South Africa has a high-cost, low-performance education system that does not compare favourably with education systems in other African countries, or in similar developing economies.

There is a multitude of well-publicised problems, including a shortage of teachers, underqualified teachers and poor teacher performance. In the classroom, this results in poor learner standards and results, a lack of classroom discipline and is exacerbated by insufficient resources and inadequate infrastructure. On a government level, difficulties have been caused by a failure of appropriate inspection and monitoring, and confusion caused by changing curricula without proper communication and training. All this has lead to massive demoralisation and disillusionment among teachers and a negative and worsening perception of the teaching profession.

Recently appointed director of the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) and former director and acting chief director for the National Department of Education Management and Governance, Martin Prew, does not beat about the bush when reviewing the challenges of the new departments of education.

“We have to go back to basics,” he insists. “Getting the teachers in to teach and the learners back to learn. We would do well to take a leaf out of Zimbabwe’s book. They followed much the same political trajectory as we did – experiencing the same kind of boycotts and association of the education system with the former regime.”

Zimbabwe’s post-independence government immediately prioritised education, Prew explains. “They wisely took the strong system already in place and built on it, introducing gradual changes over the years,” he says.

Challenges facing education in South Africa
“Education was regarded as one of the most important aspects of national regeneration and progress. The cry was to strengthen existing schools, build new ones, and appoint competent teachers regardless of their former or current allegiances. Government motivated and inspired teachers by engaging teachers’ unions, focusing on the role of principals as critical managers, and made teachers and principals feel they were a crucial component in the building of the nation.”

The initial curriculum and syllabi were maintained. “Instead of following the tabula rasa route adopted by South Africa, Zimbabwe gradually introduced a new curriculum over a period of about 10 years during the 80s. This created continuity and stability for teachers and pupils alike. Small but substantial changes were made to the various syllabi without dumping the curriculum, which of course is the whole school experience.

“The syllabus refers to the content matter of a particular subject. It appears that there was confusion in South Africa about what a curriculum was as opposed to a syllabi. Rather than talking about improving the various syllabus we kept talking about changing the curriculum. The result was that the whole system was turned upside down too soon and in the process we lost much of what was effective in the old system,” says Prew.

To make matters worse, the much touted ‘curriculum 2005’ was dumped in 2000 after only two or three years of operation. Already the new curriculum is under attack and might well be changed yet again. We need to realise that education reforms need to get bedded down: each reform needs at least 10 years of implementing before one can determine if they have worked or not.

Among the repercussions, according to Prew, was the feeling created among teachers that everything they had done was irrelevant. “They had confidence in their ability but their professionalism was pummelled out of them.

Then, with the closure of teacher training colleges, the low levels of commitment to teacher training provided at universities and the low levels of funding, the status of the profession sank even further. Now of course, with constant media reports about incompetence, unethical behaviour, failure to attend classes, shocking results and below-standard qualifications, the negative perception has been exacerbated.”

He believes a total review of the current Schools Act is a priority. He considers it to be fundamentally flawed. He says of this basic piece of legislation, “It was influenced by overseas consultants and devalued experiences gained both in South Africa and neighbouring countries such as Botswana and Zimbabwe. It does not focus sufficiently on teachers, principals or even the greater majority of South African schools, which are located mainly outside urban areas.”

Moving teacher training colleges away from rural areas deprived bright rural children who would have
been perfect potential teachers of access and opportunity. “High performing rural children, urban children with slightly lower averages and those with a passion for teaching are the normal pools for future teacher development. Every post-independent African state, except South Africa, has effectively targeted those markets. The closures of colleges, the downgrading of teaching and poor pay have resulted in fewer aspiring teachers here. At one stage we were losing 23,000 teachers a year, with replacements amounting to only 3,000 to 6,000.”

In Zimbabwe, the state in the 80s and 90s paid for training and therefore reserved the right to send teachers where they were needed. Rural schools were thus manned by enthusiastic young teachers who inspired their students to learn. Government worked with unions to promote education and learning in the interests of the nation. Prew believes that the South African government is skirting the union issue and should bite the bullet to get teachers and learners back into the classrooms, and should implement a bonding system for all teachers trained whereby the state deploys them where they are needed for the first three years of their professional career.

“Government officials, including teachers and trade unionists, should also be required to place their children in public schools. The very fact that many are in private schools sends an equivocal message about the status of public institutions,” says Prew.

“We need a national debate on education. At the moment we are driving down an unknown road without a map – we don’t know where we are going, what point we’re at, how far we have to go or where our destination is. What kind of education system do we want? What is the purpose of our education system?” Prew is convinced that a starting point would need to be a concerted national plan on education. “From there we can start getting the basic blocks in place,” he says. “Fortunately it would seem from recent statements by basic education minister, Angie Motshekga, that education is being seen as a priority and as critical to any kind of development. It will create the political environment in which things can be done. However, it will remain to be seen whether, having created the space and the opportunity to make crucial changes, there is the political will to implement and drive them. Only time will tell.”

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