



CHAPTER 1

Obstacles on our way to effective education in South Africa: A bird's-eye view

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a bird's-eye view of the state of education in South Africa. It commences with a discussion of the difficulties surrounding the concept "effective education", in particular difficulties regarding the measurement of effectiveness. After outlining a possible way of assessing the degree of effectiveness of the education project in South Africa, the discussion proceeds to an outline of a number of signs, symptoms, and manifestations of non-effectiveness in the current system, and subsequently to a discussion of the reasons for these inadequacies, which can all be regarded as stumbling blocks on the way to effective education. The chapter concludes with several

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suggestions, inspired partly by insights from complexity theory and chaos theory.

Keywords: *education, effective education, failure, education system, complexity theory, chaos theory*

1.1 Introductory remarks

The title of the book in which this chapter appears is *Stumbling blocks on the way to effective education in South Africa*. Its title implies that the book should attend to at least five key issues, namely (a) what is meant by the term “education”; (b) what is meant by the term “effective education”; (c) how we know whether or not education, in a sense decided upon, is effective; (d) how its effectiveness or ineffectiveness manifests itself in practice; and (e) what the reasons could be for not achieving effectiveness, if that should prove to be the case. We decided to devote this chapter to these five issues since, in our opinion, it casts light on the signs, symptoms and manifestations of ineffectiveness, thereby clarifying the stumbling blocks on the way to effective education, as dealt with by other authors in this book. It also provides readers with a bird’s eye view of the state of education in South Africa.

1.2 Paving the way

1.2.1 The term “education”

The first issue that we need to attend to then, is: What is meant by the term “education?” This is not a spurious question. The English language uses this term to refer to both the upbringing of children and young people in the broadest sense of the word (as in

Afrikaans and Dutch *opvoeding*, and German *Erziehung*), and also in the narrower meaning of teaching and learning, and instruction (Afrikaans and Dutch *onderrig*, German *Unterricht*). Azcona (2021: 1-2) correctly points out that education in the broadest sense of the term is not mere training, but a “solid construction of a particular concept of humanity ... a resourceful instrument to achieve actualized morality.” Education in this sense is the formation of “a group of manual and intellectual habits that are accomplished, and the moral qualities that are developed” (Ibid.). For obvious reasons, for instance, the fact that this type of education is informally provided by parents and caregivers, even by older children in child-headed families, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to assess its effectiveness.

In our opinion, this is not the concept of “education” intended for discussion in this book, but rather of “education” in the more restricted sense of formal teaching and learning or instruction that occurs in schools and that is managed by a state department of education such as the South African Department of Basic Education. The effectiveness of this form of education is more assessable in that most of the activities in the teaching-learning environment are constantly measured and assessed, and the results thereof are quantified. For this reason, we concentrate on education in the restricted sense of the term, namely the effectiveness of teaching and learning as it occurs in formal teaching-learning institutions such as schools and managed by South Africa’s Department of Basic Education.

1.2.2 The term “effective formal education”

Our study of the literature concerning the state of formal education in South Africa has not established any objective criteria for what can be regarded as “effective” education. Most of the “criteria” for “effectiveness” in the literature are rather vague and elastic. The following are two examples of this vagueness. Two commentators remarked that even though education receives the biggest allocation from the national budget (7 percent in 2023) “the yield is far below expectations” (Prince, 2023b: 15), and not an impressive “return on investment” (Beukman, 2023c: 10). Even the criterion applied by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID: 2022) is elastic when it states that although South Africa gives high priority to education in that it allocates around 20 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to this item, “it struggles to provide quality education in most of its schools.”

The norms pertaining to the concept “effective education” are, among others, to be found in the preamble of the South African Schools Act. Some of these norms include the provision of education of progressively high quality for all our learners to “lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities” and “the economic well-being of society” (SA, 1996). The statutory objectives contained in the *Guidelines for Governing Bodies for a Code of Conduct for Learners* (SA, 1998) refer to what could be understood under the term “education of a high quality”, namely the creation or provision of “a disciplined and purposeful environment (that facilitates) effective education and learning,” by adopting a code of conduct for learners. The Code of Professional Ethics for Educators is likewise directed at the provision of effective teaching practices by emphasising the ideal

of “excellence in education” (SACE:2000). Another way of determining whether education is of good quality is to be aware of obstacles that (tend to) derail the teaching and learning project.

As mentioned, it is often difficult to state in precise terms what is meant by “effective” (in this particular case, with reference to formal education). This difficulty is typical of the ancient Sorites paradox, namely the seeming impossibility of determining when a particular concept applies or not. British philosopher Julian Baggini (2023: 54) recently explained this conundrum with reference to the concept of “tallness.” We would normally regard a person who has a body length of 200cm as “tall.” Would we still do so if he were 199.9cm in height? Or if he were 194cm in height? At what point do we begin to refer to a person as of medium height? Or as short? Baggini (2023: 54-55) concludes: “The aporia here is that it seems that there must be a difference between tall, medium, and short, but when you try to find where that difference lies, you can’t. The most plausible resolution of this, I think, is simply to accept that words like ‘tall’ and ‘short’ are inherently vague...The paradox arises because we are being asked to treat the concept as though it had mathematical precision.” This is, in our opinion, much the same situation with respect to “effective” in “effective education.” At what point do we regard education as “ineffective”? As will become clearer toward the end of this chapter, there are so many complex factors involved in education that it is difficult to circumscribe “effectiveness” in precise terms. It is for this reason that we resort to the following line of reasoning.

The qualifier “effective” in the term “effective education”, taken at the semantic field value, simply means that something has the power to produce, that it is fit for duty or service, that it can produce

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the desired result, product, or consequence, that it can accomplish that which it was intended for, that it can bring about a desired result. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'effective' as "successful in producing a desired or intended result" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006: 554). Some of the vagueness in the criteria regarding formal education in South Africa can be surmounted by simply asking whether the system is able to accomplish that for which it was instituted. This then begs the question: For what exactly was the education system instituted? According to Article 29(1) of the South African Constitution (1996), everyone "has the right to education, including adult basic education" – without any quality standards calibrated. According to Article 184(3) of the same Act, the South African Human Rights Commission must require the relevant organ of state (clearly a reference to the Department of Basic Education) to provide the Commission with information on the measures that it has taken toward the realisation of human rights concerning education. This stipulation is an indication of the gravity with which education is regarded in terms of the recognition of human rights.

The South African Schools Act (Chapter 1 (iii)) states that the term "education department" refers to "the department established by section 7(2) of the Public Service Act, 1994 (Proclamation No. 103 of 1994), which is responsible for education in a province." Although the Preamble to the Act mentions norms and standards, it is clear that these norms and standards only pertain to how formal education (schools) in South Africa should be organised, governed and funded. No norms or standards for educational output or achievement are set in this Act. It is, in view of this lacuna, difficult to decide – for instance – whether or not a 75 per

cent pass rate in the Matriculation examination in a particular year should be regarded as acceptable.

1.2.3 How do we know whether or not South African education is effective?

It is in view of the general vagueness with respect to output norms and standards that commentators on the state of education fall back on either their own opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the achievements of the Department of Basic Education, depend on the results of independent international assessments, or on criteria such as whether the school system prepares learners adequately for joining the country's work force (in terms of the unemployment rate). Because clear and precise criteria for gauging whether or not South Africa's educational effort is effective are not available, commentators tend to concentrate on the perceived failures of the system. These failures, as perceived by commentators, tend to be regarded as indicators of weak achievement, as we discuss later in this chapter.

1.2.4 Failures regarded as indicators of unsatisfactory performance by education authorities

The indicators or symptoms of failure or inadequate achievement, as outlined in (c), fall within various categories. We already mentioned one, namely "return on investment." According to the two commentators mentioned above, South Africans seem to reap inadequate fruits from their investment in formal education. Other categories of perceived failure of the education project include: inadequate preparation for functioning as a productive worker in the national workforce; the inability to read with comprehension;

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the unsatisfactory through-flow of learners from Grade 1 to Grade 12; widespread learner misconduct; and several more. In the absence of objective criteria for assessing whether or not education in South Africa could be deemed “effective”, we decided to use categories such as these as sub-headings in the second part of this chapter. In that discussion, we distinguish between what could be regarded as *symptomatic* of the ineffectiveness or failures of the system, and the actual *stumbling blocks*, *obstacles* or *hindrances* on the way to the desired level of effectiveness.

1.2.5 Possible reasons for the perceived ineffectiveness or failures of the education system

Without necessarily pre-empting our findings, we are in a position already at this early stage of this discussion, to state that there is something starkly amiss with the education system in South Africa. We suspected also, at the time of writing this chapter, that the other authors who contributed chapters to this book, would highlight a plethora of stumbling blocks to effective education in the country. We therefore set ourselves the task to conclude this chapter with a section in which we recommend some reforms that might lead to improvement – both in terms of quantity and quality – to the educational project in South Africa.

1.3 Research method

An interdisciplinary approach was followed in putting this chapter together. A qualitative interpretivist examination of the data was initially done, and the results thereof combined with a legal-hermeneutic interpretation (Babbie & Mouton, 2007:31). Legal source material in the form of statutory provisions was consulted

and analysed with the aid of hermeneutical techniques such as the interpretation of statutes (Venter, Van der Walt, Van der Walt, Olivier, Pienaar & Du Plessis, 1990:148). The constructivist phase of the investigation finally came to bear on the data when we engaged in the construction of new insights and understandings flowing from the interpreted data, and of the problem at hand (Van der Walt, 2020:6). This chapter is the upshot of this constructivist engagement.

1.4 Symptoms of a failing education system

1.4.1 Inadequate preparation for the world of work

A foreign agency, the USAID (2022), recently concluded that the majority of South African learners, at the point of leaving school “are not equipped with basic skills and core competencies necessary to succeed in the workplace and much less in a highly competitive global market.”

1.4.2 Unsatisfactory through-flow of learners

A serious concern regarding the effectiveness of the education system is the poor through-flow (50%) of South African learners who start schooling in Grade 1 but fall by the wayside and never achieve a national matric certificate (Van der Walt, 2023:13; Beukman, 2023: 10).

A negative spin-off of this dropout is that the results of the Grade 12 examination are misleading. The pass rate of 80.1 per cent attained by the matric cohort of 2022 pertains only to those learners who actually sat for the examination, in other words, it

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represents this percentage of the 50 per cent of learners who remained in the system (Beukman, 2023: 10). The rest had fallen by the wayside and many of them had through the previous 12 years added to the numbers of unskilled workers, or of the unemployed. This is one of the main reasons for the inordinately high unemployment rate of 39.2 per cent in South Africa (Van der Walt, 2023: 13). In retrospect, Mmusi Maimane, leader of a political party in South Africa, laconically concluded, “We are educating young people for unemployment” (Banda, 2023: 8).

1.4.3 Poor academic results

Even though formal education is allotted 20 percent of the South African gross domestic product, analyses of annual matric results indicate a consistently poor through-flow of learners to the stage of obtaining a matric certificate after 12 years of schooling. On average, only four to five out of ten learners who begin grade one in a South African public school finish matric within the allotted timeframe (Beukman, 2023: 10).

Literacy and numeracy skills are the foundations of lifelong learning and full participation in society. These skills empower students to make meanings, think critically and creatively, and reach their full potential. Throughout the grades, literacy and numeracy are taught across all areas of learning (Foundations in Learning, 2023) because the “global society depends increasingly on literacy as a major factor for progress” (N’Namdi, 2005:1). Despite this emphasis on the importance of literacy and numeracy, South African learners have been performing below par in two basic fields of study, namely reading literacy skills and mastering the basics of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. When the

Progress in Reading Literacy Skills (PIRLS) tests were administered for the first time on South African Grade four learners in 2016, it emerged that 78 percent of them could not read with comprehension (Prinsloo, 2018;1). The greater concern is that this percentage increased by 3 percent to 81% in the 2021 PIRLS tests (Deacon, 2023: 7). The ability to read with understanding is a prerequisite for all future learning and forms the basis of all future personal development (Beukman, 2023: 20).

Also of great concern is the fact that South African learners lack the skills to perform satisfactorily in Mathematics and Science. When South Africa participated for the first time in the International Comparative Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) tests in 1999, learners ended in the last position out of 38 participating countries. Twenty years later, in 2019, with more international participating countries on board, South African learners ranked as follows: Mathematics grade 4: 56th; grade 8: 38th; Science grade 4: 57th; grade 8: 39th (Du Plessis, 2020:13).

1.4.4 Learner misconduct

Many experienced educational leaders are convinced that learner indiscipline in South African schools is worsening (Brits, 2022(d): 1). A 2017 survey conducted among teachers working in schools affiliated with the South African Teachers' Union confirmed that 85 per cent of the respondents were concerned about increasing levels of learner misconduct, to the extent that they were considering leaving the teaching profession (Kruger, 2018(b): 5). In a more recent study on learner misconduct, one of the participating teachers averred: "Many teachers are considering early retirement because of disrespectful pupils and a lack of

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discipline in the classroom (...) You spend 75% of the time teaching pupils the manners they didn't learn at home." Another participating teacher concurred by saying: "More and more teachers [are] retiring before the age of 65 because they can't handle the hostile situations in schools any longer" (Coetzer, 2022: 3).

What these teachers were increasingly experiencing in their schools was the obverse of what is stipulated in the *Guidelines for the consideration of Governing Bodies in adopting a code of conduct of learners* (SA, 1998), namely that the synchronisation of order and sound conduct among all participants in any teaching and learning environment is a prerequisite, not only for the character building of learners, but also for the establishment of a suitable "environment to facilitate effective education and learning in schools" (SA, 1998). Items 1.1. and 1.2 of these *Guidelines* (SA, 1998) emphasise that a school's Code of Conduct "must aim at establishing a disciplined and purposeful environment to facilitate effective education and learning in schools" and "to ensure that there is order and discipline in schools." Order is a prerequisite for teaching and learning to succeed. It is for this reason that a school is expected, in accordance with section 8 (1 & 2) of the South African Schools Act, to adopt a Code of Conduct for Learners aiming at "establishing a disciplined and orderly school environment, dedicated to the improvement and maintenance of the quality of the learning process" (SA, 1996).

Albert Einstein once famously quipped: "In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not" (Haddad, 2019). Theory about the maintenance of order and discipline in schools seems not to result in the desired practice. According to Zulu and

Wolhuter (2013:1), “the issue of learner misconduct is a worldwide problem that is of concern to parents, teachers and school principals.” South African schools are no exception to this tendency, as we now illustrate by referring to a number of practical examples and incidences all over South Africa.

- A considerable number of learners in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, 479 to be exact, perpetrated serious offences in and around schools in 2018. These offences ranged from sexual harassment, attempted murder, fraud, assault with the intent to inflict serious bodily harm, bullying, assault of a teacher and/or a member of school staff, possession of a dangerous weapon, assault of a fellow learner on the school premises, theft, disruptive behaviour, possession of illegal drugs, trafficking in illegal substances to disruptive learner behaviour (Kruger, 2018(a):1). A Grade 7 learner of the Noorderlig Combined School in Benoni was bullied by fellow-learners by repeatedly kicking a soccer ball at his head, causing severe headaches over the ensuing weekend, and his demise four days later (Sonnekus, 2017:6). A clinical psychologist from Pretoria specialising in trauma stated that in more than 40 per cent of the sexual abuse of children cases, the abusers were fellow learners (so-called child-on-child abuse) (Steyn, 2022:1).
- A random survey conducted in primary and secondary schools of the Western Cape showed that as many as 66.7 per cent of learners in the study population tested positive for the use of narcotics - the main substance being marijuana (Nienaber, 2017: 10). Minister of Basic Education Angie

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Motshekga averred that learners using drugs are usually also involved in drug trafficking (Brits, 2022(e):5).

- In 2017, a Grade 6 learner at the Dower Practising Schools in the Eastern Cape was strangled and bullied by a fellow learner to the extent that he had epileptic seizures. A medical report later showed that he suffered brain damage as a result of the bullying (Bezuidenhout, 2017: 16).
- A 16-year-old learner at Mqhawe Secondary School in Kwa-Zulu Natal shot a 30-year-old educator on the school premises with a firearm that he had stolen from one of his relatives. This was in reaction to the teacher requesting him to remain quiet while his fellow learners were writing exams (News 24, 2022:13).
- A Grade-10 learner at High School Bergvlam in the North-West Province assaulted one of his teachers in class, inflicting serious injuries to the ribs and face (Brits, 2022(c):4). After a scuffle between two learners at another North-West school, the aggressor, a fifteen-year-old boy, was found guilty on a charge of assault with intent to cause serious bodily harm.

1.4.5 Teenage pregnancies

Another symptom, not only of a failing education system but also of moral decay in society, is the growing numbers of teenage pregnancies, a social condition that impacts negatively on the lives and future prospects of the young mothers and fathers, and their children. According to a report of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2021; Willemse, 2022:12), 90 037 South African teenagers between the ages of 10

and 19 fell pregnant and gave birth to a child between April 2021 and March 2022. Based on his research in the Matjitjileng village, Thobejane concludes that “teenage pregnancy in South Africa is growing rapidly among school-going pupils and it leads to school drop-out as the teenage mothers must leave school to care for their babies. Teenage mothers add to the number of women who are illiterate. In Matjitjileng village, pregnancy among young people has reached pandemic heights” (Thobejane, 2015: 273).

It is estimated that approximately one million teenagers fall pregnant in South Africa each year. Around 30 000 of them fall pregnant before reaching 18 years of age. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is the fact that worldwide, around 75 per cent of teenagers younger than 15 years of age enjoy little or no access to information about sexuality and reproduction (Bezuidenhout, 2008).

1.5 Possible stumbling blocks on the way to effective education

The discussion in the previous section pivoted on what could be regarded as symptoms or indicators that the South African system of education is failing in a number of respects. Simply put: The South African education system has so far not been able to implement plans and strategies to ensure that school-leavers are appropriately prepared for the world of work after their sojourn at school, to ensure an optimal through-flow of learners, and in so doing, preventing large numbers of jobless young people from roaming the streets and dabbling in anti-social behaviour such as drug abuse and crime. The education system has also not been able to provide the quality of teaching required for learners to

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perform well in the PIRLS and TIMMS tests. It has also not been able to curb learner indiscipline which has grown to worrying proportions in schools and in the surrounding communities. It has not contributed significantly to the project of preventing teenage pregnancies. In this Section, we argue that these conditions could be ascribed to (inter alia) unprofessional educator conduct, inordinately large numbers of teachers retiring (early), the lack of appropriate leadership in schools, dangerous conditions prevailing in and around schools, and finally unsatisfactory logistics and school infrastructure. All of these factors and conditions can be regarded as stumbling blocks on South Africa's way to effective education.

1.5.1 Unprofessional educator conduct

One of the pillars of any profession is to set an example of respectable behaviour in compliance with the professional code of conduct associated with the profession. A teacher registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) is expected to “act in a proper and becoming way such that their behaviour does not bring the teaching profession into disrepute” (SA, 2000(b)). Non-compliance with this requirement is one of the major stumbling blocks to effective education in South Africa. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has pinpointed the underperformance of South African teachers as the biggest challenge in attaining quality education in South Africa. In its opinion, many South African teachers are “plagued by limited content knowledge, ineffective pedagogic practice and debilitating teacher morale” (USAID, 2022:)

Research conducted by the SACE in 2017 on the issue of teachers physically and sexually abusing learners established that more than twenty such incidents had occurred in a period of six months (Narrain, 2017: 11). In one such case, a teacher at Bothitong High School near Kuruman allegedly impregnated 30 learners of the school (Kemp, 2017: 6). In several cases filed within a space of two weeks, teachers and caretakers at a kindergarten in Gansbaai were accused of assaulting (slapping, pushing or violently pulling) toddlers who seemed unwilling to follow orders (Jansen, 2022(b): 4).

In 2021, Corruption Watch released a report which “sound(ed) the alarm on acts of bribery, extortion, and abuse of authority in South Africa’s schools, TVET colleges, and sector education and training authorities (SETAS)” (Modise, 2022:1). This report on unprofessional educator conduct refers to the 3 600 complaints that Corruption Watch received from 2012 to 2021 concerning incidents of fraud, theft, bribery, corruption, mal-administration, abuse of authority such as the victimisation of whistle blowers, theft, embezzlement of funds, and the misuse of resources in the educational sector. Other reports on unprofessional educator conduct indicate that, in the period 2017 to 2022, there were 173 cases of sexual misconduct by educators in the province of Gauteng alone (Brits, 2022:12). A male teacher working in a North-West school was found guilty on a charge of the sexual harassment of a female learner at the school (Cilliers, 2022(b):4).

1.5.2 Teachers retiring (early)

A Department of Higher Education and Training report entitled *Teacher Demand in South Africa in 2019 and beyond* indicated

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that the annual graduate teacher figures for 2017 was estimated at a conservative number of 22 780 teacher education graduates whereas a conservative demand scenario for 2018 was around 23 000 of such graduates (DHET, 2019: 63). In the longer term (up to 2030), a growing demand of 2 000 new teachers per annum was predicted.

Although the discrepancy between supply and demand is “not so large that it appears to be impossible” to cope with (DHET, 2019:63), the possibility of a large number of retiring teachers in the near future is likely to cause a shortfall in teacher supply in the coming years. This situation could be exacerbated by the retirement of many teachers in the near future. A research project of the University of Stellenbosch verified that “the country faces an ageing teacher problem” in that almost half of public-school teachers in the country are currently between 50 and 60 years old (Monama, 2022). This means that around 49 percent of the public-school teachers will be going on pension during the next decade. To add insult to injury, the research also uncovered the fact that many teachers are leaving the teaching profession even before reaching the official retirement age. An analysis of the data confirmed that in 2013, approximately 7 800 teachers resigned before reaching the official retirement age. In 2021, this number almost doubled: 12 500 teachers left the profession. Some of the reasons for their early retirement included attractive teaching propositions abroad, a more promising teaching offer at a private school, the offer of a governing body post, other attractive options outside the educational sphere, and also because of frustrations experienced in the educational working environment.

There is no prescribed class size norm in South Africa. It is advisable, however, that the current ratio of 1:30 should improve to 1:25, particularly in the lower grades (Deacon, 2023: 7), a ratio that is also typical of a middle-income country. If this more favourable ratio is to be attained, another 100 000 teachers would have to be employed now (Gustaffson, 2021). Such an improvement in the ratio is improbable, however, in view of the fact that around 49 per cent of South Africa's publicly employed teachers will most likely retire over the next decade. This essentially means that the universities will have to turn out 6 000 more new teachers each year than the current 28 000 just to maintain the current ratio (Monama, 2022).

If this higher number of new teachers does not materialise soon, the envisioned teacher to learner ratio of 1:30 will be perpetuated. We know from experience that this tends to result in overcrowded classes and even schools. If this ratio gets out of hand, it could have a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms, a condition that is unlikely to contribute to effective education in South Africa.

1.5.3 The absence of strong leadership in schools

It is a widely accepted dictum that any organisation (including a school) stands or falls at the hands of its leadership (Kolzow, 2014: 5). Educationist Jonathan Molver (2022:30) is convinced that South African schools suffer from a leadership crisis, and that “bold policy reform” is required in this respect. Although, he avers, the quality of any education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers, the teachers as such also need efficient leaders to guide them in their professional activities. According to him, South

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African schools need more efficient leaders, particularly principals. Although around 70 per cent of principals in charge of South African schools meet the minimum qualification criteria, only around 15 per cent of them are “extremely well qualified.” Both percentages, the 30 percent without the required leadership qualifications, and the 85 per cent who are deemed “just adequately qualified” for the leadership task of the principal, is a cause of concern; hence a stumbling block on South Africa’s way to effective education.

1.5.4 Dangers lurking in and around schools

Many forms of serious misconduct in South African schools might, in certain instances, be comparable to international tendencies. A complicating factor in South Africa’s case is the criminal climate currently prevailing in the country. Recent South African Police Department quarterly statistics (1 January – 31 March 2023) indicate a sharp increase in contact crimes: as many as 70 murders per day, and other forms of contact crime (e.g., assault) every 50 seconds (Willemse & Barnard, 2023: 6). The statistics paint a bleak picture of the criminal environment in which the upcoming generation must live, work and attend school. During the first quarter of 2023, the following criminal offences pertaining to children were reported to the police: 245 children younger than 17 years of age were murdered; 360 children were faced with attempted murder; 1 931 children were assaulted, and – according to Minister of Police, Bheki Cele – a growing number of children are currently becoming victims of *muti* murders (Barnard, 2023:1). The above-mentioned Police Report showed a rise in rape incidents at schools in the same quarter. The number of rape

cases increased by 18 to 84 in the quarter January to March 2023 - amounting to approximately one reported rape incident per day (Mashale, 2023:2; Mahlatsi, 2023:11). More than 40 of the offenders were fellow learners or students. In some cases, teachers were also accused of this crime.

The safety (or rather unsafe) situation in South African schools clearly constitutes an obstacle on the way to effective education. A learner who has to constantly look over their shoulder to avoid becoming the victim of a serious crime cannot concentrate on their schoolwork. The general criminal climate prevailing in parts of South Africa, particularly in some metropolitan suburbs, imbue the hearts and minds of learners and teachers alike with a sense of anxiety, making it difficult to devote their undivided attention to their schoolwork, and to effectively display their mastery of the required knowledge, skills and capabilities in tests and examinations. One can, at this point, only conjecture whether such unsafe conditions in schools might not have led up to the poor results that South African learners display in PIRLS and TIMMS tests, and even in the Grade 12 (matriculation) examination.

The following are some of the fateful incidents endangering the lives of school learners, thereby creating a serious stumbling block to effective education (Coetzer, 2022:3; Jansen, 2022(c):2):

- A 21-year-old learner of the Qalabotjha Secondary School in Gauteng was arrested after having stabbed to death a fellow-learner (Beeld, 2022:24)
- Three learners at High School Riebeeckrand in Randfontein committed suicide as a result of being bullied by fellow learners of the school. In a similar incident a Grade 10 learner

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of a school near Hoedspruit in the Limpopo Province also committed suicide after she had been bullied by a fellow learner (News 24).

- During the month of December 2022 two bomb scares were reported in Gauteng schools – one at Boksburg High School; the other one at the School of Achievement (sarcasm unintended) in Germiston (Brits, 2022: 6).
- Supervised by their teacher, a group of learners of the Rustenburg Technical School went on an excursion to a nearby Rustenburg farm. Three of the learners who had obtained permission from the teacher to go swimming in the farm-dam drowned (Cupido, 2022: 4).
- During a fight on the school premises of the Sir Pierre van Ryneveld High School in Kempton Park, a Grade 11 learner was seriously injured, and ultimately passed away (Jansen, 2022:10).
- Seven learners of the Dinokaneng High School in Vanderbijlpark were injured and taken to hospital when the school bus collided with them. One of the learners who was fatally injured later died in the hospital (Cilliers, 2022:4).
- In general, some of South Africa's public schools have become unsafe environments. In an interview conducted with a concerned mother, she responded by saying that children should rather refrain from arguments at school lest they are stabbed. She then added, "We are sending our children to war." (Delpont, 2022:13.)

- An angry learner at a Krugersdorp High School jumped on the back of a 65-year-old teacher and strangled him (Khumalo, 2022:4).
- A tragic incident recently occurred when the body of a 17-year-old girl was found near a school in Soshanguwe in the Tswane township. She was apparently walking back home, having attended extra classes at school when she was “sexually assaulted and brutally murdered” (Mahlatsi, 2023:11.)
- In April of 2023 a young female teacher at Middelpoos Primary School in Saldanha was killed by her estranged husband in the presence of the school’s learners when he drove up to her car and shot her in cold blood (Theron, 2018: 14).
- In December 2012 a 20-year-old killed 20 grade one children and six teachers at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, before he committed suicide.

1.5.5 Inadequate logistics and failing infrastructure

It stands to reason that, if education (schooling) has to be provided in facilities that are in a dilapidated state, with amenities that are either non-existent or seriously faulty, the end result will leave much to be desired. And this is precisely the case with many of the schools in South Africa. Le Cordeur (2022: 17) refers to all these shortcomings as “the many logistical challenges facing education in South African schools.”

A major obstacle in the achievement of effective education is that not enough new schools are being built. In his State of the Nation Address on 11 February, 2022, President Ramaphosa admitted

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that government still has to build at least 2 500 new schools around the country (Ramaphosa, 2022). This shortage of schools results in problems with the placement of learners at the opening of the school year, and for some learners, it means no admission in the school of their choice (Louw-Carstens, 2023:6). This causes many schools (and classes) being overcrowded: some classrooms must accommodate 60 or more learners. In addition to this overall lack of schools, the conditions in which many children need to spend their days at school are rather challenging. Approximately 10 000 schools in South Africa do not have any sport facilities, for instance. Some 1 800 of them do not have a library, and around 20 000 of them, no laboratory. Around 5 000 schools, particularly in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal still have pit latrines “or ... no proper sanitation facilities” (Dywaba, 2022:2). Several learners have lost their lives by drowning in pit latrines (Prince, 2023:1). Because of the neglect of the Department of Public Construction to pay the electricity and water bills of schools timeously, schools around the country are compelled to go without these amenities (Swanepoel, 2017:8). In some cases, schools such as the one in the Tumahole township in the Northern Free State, are compelled to close down due to a lack of safe drinking water on the school premises (Gericke, 2023:5).

1.6 Discussion

Two theories enable us to form a picture of the current situation in South Africa, namely chaos theory, and complexity theory. Chaos theory enables us to understand a given situation, such as the state of education in South Africa, as an assemblage of continually

changing phenomena, including the actions (or neglect of action) by human actors (for instance, teachers), interpretations (for instance, of policy) and meanings (for instance, what the current matric pass rate of 80 per cent means). The theory helps us understand that we have, at best, only a partial grasp of what transpires on the education scene in South Africa, and we are occasionally compelled to work with untested surmises. Chaos theory departs from the notion that reality, including the realities of education in South Africa, appears to be a dynamic, confusing entity in which the component parts are driven by human ideals, choices, contradictions, power play and imbalances (Barrett, 2009: 157, 161).

Chaos theory also helps us to understand that the educational scene in South Africa is currently not a well-oiled operation. Apart from the fact that we do not have objective criteria for judging whether education in South Africa is effective or not, and also apart from the fact that education as a national enterprise is extremely complex and difficult to manage (Dekker, Celliers & Hofmeyr, 2011), its complexity is compounded by the dysfunctionality of the different dimensions and aspects that we discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. Humans do not find it easy to think in terms of complex systems, because these systems (such as the South African education system) are essentially dynamic, unstable and unpredictable (Raworth, 2022: 130).

If one adds to this complexity the “chaos” in the form of a number of dysfunctionalities in the system, the education scene in South Africa becomes an even more complex *mélange*. What we do know is that no single factor can explain whether or not education in South Africa is effective. Single factors, such as claiming that a

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Grade 12 pass rate of 80 per cent has been achieved in a particular year, are clearly inadequate. Reflection on the notion of “effective education” therefore has to be done at system level, at the level of causal interactions (Dekker et al., 2011) – as we have attempted to do in the initial sections of this chapter.

The complexity and the “chaos” that we currently detect in the South African education system present us (the authors whose publications appear in this book) with many opportunities for research, and for coming up with solutions to the many problems with which the system is currently afflicted. As educationists, we need to find ways to understand and manage, both philosophically and physically, this complex situation (Plotnitsky, 2006: 42-47). Put differently, the current situation in the South African system of education proffers a plethora of research opportunities to educationists (as evident in the compilation of the book in which this chapter appears). Each book chapter, each dissertation or thesis, each conference paper, each report on research that was done represents one small piece of the huge jig-saw puzzle that is reality, in this case educational reality. The discussion in the remainder of this section is proffered in this spirit of shaping a piece or two of the education reality puzzle of South Africa.

1.6.1 Sound professional conduct

To ensure that education in South Africa becomes effective in the not-too-distant future, all those who are placed in positions of responsibility, from the Minister of Education, through all the administrators on the various levels of management, the principals, to the teachers in the classrooms, should be well-trained, apply themselves diligently to the challenges and duties

of their profession and in the interest of the learners, and be responsible for all their actions. This means that each functionary should attend to the functionality of everything in his or her working environment and be prepared to take responsibility for any form of dysfunctionality. This applies to the teachers who are in daily interaction with learners. They can be expected to display sound professional conduct as role models for the learners who have been entrusted to their care and professional knowledge. They can be expected to set a good example to the learners and to the wider community beyond the school by demonstrating compliance with high ethical and moral standards. They can be expected to display compliance with the ethics and morals as provided for in section 2.5 of the *Code for Professional Ethics for Educators* (SA, 2000 (b)).

Many an experienced educator is convinced that, currently, learner discipline in South African schools is parlous due to the depraved behaviour of their teachers (Brits, 2022(d):1). The vital motive of servanthood, a sine qua non for the teaching profession, is often lacking among teachers. A sound work ethic, based on a “higher calling” as understood by a particular individual, should find a place in the hearts and minds of the teaching corps of South Africa. A willingness to serve is a fundamental principle of the teaching profession; teachers should display willingness to serve the interests of their learners, the parents, and the state (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001:224). As professionals, teachers are called to serve, not for material gain or for enhancing their image or positions, and also not for a self-serving ego. A teacher’s duty and calling to serve is inspired by a higher calling: the calling to serve in the best interests of others. The seven roles of an educator, as

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prescribed by the Department of Education (DBE, 2000), serve as a valuable guideline in this respect: a professional educator should be a learning mediator; an interpreter and designer of learning programmes and support material; a leader; an administrator and manager able to fulfil a pastoral role; an assessor, and a person who is knowledgeable about the relevant field of study he or she presents.

1.6.2 Avoiding a possible shortage of teachers

To avoid a possible shortage of teachers in future, the South African Department of Basic Education should consider adopting the United Kingdom's practice by appointing assistant teachers from a pool of available pensioners and senior teacher students on a temporary basis. The pool of school governing body posts can obviously be enlarged where needed.

1.6.3 Competent leadership

The presence and guidance of a competent leader (read: school principal) is a prerequisite for the success of any organisation, including a school. "A true leader needs to have a vision; not in the sense of something abstract or intangible, but as a tangible managerial instrument with a clearly defined goal, containing a detailed plan and timetable for achieving that goal" (Scott, 2006:33). This guideline is aligned with the following Biblical perspective: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18). A competent leader also needs to be well informed. Polybius once quipped that a good general not only sees the way to victory; he also knows when victory is possible. A principal, as the leader of all those involved in their school, should therefore be

well-informed about everything that might impact on the performance of their school. As things stand now, a principal should only have a matric certificate plus a four-year degree. The professional standards for principalship should be raised to a postgraduate qualification on educational leadership. One of the avenues that could be explored for this purpose is the reinstitution of teacher training facilities such as the former College of Education for Further Training (CEFT) which was founded in 1974 but terminated in the mid-1990s. During its time, the CEFT offered an off-campus diploma focusing, among others, on educational management and leadership (CEFT, 1987:1).

1.6.4 The provision of proper school infrastructure

We agree with Ms Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, who recently stated that the only way to prevent overcrowded schools and classrooms is for her department to start building more schools (Cupido, 2023:6). This has been said repeatedly in the past, but not enough has been done in this regard during the last three decades. Attention to this requirement is now more urgent than ever. In the process, all pit latrines should be replaced with modern bathroom facilities, and libraries and sports facilities provided at all schools.

1.6.5 The eradication of learner misconduct

In the outline in the initial sections of this paper, learner misconduct was identified as one of the major stumbling blocks on South Africa's way to effective education. This is an issue that requires immediate and dedicated attention by the authorities, from the Department of Basic Education right down to classroom

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level. Section 10 of the South African Schools Act (SA, 1996) stipulates that the implementation of a proper Code of Conduct for learners is of prime importance to ensure and maintain an environment conducive to optimal teaching and learning. Learner misconduct tends to disrupt the orderly flow of didactical procedures in the classroom. A clear, plausible code of conduct should be adopted for the purpose of managing learner conduct in, as well as outside, the classroom. Such a code of conduct could also form the basis of class rules (cf. Item 5.1(a) of the *Guidelines for a Code of Conduct* (SA, 1998) regarding the formulation of class rules). Whereas a school's code of conduct is general in its application to activities in the school as a whole, class rules pertain to the requirements of the unique setting of a particular classroom. The class rules for a Civil Engineering workshop will obviously differ from those for the Home Economics or for the Art class.

To combat serious misconduct by learners is a much more challenging task. In 2018, Angie Motshega, Minister of Basic Education averred that “there is a correlation between high levels of criminality in the community which is transported into schools. Guns come from communities; the knifing and anger come from communities” (Daniel, 2018). Based on the statistics provided by Nation Masters (2019), the crime rate in South Africa stands at 58.94 per 100 000 of the population. Both the utterance by the Minister and the crime statistics suggest that schools should take hands with the surrounding communities and institutions such as churches in a renewed project to raise the morality level in communities. Such a project might have positive spinoffs for schools in that (serious) learner misconduct might be ameliorated. In the meantime, it is necessary for schools to be properly fenced

so that negative influences from the outside be kept from encroaching on school premises and leading learners into temptation during school hours. Learners could be educated about such dangers and temptations during assembly.

It is also advisable to prevent lethal objects such as weapons and drugs from entering the school premises. In terms of section 8A of the South African Act (SA, 1996), the principal (or his/her delegate) is allowed to search learners to prevent weapons or illegal drugs from entering school premises. In terms of these provisions, and under certain circumstances, it is allowed to delegate these powers to a pensioned police officer.

1.7 Conclusion

In terms of Section 28(2) of the South African Constitution (SA, 1996(b)), all those involved in formal education in South Africa are to serve the best interests of the child. The interest of the child is deemed to be of paramount importance in every matter related to the child. New York State Senator Carol Bellamy (AZ Quotes) justifiably averred that “in serving the best interests of children we are serving the best interests of all humanity.” The contents of this chapter were proffered in this spirit, that although currently many shortcomings in, and obstacles to, the attainment of effective education in South Africa exist, much can be done to put things on a trajectory towards greater effectiveness. The contents of this chapter were also proffered as a way of attaining a bird’s-eye view of the educational scene in South Africa.

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