance, we advocated a serious review of the basic education sector. In response to this crisis, we

hypothesised that the following five significant elements are closely linked to school improvement and need to be improved themselves: human capacity development, leadership and management in schools, deployment and utilisation of educational resources, learner outcomes and interrogation of poverty in the sector.

We also compared pre- and post-apartheid systems of education and argued that during apartheid, various forms of violence were exerted on local populations. Sadly, the effects of these violations persist in South Africa's democratic education system. We argued that whilst the country has achieved almost 100% physical access to schools, a great deal still needs to be done to promote epistemological access to basic education in South Africa.

The evidence from the systematic reviews in this book has highlighted various gaps in the literature. Below we highlight five key recommendations, which we refer to as imperatives for improving schooling and educational outcomes in South Africa. We have deliberately presented them as a list, to emphasise the high priority that we consider should be given to them.

Key recommendations

The separate chapters in this book provide valuable insights into the working of critical aspects of basic education in South Africa. We, however, synthesise these into the following five key areas:

1. The need to develop frameworks for interrogating poverty in schools, including evaluating the impact of post-democratic interventions aimed to reduce poverty in schools

Three dimensions of school poverty appear to be at the forefront of the debates in this area. The first is material poverty (Ferguson, 2008; Kabir and Ahmed, 2019; Raffo et al., 2007) that has necessitated key interventions such as school uniform policy, free school meals and food support to child-headed families. The second is economic poverty (Bhorat and van der Westhuizen, 2010), which is closely related to the first, but specifically refers to the challenges faced by low-income families. Such challenges include lack of access to financial resources, scarce reading materials, limited study spaces and above all, limited parental support for cognitive growth, amongst others. The third dimension is epistemological poverty (du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014), which includes phenomena such as lack of socio-cognitive capital (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2013) to deal with the requirements of formal schooling by poor learners, the poverty of epistemological support in poor schools due to frequent teacher absence, uneven distribution of good teachers in schools, which has a substantial impact on poor schools, and the poor state of infrastructural support in these poor schools. These factors combine to depress cognitive development in learners, increase school dropout, influence poor learning outcomes, and generally ensure the recycling and reproduction

of poverty, socially, cognitively, culturally and intergenerationally amongst the poor (McLanahan, 2009). There seems to be a need to explore how it is that, despite the interventions over the last 25 years following the demise of apartheid, learners from poor households continue to finish schooling with insecure learning outcomes, contribute the most to the wastage phenomena in schools, and have the lowest progression rates to higher forms of learning and meaningful employment opportunities. We can learn from other international interventions, especially in South America, but also from the more developed world where reducing school poverty has a longer history. A starting point could be for the Department of Basic Education to sponsor a systematic review of poverty-alleviating strategies in different countries to see what has and has not worked and why.

2. The need to interrogate inequalities in knowledge distribution

The evidence across most of the systematic reviews captured in this book identifies two fundamental issues that relate to knowledge and power dynamics in an unequal world (Chirwa, 2020). The first issue is the limited presence of South African research in mainstream publications. This is reflected in the dominance of global north research in the reference lists of the research captured for this book. In part, this might reflect the developmental status of knowledge in the global south. But it might also reveal deliberate mechanisms for marginalising knowledge from the global south, a process that was a major strategy for exerting power and dominance in the colonial and colonisation processes (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2013; Evans, 2014). This may call for a more vigorous pursuit of the goals of decolonisation of knowledge, which entails more support for local research and publication, and stronger motivation for turning the gaze of research and theory from dominant Western epistemes to more local and indigenous epistemes. The effort cannot be left to individual researchers to muster; there will be a need for a significant national shake-up, both in terms of prioritising the decolonising of knowledge and education as key strategic goals, and in terms of supporting research that seeks to support these goals. The need for supporting research that interrogates issues of coloniality, the reproduction of intergenerational poverty and inequality and the perpetual dependency of developing nations on the developed world must be a major impetus for change and transformation not just in basic education, but across different areas of human endeavour.

The second issue is the over-representation of deductive forms of research, which lay emphasis on hypothesis testing, and the limited representation of inductive research that seeks to draw on in-depth understandings and experiences of phenomena by those who engage with reform and school interventions in the most valued research outlets (Eyisi, 2016; Sale et al., 2002). This too has its roots in the long-standing tradition of the superiority of quantitative knowledge over all other forms of knowledge and especially over qualitative data, which some

describe as spurious hearsay and gossip (Layder, 2013). Also, many qualitative studies tend to be small-scale case studies that have limited application beyond their specific contexts, reproducibility and generalisability and can thus add limited value to policy reform and strategic change aimed at systemic-level transformation. However, the need for such studies is gradually being recognised, especially as they provide enhanced and nuanced understandings of systemic issues and challenges, which are needed in informing more successful transformation and its implementation (Brannen, 2005).

3. The need to develop a stronger focus on language, literacy and numeracy teaching especially in the early learning phases

The research by both Motilal and Fleisch et al. in this book specifically points to substantial gaps in language, literacy and numeracy teaching in basic education in South African schools. Three specific issues seem to have strong relevance to the improvement of basic education in South Africa.

First is the question of language-of-instruction in the early grades. Policy in South Africa requires that learners be instructed in their mother tongue in the first two grades of schooling. The problem is that in many cosmopolitan areas, especially, learners come from a variety of mother-tongue spaces. There are eleven official languages in South Africa and sometimes, classrooms have children from all these language backgrounds. This stretches the capacity of schools to have teachers who can teach in all the official languages and could also compromise the cherished goals and values of inclusivity in education. In the end, schools tend to teach all children in the language of the majority in specific areas of the country. Besides, schools have a choice about the language of instruction. Most schools choose between English and Afrikaans, and the local languages are only taught as subjects, rather than mediums of instruction (Makalela, 2019). Research also appears to show that most parents in South Africa prefer their children to be taught in English rather than through local languages (Gordon and Harvey, 2019), a reflection of the impact of colonialism and the persistent coloniality of being amongst the citizens of the country.

The third aspect is related to the effectiveness of methodologies used in teaching literacy and numeracy in schools. In a review undertaken by Nag et al. (2014) for the period 1990 to 2013 in several developing country contexts, it was established that rote and surface learning, chorus, copywriting and drill were the most prevalent instructional techniques used for teaching numeracy and literacy. Phonological awareness was rarely developed in learners in early grade teaching, despite its acknowledged centrality to facilitating reading and understanding of text. Similarly, Vale et al. (2016) draw attention to substantial constraints in numeracy teaching and learning in developing country contexts. Key barriers include teacher

deficits in mathematical content, poor understanding of mathematical pedagogical skills, large class sizes and limited teaching and learning resources (Askew, 2013).

There seems to be an urgent need for supporting multiple research thrusts around recapacitating teachers with both content and pedagogical knowledge skills in both areas of literacy and numeracy teaching in the early grades in South African schools.

4. The need to increase teacher awareness and competency in dealing with the idea of inclusive education

Inclusive education in South Africa is an integral part of the overall transformational agenda in schools. Emanating directly from the Constitution of the country and supported by various pieces of legislation, the imperatives of establishing an equal, non-segregated and non-sexist society are cherished goals. Inclusion, thus, has a high-profile presence in teacher education and more broadly, in schools in South Africa. However, as Sayed et al., (2003) have noted, the notion of inclusion is mired in intractable debates about its meaning, its priorities and, more importantly, in the efficacy of its associated strategies. Inclusion is thus a slippery concept. It comes with a lot of promise for righting the wrongs of the past, for delivering equal opportunities especially to previously disadvantaged communities, and for ensuring equal treatment and access to resources amongst groups with different identities such as disabled learners, gendered identities, and learners from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds, amongst others.

The major problem in dealing with issues of inclusive practice seems to be the challenge of striking a balance between creating opportunities for marginalised groups without disadvantaging other groups. For example, teaching special groups of learners separately from mainstream groups can be exclusionary in its own way. On the other hand, integrating the learners in mainstream teaching and learning formations carries its own burdens of managing differentiated learning support in a common environment and the risk of short-changing other learners who need different forms of support.

In South African schools, students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, such as those from rural schools, experience multiple challenges. First, the middle-class culture that characterises many schools is a threat to their process of integrating into the citizenry of the institutions. Many come to school without having used a computer or laptop, and they need time to be socialised into the high-tech learning environment before they can productively engage with the learning. They could very quickly be left behind given the fast pace of curriculum instruction in many schools. In South Africa, almost 40% of students who start year one, do not complete their full years of compulsory education. Approximately 80% of these students are from disadvantaged backgrounds characterised by the infliction of multiple deprivations. To that end, we can argue that while schools

have created substantially more opportunities for disadvantaged learners through promoting greater physical access, the equality of epistemological access remains an issue of great concern. As such, the South African schools cannot be said to be providing cognitive justice to all their students.

The question of integrating learners with various forms of disabilities is also a very thorny issue in basic education in South Africa. While there are important philosophical and ideological arguments for mainstreaming learners from all backgrounds in the same schools and environments, there are substantial challenges confronting schools and teachers with respect to providing cognitively and socially just educational experiences to all. The practice of integrating learners from all walks of life in the same teaching environments has the potential to create new forms of exclusion which may negate the overall purpose of inclusive education.

5. A need to explore more effective distributed leadership development modalities

Three significant challenges are worth mentioning in the basic education sector in South Africa. Leadership is a highly significant contributor to school improvement in its broadest sense and to learner outcomes specifically. Apart from the influence of good teachers, leadership exerts the second most significant influence of the success of schools and their learners. But good leaders do not grow on trees; they are made by the systems that need them. In South Africa though, as indeed in many other places across the world, and especially in developing nations, school leaders are assumed to grow organically without formal investment in the systems and the people expected to become leaders. There is no formal training of school principals as they are expected to emerge from the crop of experienced teachers in the schools. In 1995, almost 60% of teachers in South Africa were either under-qualified or unqualified to teach in schools. Yet this pool forms the source of future leaders in the system. The Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), which has now been redeveloped to an Advanced Diploma in Education (ADE), has been the flagship programme for reskilling and capacitating school leadership/principalship in South Africa. There has not been any formal evaluation of the impact of this programme in the country, something which is now overdue.

A second substantial challenge with school leadership in South Africa is the question of age. Most principals are in the 50-65 year age group, and there is not an adequate pipeline ready to take over when these leaders retire.

Third, school leadership development in South Africa places little or no emphasis on distributed leadership layers below the principal role. The principals alone have limited capacity to drive school improvement without the involvement of deputy heads, heads of departments, leader leadership groups and parent leadership groups. Relatively little leadership training exists to cultivate effective

distributed school leadership in South Africa. This is an area requiring dedicated attention to enhance the quality of school improvement in the country.

A sound and effective education system is critical for the development of nations. The evidence presented in this book clearly shows that basic education in South Africa remains in a state of crisis. Despite the transition to democracy and significant investment in education, learner outcomes continue to trace the contours of race and privilege. The changes that have been introduced since 1994 do not reflect sufficient epistemological and ontological transformation. Amongst the many issues raised in specific chapters, this book identifies three critical areas of transitioning to a more decolonised education system: revitalised language, literacy and numeracy programmes, especially in the early grade learning phases; stronger teacher training for enhancing content and pedagogical competences, including greater attention to the intractable issues of inclusive educational programmes; and a distributed leadership training approach that goes beyond a focus on school principalship.

We hope readers and policymakers, other researchers and postgraduate students will find the ideas and suggestions in this book a sound basis for developing new ideas and new programmes of research and development in basic education in South Africa.

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