

## Exercising the Fiduciary Responsibility to Improve Education of their Children: Ecological Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** This paper aims to describe the design and implementation of support to at risk school low performing schools using data from nine Provinces in South Africa. Using the literature on external support, instructional capacity, and policy strength, the study gathered data from interviews and observations. The findings suggest that the model of assistance provided by the provinces was adequate to the task. While the policies examined demonstrate recognition that low-performing schools need additional capacity if they are to substantially improve student outcomes, external support providers used limited and haphazard approaches, and as a result, the support component had little influence on teaching and learning. In addition, because the external supports relied on a market-like support structure with few other mechanisms to ensure quality, and because there was limited quantity (intensity) of support, the benefit that external assistance might otherwise have provided was limited. This was particularly problematic for the lowest capacity schools, many of which experienced limited change despite increased educator effort and involvement of external providers. In essence, external assistance through these school accountability policies did little to improve educator and organizational performance.

### INTRODUCTION

Improving the grade 12 results, particularly those of under-performing, is a task whose challenges are far easier to catalogue than to surmount. Educationalist familiar with the current state of high schools particular grade 12 results, and efforts to improve them, can cite their own favored grim statistics and stories that illustrate the extent of the problem. Many of learners are not able to pass Mathematics and Physical Sciences in addition the number of learner's passing grade 12 with university admission is slowly improving (Fleischman and Heppen 2009).

Underperforming at Grade 12 cannot solely be put on the shoulder of the learners, educators and the schools capacity should be held accountable. According to output 1 of the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation legislated by the South African National Government it supports the principle of accountability as far as learners performance is concern. The assumption is that consequences will motivate educators and School Management Team (SMT) to improve the school performance and learners outcomes (Finnigan et al. 2009).

It is a common cause that schools that is performing below the set benchmark will be classified as either being at risk or underperforming. At at-risk schools are described by the Department of Basic Education, as schools with low academic achievement and trapped in that par-

ticular underperforming environment. In 2010, 25 schools were identified as schools at risk. They were chosen on the basis of having been considered at-risk due to their 2009 Grade 12 results. Their academic achievements were below 40%, far below the provincial benchmark. In pursuit of excellence the provinces devise some strategies and plans to improve the academic performance; an intervention project was conceptualized and put into motion. The intention of the project was to improve the results of Grade 12 and turned around the situation at these schools from being 'at-risk' to 'performing schools'.

It is important to begin the search for effective programme that can support the underperforming schools. All nine provinces in South Africa have started the Saturday schools, Winter School project and other forms of support in improving the performance of Grade 12 learners. In most cases this form of support take the route of additional tutoring, with the sole purpose of improving the grade 12 results. This process has to focus on the teaching procedures that will ensure that the teaching modalities are reviewed and perhaps the strategies used to prepare our learners are reviewed.

As Fleischman and Heppen (2009) mention that the school revival focus should be on exposing the flaws of the education system and help principal and educators to create a road map for improving it. With reformers constantly

defining, demanding, and measuring better performance, educators set about imagining and implementing a variety of approaches to meet this goal. The conceptual approach that was deemed to be feasible was in the form of additional tutoring on weekends for a period of three months. This approach was seen as an ideal revival to better the situation in the affected schools.

Furthermore, in many evaluations of school reforms, the measures used to evaluate the impact are not aligned with the outcomes that the reform model seeks to affect. An additional challenge is the duration of the support reform (Crawford 2007).

To understand the nature, intensity, and quality of support provided to these schools during the weekends, the paper did examine the governance structure of these underperforming schools. Finally, the article used interviews and observations from case studies of 25 schools.

### Theoretical Rationale

The inclusion of service provider in the form of designing some methodologies to support these low-performing schools did help to rethink certain principle but to a certain extent they lack the sustainability in bringing a lasting solution to the school, rather a short term solution. External support can potentially bring new information, perspectives, and resources into school communities. They may also provide different types of assistance, including brokering or connecting communities to new ideas or practices, modeling new practices, facilitating dialogue and shared learning experiences around teaching and learning, and developing conceptual or practical tools. The limited impact or effectiveness of these groups may be the result of support providers generally spending inadequate time in schools and lacking a strong vision for instructional improvement (Finnigan et al. 2009).

It is envisaged that parent's participation is quite important in the education of their children (Erchul and Martens 2006). It is for this reason that parents elect the school governing body to assist in running the governance role of the school. In order for the parent to be eligible for candidature in the School Governing Body (SGB), the regulation clearly stipulated that one must be a parent of the learner enroll in the school for the particular year or be a legal guard-

ian of the learners in the school. The size of the SGB is not fixed, however it stipulates the minimum participation. It is for this reason that Erchul and Martens (2006) states that each school is unique in its settings, as well as its function of size, local community demographics amount of parental involvement, number of staff as well as administrative priorities.

All the candidates showcase their experience and qualifications as vehicles driving them to securing membership in the SGB. Experience is another tool believed to contribute a lot in performance. Mwamwenda (2004) contends that although, there is not any set of criteria used in selecting SGB member except having a child in the school. It may therefore remain a challenge to establish such criteria in order to run the schools with capable and skillful personnel. This will clearly give schools a very clear direction towards attainment of their respective goals. Given this argument, it therefore is expedient to critically examine the role of the SGB and the principal in the performance of a school and its development.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative study of thirty-two selected turn-around at-risk schools; these 32 schools were identified as schools at risk, of which 25 had performed below 40% at the Grade 12 results in 2009. More than 50% of these schools did perform badly in 2008 academic year; therefore it was not a surprise that they perform as such in 2009. If the school performed above 50%, this will be regarded as sufficiently enough to be removed from schools at risk. These schools were mainly from black communities; over 80% of these schools are classified as high poverty, compared to only 20% of schools. All the schools had been listed as at risk by the province, but are also considered as having potential to turn around if various supports can be afforded and also as part of the Provincial Strategy on Learner Attainment (PSLA). Principals, present teachers and learners from these schools were interviewed to discern the changes and programs introduced that led to the turn around, specifically those that led to improvements in the climate of the school. Methods of data collection include interviews, document content analysis and observation. Semi-structured questions were developed pri-

or to data collection to guide researchers during the interview with respondents. This article primarily draws on interviews with 18 school principals and 65 educators. In addition, the article uses reports of provincial coordinators on the enhancement programme associated with the case study schools.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analyses include record of grade 12 June examination statistics and grading, records of field trips and observations and reports by field workers. Records of June examination include the pass rate and grading level. From the examination records a meeting with principal and school governing body meeting were attended to establish the progress. From the school record it was easy to match the learners profile with the household income based. The quintile level of the school also assisted to a certain degree the level of income in the surrounding areas of the school.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Parental Involvement**

The parents play a major role in the education of their child, in most case parents in some schools are not really committed to the education of their child; this was witnessed in the attendance of some SGB meeting. In most schools, parents generally were not very enthusiastic about participating in school activities and the principals had to face an uphill task to get their involvement. When they noticed that this is not just an ordinary school, they started to take the principals more seriously.

Although it is normally very difficult to get parents to come and discuss their children's absence from school, the school somehow managed to get very encouraging responses from the parents. In most cases there is a correlation between parents' educational achievement and their children's low educational attainment. This may also reflect the amount of emphasis parents place on education. Regardless of family background, parental participation and social support is fundamental to educational success. Parenting styles and the degree of parental involvement in children's education can account for some of the disparities in educational

achievement. The lack of parental involvement in participating in the education of their children limits the opportunities of seeing them completing their high school. Additionally, the ability of parents to reinforce skills obtained in formal education and promote learning outside of school is critical to school success.

In some schools they claimed the quality of the academic offering depends entirely on the resources allocation. Although the funding formula differs from school to schools this was regarded as an influencing phenomenon by the schools. The fundraising strategies of the SGB was the main issues as some schools could not afford to pay extra teacher appointed for assisting in the extra classes should the schools need extra assistance in the identified subjects. This was viewed as a contributory in the academic achievement of the learners.

The lack of parental engagements from the teachers' side was also mentioned as the main contributory factor by the parents. Although not all but majority of teachers fail to engage parents about the education of their children and this hampers teachers and parents relationships. Unfortunately, teacher quality is persistently lower in schools with students who enter formal education already behind their advantaged peers than in more affluent school districts. In most schools regarded as underperforming more classes are taught by new, unskilled, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers, shortchanging students and preventing them from accessing the benefits of seasoned teachers.

### **Demographics of These**

Similarly, most of these schools were the 'no paying fee' school typically that distinguish the background have difficulty attracting and retaining capable and experienced teachers and principals and other leaders. At-risk schools are likely to serve a high proportion of majority and low-income students, have poor student achievement, and—if they are high schools—have lower matric completion rates. Such schools often are found in core urban areas, but rural schools also may have many of these characteristics. Finally, while individual at-risk schools with these characteristics may beat the odds from time to time and may significantly exceed the average for student achievement among schools

with their profile, we believe these schools are likely to fall back into a pattern of low achievement over time.

### **Limited Monitoring of External Support Quality**

The biggest problem as capture from the principal was the limited capacity of the district, respectively, to directly assist the large number of under-performing schools. More recently this same problem has been found in response to 2010 academic year results as well as the release of funding and increased (and shifting) responsibilities of these agencies in addressing the problem of low performance. It is common fact that most provinces often providing assistance to low-performing schools, yet most districts were unable to provide the resource-intensive support necessary because of their own limited capacity.

### **Teaching and Learning**

Research suggests that to improve school-level student performance, one must focus on individual teacher capacity, including teachers' knowledge of content, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge (Erchul and Martens 2006). An implication of this research is that external support providers seeking to improve student learning should begin by focusing on the knowledge of teachers. For external support providers to initiate school improvement, they must take into account each of these levels (the instructional unit and the school environment). At the level of the instructional unit, teachers, materials, and students should be the primary foci, while important targets at the organizational level include coordination, professional norms, learning opportunities, resources, and the monitoring of student learning.

The extra class support provided to grade 12 learners did not touch on the educators' capabilities, the external support providers did not work with teachers individually or in group settings to increase their knowledge and skills or hone their classroom management and teaching capabilities. The external providers did not directly provide educators professional development or assistance in the first year, neither did it target teachers' knowledge and skills in their

needs assessments and Action Plans. Nearly all of the external support providers also attended to instructional materials in some manner, including deliver of curricular packages, lesson plan guides, "how-to" packets, and assessments. In addition, some of the external support providers focused their assistance at the organizational level.

### **Support Provided DoE**

At the support level, the supports were rather weak in terms of the authority of support provided by the Learning Facilitators (LF) on the school improvement strategies. In both contexts, the LF's indicated that they had no line authority; that is, they had no supervisory power over the schools. They could not force the schools to implement their programs, hire or fire teachers or administrators, or require that certain teachers receive their assistance. The other influencing factor was the School Management Governance Developers (SMGD's) that had degree of management and governance authority; they monitored the schools' implementation of their improvement plans. The monitoring role was only vaguely defined, however, and few school SMGD's believed that their responsibilities extended beyond principal mentoring.

Furthermore, most provinces experienced a high degree of turnover in support provided in the form of Saturday classes and Winter Schools, resulting in a lack of continuity for schools. In most cases support providers does not understood the extreme circumstances they faced in these schools and communities. In some schools, educators in rural settings questioned whether their Learning Facilitators understood their unique, rural context. This criticism was linked to the low level of intensity of the support because educators believed that these individuals simply were not at their schools enough to understand their schools.

In the provider view teacher expertise—scores were the main drive in taking this project forwards, the learner's socio-economic status were also observed were provided. The issue of poverty was also the main reason in this schools that were escalating performance. Although one might contest that there is no significant relation between learners' poverty and performance.

Accountability systems attempt to motivate identified low-performing schools (LPS), and

sometimes districts, in three ways: through pressure, meaningful goals, and the provision of resources and support. In some systems, pressures and sanctions are severe, at least on the books; others emphasize capacity building more strongly. Capacity building is organized in various ways. Some states (and districts) provide assistance and oversight to schools that are directly targeted, specifically tailored to the problems of low-performing schools, sustained over time, and directly under the supervision of the state. Others leverage support and assistance in an indirect or unspecified way, for example through regional service centers open to all schools in need of assistance. States differ as to grants of additional resources to identified schools.

### CONCLUSION

Finally, improving high schools requires taking a holistic view—focusing simultaneously on the desirability of a number of outcomes and recognizing that high schools can be improved not by adopting piecemeal programs or actions but through systemic, coordinated action that may involve combining many approaches. There are various approaches used to ensure the schools are turned around, however it is imperative to focus on the best approaches.

Turning around at-risk school into an excellent one is not an easy task. It is not an exaggeration to call it an uphill battle, especially in a centralized and exam oriented system of education. Students who are not academically inclined feel marginalized in school. As teacher educators, we often visit high schools to supervise our student teachers. The conditions of some schools are appalling: broken doors and windows, missing chairs and ceiling fans, graffiti on the walls, etc. Disengaged students roam the corridors, making noise in the classrooms and generally distracting others and disrupting the teaching and learning process. But when we found these turnaround schools, we became convinced that improving even difficult schools is not an impossible task.

When the principal of School One was asked to identify the most important attribute of a turned-around school, she said it is the sense of togetherness amongst its members. When members of the school understand the ‘whys’ and the ‘hows’ of change and work together to

achieve it, nothing is impossible. In addition, it takes brave, creative and persistent principals who sometimes go against set policies and common practices to turn around their at-risk schools for the better. It is not easy to make schools interesting for students and to make everyone count in a system where having excellent examination results is the only thing that matters. Effective at-risk school principals recognize that they will lose their children to the streets if these children experience only failure in school, so they Endeavour to give their students an experience of success by encouraging them to excel in what they can do best, which incorporates non-academic endeavors.

School improvement would indeed be rather simple if it merely was about matching an identified performance problem with a proven strategy implemented by willing educators. The study has revealed some limitations of a motivational strategy that bank on pressure to the principal. But there are also problems with the idea of proven strategies. A number of these strategies have been tried for corrective action and school redesign within first-generation accountability systems. They seemed to have worked in some contexts, but not in others, confirming the contingent nature of school improvement even within the context of stringent accountability systems. The research will briefly summarise findings on the most commonly used strategies.

Fundamentally, staff replacements were not necessarily of higher quality than the original teaching staff, and in many schools teacher morale plummeted. Enhancement program corrective action and redesign were used more vigorously. Almost in these 25 schools, seven schools had new principal, appointed to lead this new reconstituted school. These seven schools that had new principal saw consistent gains, some performed on the higher quintile. This finding suggests that there are possibilities that they might a higher numbers of schools that will shifted to new principal as this is the only reform strategy that work. Here, each provider offers different models of intervention. This finding, suggest that managerial changes has helped in some cases, but is not a sustainable solution.

Department of Education takeovers of entire districts have also produced uneven outcomes. Financial management is often cited as the most promising area for potential success by states.

However, equally dramatic *academic* success has been much harder to achieve. Academic gains have been mixed at best, most often occurring only after multiple years of intervention.

School improvement, even under conditions of stringent accountability, is (and remains) far more complex than matching an identified performance problem with a proven strategy implemented by willing educators. As a consequence, states are advised to design low-performing schools programs that are rich in capacity building and sophisticated enough to address the complexity and contingent nature of the task. By looking at variations among first-generation systems across states, we gain a better understanding of the requirements for capacity building.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important aspect in this regard is to build capacity among educators in the underperforming schools. However, these studies suggest fundamental problems in the design and implementation of school improvement support mechanisms that must be addressed if this support is to truly benefit the recipient schools. If external support is sought from service providers' assistance should be integrated into a comprehensive, strategic approach to school im-

provement linked to individual school problems. Furthermore, at the heart of school improvement is instructional change; therefore, the external support providers should be required to demonstrate a link between their programs and instructional improvements.

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