

The Politics of Improving Learning Outcomes in South Africa

PE 03

Martin Gustafsson and Nick Taylor

Abstract

Political economy and ideology are important determinants of educational development. The authors examine this in the South African context, using an approach which is in part dialogical, while paying special attention to the acquisition of foundational skills in the early grades. South Africa's apartheid legacy, and the predominance of the upper secondary school-leaving certificate, shaped the policy discourse in ways that often marginalised the question of foundational skills. Post-1994, the political urgency of providing quality schooling to the emerging black middle class could have diverted attention from improving the quality of education for the poorest segments of society, despite official policy commitments to serving the poor. Notwithstanding these limitations, South Africa has seen substantial gains in learning outcomes in the last twenty years, driven mainly by improvements among the least advantaged. Yet outcomes remain well below those of other middle income countries. Several political and non-political factors could impede further gains. Education planning capacity remains weak. The quality of teacher training at universities is considered poor. The electoral system rewards politicians who respond to popular demands, but such demands tend to focus on very visible phenomena such as school infrastructure and obtaining the Grade 12 certificate. Learning in the early grades has become more visible due to work occurring in samples or pockets of the system. How to make this visible across all primary schools through better availability of information, and better systems development capacity, and how to link information to school accountability in ways that avoid pitfalls experienced in South Africa's recent past, are politically and ideologically charged questions. Corruption has adversely affected the schooling system, most noticeably with respect to who is promoted, but the wider erosion of institutions caused by corruption undermines schooling in more insidious ways. The South African experience confirms that a more politically informed approach to education policy analysis is illuminating and necessary. The emergence of a specialist literature on the political economy of education is helpful. However, a complete treatment of politics in the education policy arena should include analysis of ideological narratives employed by contesting elites, and how these narratives almost gain 'a life of their own', independently of what their proponents may have intended.

The Politics of Improving Learning Outcomes in South Africa

Martin Gustafsson

Research on Socio-Economic Policy (ReSEP); University of Stellenbosch

Nick Taylor

JET Education Services

Notes:

Martin Gustafsson is a former history teacher who currently works as an education economist, producing research for the Department of Basic Education (DBE), South Africa's national authority for schools, and outside the Department, through his work for Research on Socio-Economic Policy (ReSEP), a unit at Stellenbosch University.

Nick Taylor is a former mathematics teacher and current education researcher, working largely for JET Education Services, a prominent South African research institute. He formerly headed an evaluation unit in the DBE and is currently engaged in work in a Department of Higher Education and Training initiative focussing on university-based teacher training.

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1 Introduction

The Research in Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme, within which the current paper is produced, focusses on understanding why foundational skills among learners are so low in developing countries, and how this problem can be solved. The political economy arm of RISE's activities uses as its point of departure the following question: 'How can we understand the political and social forces underpinning education system dynamics and reform—from global to local?' Going further¹,

A central research question ... is: Why do some countries adopt and successfully implement policies that improve learning, but most do not? This requires a deeper understanding of the underlying power relations among a broad range of interest groups – and the priorities, incentives, and decisions of politicians, governments, and policymakers.

The current paper is one of twelve studies, each focussing on a developing country. These studies are expected to feed into a comparative meta-study aimed at presenting new global insights into the political economy of schooling.

The central problem receiving attention is very specific, and of great importance. It is the problem of particularly weak foundational skills, in areas such as reading and numeracy, among South Africa's youngest learners. This under-performance, which has been widely documented, and is acknowledged by the South African government, has adverse long-range implications for skills in the labour market, poverty reduction and social cohesion.

The purpose of the paper is twofold. On the one hand, it attempts to provide a fresh perspective on South Africa's formidable educational quality challenges, aimed at contributing constructively to the national education policy debates. Secondly, it feeds into RISE's global work.

We have come up with the following three questions to structure the paper:

- i. Given South Africa's current political economy context, how likely is it that desired educational quality improvements in future will be realised?
- ii. What historical factors, over the last four decades or so, have shaped the policies, institutions, leadership and quality trends in South Africa's education system?
- iii. What conceptual frameworks seem particularly effective for taking South Africa's political economy debates forward in the area of education?

The first question forces us to examine the health of the political economy context in South Africa, in terms of its ability to enable future educational quality gains. In doing so, we identify parts of this context which are most problematic, but also aspects which seem relatively conducive for progress. How one describes the political economy context is contested terrain, so the first question provides an opportunity to find a description which is at least suitable for South Africa, but possibly also other developing countries. The second question forces us to examine how historical factors shaped current political obstacles and opportunities. Lastly, the third question presents an opportunity to lay out a fresh framework for understanding qualitative

¹ From <https://riseprogramme.org/countries/political-economy>, accessed May 2021.

progress in the South African schooling system. Such a framework could be used, for instance, in the training of South African policy analysts.

The paper provides a fresh perspective inasmuch as the politics around school policies and learning outcomes in South Africa have not been formally diagnosed in the manner of this paper². There is by now a large body of literature analysing South Africa's low learning outcomes, and evidence-based solutions. Indeed, the South African education authorities formally embrace an evidence-based approach to policymaking. How deep this embrace goes is one of the focus areas of the paper. The politics behind South Africa's schooling system is widely reported on in the media, and receives attention in the public debates. As will be argued in this paper, some widely held views on this are more accurate and informed by realities than others.

Section 2 below summarises the RISE political economy framework, in a manner that seemed useful for the current report. The summary is not South Africa-specific, meaning it could be applicable to a context similar to South Africa's. Importantly, because the role of international donor organisations is fairly limited in South Africa, this matter receives less attention here than it would in the case of many other developing countries.

Section 3 provides a basic history of South Africa's learning outcomes and the country's politics, in education and in general, going back around 30 years, meaning the scope includes the last years of apartheid and the transition to democracy. This section is in part intended to assist the non-South African reader. This section does *not* address question (ii) referred to above in any explicit way, though it presents facts which can help to answer it.

The three sections 4 to 6 present the first author's (Martin Gustafsson's) attempt to deal with the three questions posed above, drawing from the political economy framework of section 2. In part, this is about testing the effectiveness of the framework for performing a meaningful and constructive analysis.

It should be explained why the first question, which looks at future prospects, comes before the second question, focussing on a critical discussion of history. One might expect a look backward to precede a look forward. The reason we deal with the questions in the reverse order is that we wanted to focus the historical analysis on aspects of the system which, within the political economy framework, emerge as the most problematic, or promising, for future progress. The identification of these aspects occurs first, in answering the first question.

Section 7 presents the second author's (Nick Taylor's) responses to the three questions, and some reflection by him of the first author's views. An earlier version of this paper employed what could be more accurately described as a dialogical approach, compared to this final version of the paper. The earlier paper moved back and forth between the two authors. Dialogical approaches have been defined and advocated in the literature on the methodology of policy analysis³. However, we realised that our original approach was difficult to implement well, while producing a paper that would be easily readable. It was an interesting learning exercise. What we have opted for here is only weakly dialogical. Gustafsson puts forward his arguments

² One important and recent analysis of the political economy of South Africa's schooling, is that of Levy *et al* (2018). We discuss commonalities and differences between our approach and that analysis within the paper.

³ Fischer *et al*, 2015.

in sections 4 to 6, and Taylor provides his arguments, and some reflection on Gustafsson, in section 7. Finally, a conclusion in section 8 represents both authors' summing up of the paper in its entirety.

The two authors of the current paper have extensive, but differing, experiences inside and outside government. Gustafsson has for over ten years worked for both the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the authority overseeing schools in South Africa, and a research institute based at Stellenbosch University. At the time of the writing of the present paper, he was still employed by the DBE. His focus has included the optimal strategies for South Africa's schooling sector, the reliability of learner performance statistics, and how to use data better in improving education outcomes⁴. Taylor is a former executive director of JET Education Services, a non-government research institute, and helped establish, and then headed, the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit, a public body reporting to the Minister of Basic Education and designed to evaluate the work of the DBE. His areas of focus have included the Grade 12 examinations, school improvement, school management, and teacher training⁵. Both authors are former teachers and teacher unionists. In the current paper, they obviously write in their personal capacities.

The paper is in part informed by conversations the two authors have had with various influential leaders and academics, inside and outside government. It is also informed by the authors' own experiences in the education policy space in South Africa. The paper moreover presents an extensive overview of a wide range of analytical and policy texts, produced by a variety of actors, in backing up the arguments made.

The methodology followed in this South Africa paper seems to differ from that followed by most or all the other RISE country papers, though this is still to be seen when all the papers are finalised. The current paper is not produced by a team of researchers who are essentially *outside* the bureaucracy, or even from a different country, who conduct structured interviews with a range of national experts, many *inside* the bureaucracy. In the case of the current paper, the two authors have a close relationship with the South African bureaucracy, and have themselves been responsible for some of the work in this bureaucracy. Thus, evaluating the bureaucracy, as this paper does, often involves evaluating the work of current or former colleagues, or work done by the authors themselves. This creates obvious risks, which were discussed with RISE when the project began. To reduce the risk of bias, the paper pays special attention to laying out the arguments of various actors, including those who often criticise the bureaucracy, such as teacher unions, in their own words, and attempting to identify the rationale for these arguments. Obviously, the authors have their own positions on the various issues, and these should also be clear. The current paper, while critical of South Africa's education bureaucracy, probably directs fewer criticisms at the bureaucracy than would be the case with a paper produced by South African researchers who are not linked to the bureaucracy as we are. We would argue that this is not because we are less critical of the bureaucracy, but because our criticisms focus on a narrower range of problems. This, in turn, is informed by our view, as 'insiders', of what we perceive to be the key binding constraints, but moreover constraints that can at least partially be shifted in the existing political and institutional context.

2 A summary of the political economy framework

An ideal but unrealistic arrangement as a point of departure

⁴ Gustafsson, 2019b; Gustafsson, 2020a; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2018; National Treasury, 2017a.

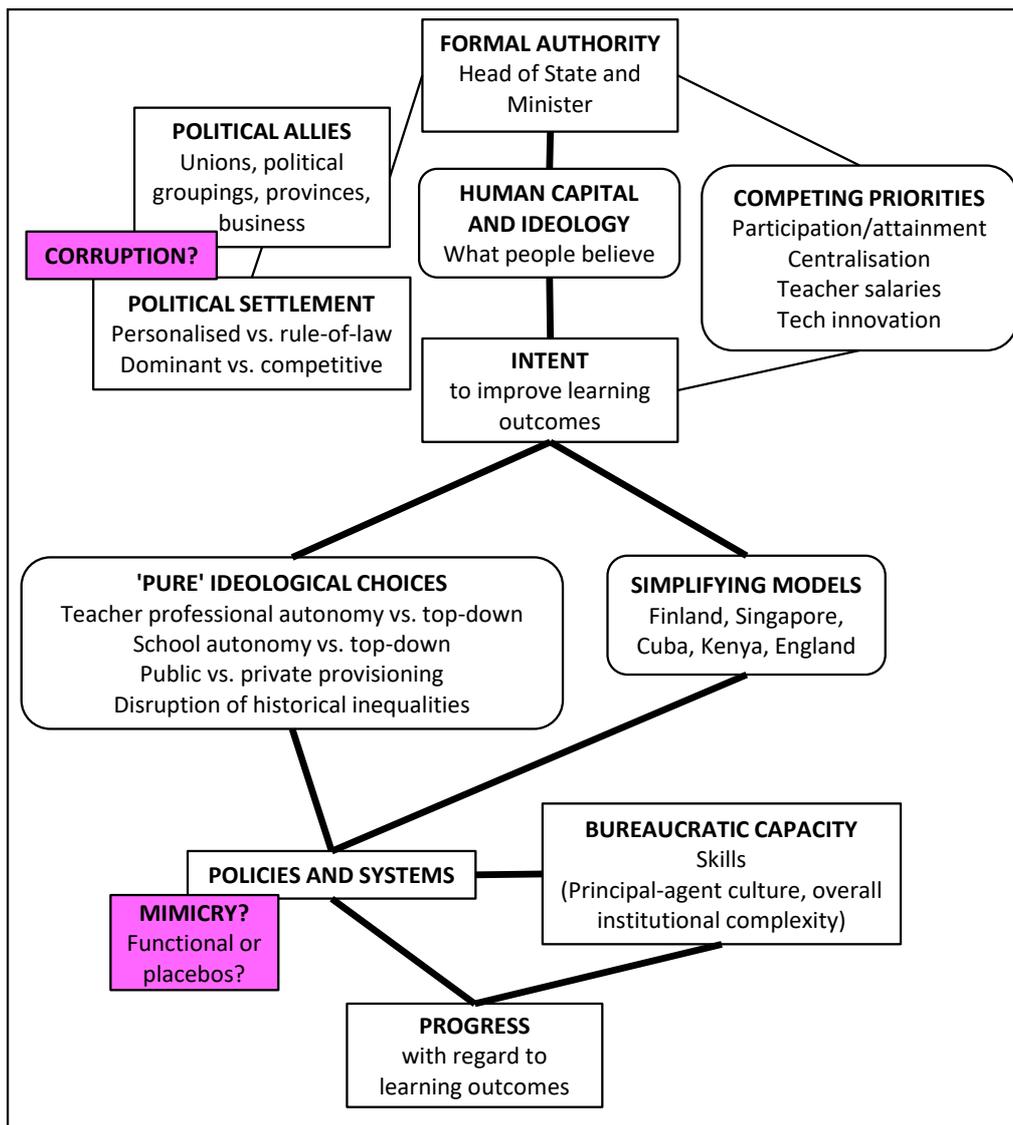
⁵ Taylor, 2009; Department of Basic Education, 2013; Taylor and Hoadley, 2018; Taylor, 2014.

We begin the paper by summarising the RISE political economy (PE) framework, as it currently exists. There are of course many ways of summarising this. We have chosen a summary that seemed best at facilitating this South Africa paper. Yet while the summary is informed by South African experiences, it is not South Africa-specific. It could apply to some other, similar country.

We describe the political economy by beginning with an ideal arrangement, through which progress in learning outcomes would be optimised. By ideal arrangement, we mean above all an arrangement where benign and relatively knowledgeable actors wield political and bureaucratic power. But we also mean a benign context for these actors, where for instance destructive political divisions are not a hurdle. The description of the arrangement is broad, covering the political economy elements emphasised in the RISE framework, but also other elements we thought were important for the paper. While the arrangement does not appear, at least not in our format, in the texts informing the RISE framework, it is easily compatible with the implied ideals of the framework. Admittedly, to some extent the RISE framework steers clear of universal ideals, while focussing strongly on how appropriate actions differ across national and political contexts. Nonetheless, we believe that behind this insistence on sufficient flexibility, there is a unified sense of what is best and right for advancing learning outcomes in the RISE framework.

We aim for a relatively straightforward narrative, supported by one diagram, Figure 1 below. The RISE framework, which itself is work in progress, is based on a critical analysis of various schools of thought in the political economy field. We have paid particular attention to one text which relates directly to the RISE framework: Pritchett (2018). However, this section also draws from a few other texts. To streamline the narrative, we discuss the links to the background literature, above all Pritchett (2018), within footnotes.

Figure 1: The political economy framework summarised



The ideal arrangement we use as the point of departure is unrealistic. No reality would be ideal, though it is likely to have elements of the ideal. However, positing an ideal, and then explaining in what ways reality deviates from this ideal, would be an approach that the reader is likely to be familiar with for describing a system.

The formal authority, its ideology, and its understanding of human capital

In the ideal arrangement, the **formal authority**, the head of state and minister of education, wield considerable power. These are elite figures, elected to their positions, in a liberal democratic system. They come with knowledge and **an ideology concerning how education and human capital functions in the broader world**. In this paper, the word ‘ideology’ is not used in a pejorative sense, as is sometimes the case. Its meaning here is along the lines of the Cambridge Dictionary definition: ‘a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based’⁶. This non-pejorative meaning is common in the South African education policy discourse.

⁶ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ideology>.

In the ideal arrangement, the beliefs of the elite are strongly informed by evidence. They understand the importance of developing basic skills among children as an absolute prerequisite, and even a determinant, of an informed electorate, a skilled labour market, and a citizenry capable of navigating a rules-based society.

An example of what the formal authority is *not* informed by is an ideology that states that channelling the right quantities of youths into different occupational training is *the* pre-eminent education challenge. A manpower training model is not at the *centre* of their beliefs, though this type of channelling obviously plays a role. A further example is that they do not believe that the right ICT⁷ technologies in schools will, largely on their own, prompt better performance among learners. They acknowledge that technology solutions may in the future revolutionise learning, but accept that to date there is no proven system-wide technology solution. They do not believe that unemployment is simply a problem of a limited and finite number of jobs supplied in the labour market. They understand that having more youths with a strong skills foundation, in areas such as language and numeracy, is itself a factor that creates jobs. In short, the authority has a good grasp of what economists would call human capital theory⁸.

The two key elite figures hold these very evidence-driven views because the broader political group they are a part of holds such views too. In fact, evidence-driven policy thinking pervades all influential actors in society.

The formal authority has established **political alliances with elites** such as union and business leaders. Power within these alliances can be fluid, as we are dealing with a liberal democracy, in other words a competitive **political settlement**. However, this settlement is characterised by sufficient acquiescence to elected leaders, even if there is lively debate. The dominance of the democratically elected is respected. Moreover, the settlement is based on a firm respect for the rule of law, from the constitution governing the democratic order down to the details of criminal law. There is thus no corruption.

The authority's expressed intent and its competing priorities

There is an **expressed intent** to improve learning outcomes, and hence the foundations of human capital and the economy. The formal authority is successful at maintaining the centrality of learning outcomes in a context where there are **competing priorities**, or distractions, which can be considered inherent to any schooling system. One competing priority is participation and grade attainment. Seeing the private individual returns to educational attainment and qualifications, the electorate understandably exerts pressure to increase access to qualifications. The authority accommodates this demand to an extent⁹, while ensuring that the quality of skills represented by these qualifications is not compromised¹⁰.

⁷ Information and communication technology.

⁸ Gershberg (2018), in reviewing Pritchett (2018), concludes that a solid understanding of human capital theory, and a clear and public expression of this, by the relevant elites, is one of the most important signals indicating that improvements in learning outcomes are possible.

⁹ The first key observation, of three, in Pritchett (2018: 1) is that government responsiveness to the population's demand for additional years of schooling is much lower than traditional economic models would suggest. Years of schooling increased dramatically, especially in developing countries, in fact faster than one would expect given growth in income, and given what one sees cross-sectionally if one combines recent data from developed and developing countries. It is this excessive growth in schooling in developing countries that leads Pritchett to conclude that factors other than private demand for schooling, based on income returns, must be playing an important role. That said, Pritchett does not

There is a temptation to centralise power beyond what may be rationally necessary to bring about educational progress. There are of course evidence-based reasons to centralise. Transaction with provincial authorities, or private providers, can be reduced, and this could improve efficiency. But centralisation becomes a ‘competing priority’ when it is pursued for reasons other than to improve learning outcomes. Such reasons could be an almost innate human tendency to want to accumulate power in a complex system¹¹. Or it could be due to personality or ideological clashes¹² among the stakeholders driving education.

The authority maintains a careful relationship with the powerful teacher unions. It satisfies the demands of labour as far as possible, while not losing sight of the core aim of improving learning outcomes. This means, for instance, that teacher salaries should not crowd out other essential inputs, such as spending on materials for learners, or school meals. The authority advocates professional support to teachers, while maintaining accountability systems that rest of the assumption that teachers and schools are at the centre of tackling learner under-performance.

The authority encourages investments in ‘tech’¹³ innovations in the schooling sector, in response to demands from the electorate for this, and in a context where suppliers promote specific products. However, the centrality of learning outcomes is never lost.

‘Pure’ ideological choices and their contamination

discard the public’s demand for more schooling as a factor, but it carries far less weight than is often claimed (Pritchett, 2018: 10). As discussed under a following footnote, socialisation is the key factor that has mostly been ignored. One historical factor not explored by Pritchett is competition *between* nations. This could have prompted investments in education, not by benign leaders wanting to empower the population, but by national elites believing that more education could help advance growth, and tax revenue, and hence bolster the country’s power internationally.

¹⁰ To underscore the high risk of inefficiency, in a traditional economic sense, Pritchett (2018: 7) contrasts the 1950 to 2010 historical gains in years of schooling across developed and developing countries. Developing countries reached 7.2 years of schooling in 2010, a level developing countries reached around 1965. Yet developed countries in 2010 were considerably less developed than developed countries were in 1965. The implication is that the expansion of schooling has been relatively ineffective in developing countries as a driver of economic growth and development.

¹¹ Pritchett’s (2018) third observation, of the three (the second one is discussed in following footnote), is that expanding schooling has been driven mostly by the need for social control, the maintenance of political stability (and hence preserving existing political elites), and ‘socialisation’. If Figure 1 followed Pritchett very closely, ‘Centralisation’ could have been replaced by ‘Socialisation’. The reason we use ‘Centralisation’ is that our aim is in part to produce a diagram that analysts and policymakers in South Africa can relate to. The ‘problem with unnecessary centralisation’ is a concept many would be able to identify with. Debating the ‘problem of socialisation’, or the tendency of governments to want to maintain power, is both intellectually demanding and could be awkward in a typical stakeholder meeting. As Pritchett (2018: 37) point out, what is necessary is an ‘actionable theory’ that can facilitate conversations about how to improve learning outcomes.

¹² To support his argument that the rather non-altruistic factor of socialisation is central, and not the more altruistic mechanism of responding to public demand, or some ideological commitment to empowering people through education, Pritchett (2018: 13) turns to breakdowns by dimensions such as democracy. Developing countries with more democratic governments, or governments more inclined to support civil liberties, did *not* display stronger growth in years of schooling. Moreover, it is argued that governments often expanded public schooling in areas where private schooling existed, instead of focussing on areas where no schooling existed. This, Pritchett argues, further undermines more altruistic explanations. It should be noted that Pritchett’s socialisation receives considerable attention in the sociology of education. In fact, the prominence of socialisation in schooling systems is something many South African education scholars would accept, in particular within the context of apartheid. We deal with this in section 3.

¹³ We use ‘tech’, in this colloquial manner, as ‘technology’ has a broader meaning in the economics of education encompassing, for instance, how teachers teach.

The intent of the authority must be translated to policies and action. For this translation to occur, it is necessary to have clarity around **‘pure’ ideological choices**. These are choices where the evidence is mixed, and the values embraced by society play an important role. One choice is the degree of teacher autonomy to have. While there is much research into this matter, credible evidence can be found leaning both towards more teacher autonomy and towards a more prescriptive and managerial approach¹⁴. Teacher autonomy is not a minor technical aspect of the schooling system. It is a fundamental feature of the culture of the system, in other words something that is difficult to change, even if it were desirable to do so.

Importantly, ‘pure’ ideological choices easily become ‘contaminated’. There is an important relationship between these ideological choices, political allies, and the political settlement. Choices are contaminated when considerations not related to the improvement of learning outcomes predominate. For instance, if the authority favours strong teacher autonomy not because this is viewed as educationally optimal, but because teacher unions insist on this in order to conceal teacher under-performance and limit teacher accountability, the choice would have become contaminated.

The three other choices listed in the diagram are also subject to contamination. School autonomy is closely related to teacher autonomy, yet different¹⁵. Teachers may enjoy considerable autonomy while the school principal is subject to a high degree of top-down management. The choice between public and private provisioning¹⁶ as a pure ideological choice is distinct from the authority’s temptation to centralise (discussed above). There is evidence pointing to the effectiveness of private provisioning, but also evidence pointing to outcome problems associated with such provisioning. In particular, more private provisioning seems to raise inequalities in learning outcomes¹⁷. There seem to be legitimate and complex choices that must be made in this regard in the interests of furthering learning outcomes. The temptation to increase control is a different matter. To illustrate, purely public provisioning can go hand in hand with strong centralisation, or strong de-centralisation. The choice between public and private provisioning becomes contaminated when, for instance, private provisioning is shunned because unions fear losing control, and not because of concerns relating to, for instance, inequalities in learning outcomes.

There are conceivably some trade-offs between advancing average learner performance and advancing the equality of learner performance, both of which are of strong interest to our idealised formal authority. Educational progress is to a large degree about breaking cycles of inter-generational transfer of privilege and social disadvantage. This raises the question of whether relatively strong action to break these cycles should be introduced. The most vigorous action which can be taken in

¹⁴ A World Bank study by Piza *et al* (2020), focussing on Brazil, found that teacher autonomy improved learning outcomes. At the same time, evidence from South Africa and elsewhere points to the effectiveness of ‘scripted lessons’, which would typically be seen as running counter to teacher autonomy – see Department of Basic Education (2017a).

¹⁵ School autonomy is generally accompanied by considerable community and parental control. Pritchett (2018: 41) argues that the stronger the state’s focus on schooling as a process of socialisation, the less likely it will be to allow parents to exercise control over schools.

¹⁶ In explaining the tendency of governments to avoid private provisioning of schooling (though with public funding), Pritchett (2018: 43) argues that ‘the inculcation of beliefs is not third party contractible’. Inculcating beliefs necessary for socialisation and nation-building, unlike the teaching of basic skills, is not something that can be outsourced to the private sector.

¹⁷ Pritchett (2018: 35) makes reference to evidence for the relative under-performance of public schools. On risks associated with privatisation, Mizala and Torche (2012) discuss the inequities associated with Chile’s voucher system.

this regard is arguably to ensure that teachers are not recycled into the socio-economic strata they originally come from. Without an intervention, it is likely that teachers from advantaged backgrounds will end up teaching learners from advantaged families, and that teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds will teach the disadvantaged. This is a key mechanism through which cycles of disadvantage are *not* broken. The choices made with regard to the distribution of teachers can be entirely based on criteria relating to learning outcomes, and the equality of this, or they can be influenced by interest groups, such as historically advantaged groups wanting to preserve their advantages. If the political authority simply bends to the demands of these groups, the choice can be said to have been contaminated.

So, the authority must manage difficult choices, where the evidence is not always clear-cut, and there is a risk that influences not relating to learning outcomes will be brought to bear on the decisions. There is a further risk. Even in a situation where all those who shape policy are completely focussed on improving learning outcomes, decisions may not be taken if there are high levels of ideological divergence¹⁸. This can result in strategy logjams. However, in our idealised scenario, the authority is able to provide the leadership needed to convince everyone to follow a specific path, and thus prevent inaction, even if not everyone is completely happy with the final decisions.

Other countries as simplifying models

In order to concretise ideas around policy pathways, the authority and policy stakeholders use existing countries as **simplifying models** of what these pathways look like in very practical terms. In our ideal situation, policymakers are realistic and understand the role of, firstly, time and secondly, context. They understand that there is no short-cut route to 'being Singapore', one of the strongest performers in the international tests. Similarly, they understand that the cultural and historical specificities of Singapore may make it impossible to follow that country's policy pathway, even in the long term.

The impact of bureaucratic capacity on policies, systems and the likelihood of progress

We now turn to the actual **policies and systems** of the schooling sector, designed to realise the political intent. Ideally, these reflect choices made, openly and explicitly, around difficult ideological questions, and the less difficult technical questions. The latter would include optimal pupil-teacher ratios, or the frequency of national assessments, for instance. Both the detailed design work behind policies and systems, and policy implementation, rely heavily on **bureaucratic capacity**. Relevant skills are obviously at the heart of this capacity. But institutional and bureaucratic complexity, and culture, for instance in relation to the accepted balance of compliance and debate among bureaucrats, can also be considered a part of administrative capacity. If complexity and culture result in the sub-optimal use of skills, the authority tries to remove the constraints, for instance through public sector

¹⁸ Ideologies and their role in the politics of education is not dealt with by Pritchett (2018). We will argue that at least in a context such as South Africa's, dealing explicitly with ideological narratives is necessary for a proper understanding of the politics of education. Mehta (2013), while not referring to 'ideology', argues that a similar concept, 'paradigms', has shaped education policies in the United States in ways which are not fully appreciated. Wang *et al* (2006) argue that ideologies relating to education should be considered in research on educational improvement. One could of course go further and examine the role of more all-encompassing ideologies, which are often not neatly arranged in a left-right spectrum, on educational decisions. To some extent, we do this in the paper.

reform, though this may be difficult insofar as it might require change beyond the education sector.

Finally, there is **progress**, or a movement towards improved learning outcomes¹⁹.

Corruption, mimicry and other ‘contaminants’

The above naïve scenario was painted to serve as a point of departure for less ideal political economy scenarios²⁰. There is much that can go wrong. Decisions in relation to competing priorities and ideological choices are easily contaminated by factors closely related to the kind of political settlement that prevails. To illustrate, powerful teacher unions may push for an over-prioritisation of teacher salaries in the policy debates, and link this to an ideology where teacher autonomy is elevated, and the central obstacle to progress is seen as lacking resources, both with respect to salaries and spending on other school inputs²¹.

Two important and common flaws stand out: **corruption** and **mimicry**. Corruption could take the form of the nepotistic, and hence inefficient, granting of government tenders. Nepotism could take the form of positions being occupied by people to whom political favours are owed, or who are members of elite families or ethnic groups, as opposed to those with the most appropriate skills. It is important to differentiate here between the corrupt favouring of certain groups when hiring occurs, and a transparent system of affirmative action, such as that legislated in South Africa and many other countries. Skills are not the sole factor, but they should be a central factor.

Corruption is likely to be rooted at the highest levels of power, within the relationships between political allies. Once a feature here, it may spread throughout the entire education system, unless elites are successful in limiting corrupt practices to themselves.

¹⁹ A concern underlying the urgency of understanding the production of learning outcomes in developing countries better, is the finding in Pritchett (2018: 30) that not only are outcomes weak in developing countries, they are often not improving. In fact, in rural India they appear to have deteriorated. Importantly, however, progress with respect to learning outcomes seems far more heterogeneous than progress with respect to increases in years of schooling. For instance, among 46 developing countries, the percentage of females who completed exactly six school grades who are able to read a sentence varies from 100% to almost 0%, with substantial variation across countries. This finding is based on international Demographic and Health Survey data.

²⁰ It must be emphasised that Figure 1 applies to a liberal democracy. In Pritchett’s (2018: 27) analysis, Vietnam stands out as a striking example of a developing countries with exceptionally good learning outcomes, while controlling for home background factors. Another outlier is Cuba, whose exceptional performance in international tests has been the subject of a few analyses, for instance McEwan and Marshall (2004). Other communist or ex-communist countries, such as China and certain countries in Eastern Europe, also appear to perform exceptionally well in these tests. The link between a communist past and learning outcomes has received little attention in the literature, yet it seems clearly important for understanding the political economy of education. As pointed out by Pritchett (2018: 38), it is important for the analyst attempting to understand educational progress not to be so immersed in a particular ideology that this blurs possible causal relationships. If one assumes that the best political system is a democracy, one should not automatically assume that democracies produce the best learning outcomes.

²¹ The role of teacher unions in creating and maintaining rather large and centralised schooling systems is not dealt with explicitly in Pritchett (2018), though concepts of politically powerful unions put forward in for instance Vaillant (2005) and Crouch (2005a) are easily compatible with Pritchett’s framework. Inevitably, we pay considerable attention to teacher unions.

Mimicry²², unlike corruption, does not entail breaking the law, though it does introduce deep dishonesty into the system. Policies and institutions mimic effectiveness, though they suffer serious gaps and contradictions. Mimicry would typically be reflected in: unaffordable policies; policies which are so intent on satisfying the full range of stakeholders that they are rendered unworkable; and institutions within the bureaucracy whose names and stated role are completely at odds with their human capacity. In short, institutions and policies become placebos aimed at satisfying aspirations superficially, as opposed to functional elements of the system designed to respond to aspirations substantively.

Mimicry may arise when there is undue political pressure on the authority, as in the above example where teacher unions use teacher autonomy as a smokescreen for under-performance. This could result in a policy which mimics policies of other relatively well-performing countries, in its advocacy of teacher autonomy, arguably a legitimate and important goal, while in fact the undeclared intention of the policy is to protect teachers from scrutiny and accountability.

How is this framework different to what already exists?

How is the political economy framework outlined so far different to the frameworks which commonly inform education development work? To represent a typical framework, we use a 2003 World Bank manual aimed at education policy analysts²³. The implied framework of this manual is that policy priorities display varying degrees of appropriateness, depending on how well grounded they are in evidence, particularly cost-effectiveness analysis. Inappropriate priorities become more likely where country-specific cost-effectiveness analyses are absent, or poorly done. Consequently, the manual focusses strongly on how to perform such analyses, and other related analyses, for instance on the equity of teacher allocation. Analytical skills in the bureaucracy are assumed to be critically important. These skills are obviously of enormous importance for an education bureaucracy, and for the broader set of stakeholders who shape policy, yet they are often absent. While the World Bank manual acknowledges that policy positions not grounded in evidence are common in the policymaking process, it does not cover how one may analyse *this*. In other words, it does not provide political economy models for understanding the system. It moreover does not deal with mimicry, as discussed above, or the effects of corruption²⁴.

Arguably, the 2003 World Bank manual remains representative of the predominant approach, or the orthodoxy, of education policy analysis. What this approach

²² Pritchett's (2018: 1, 42) second observation (of the three) is that 'isomorphism' of various types plays an important role in the behaviour of countries in the area of education. We use the more familiar term 'mimicry' here. In fact, in Pritchett *et al* (2012), the term 'isomorphic mimicry' is used. Trying to satisfy conflicting pressures can result in mimicry. But mimicry is also a way of dealing with complexity, and an inability to understand this sufficiently. If country X appears successful in most respects, and country Y aspires to being like country X, country Y may copy policies from X, even if the workability of those policies in the context Y are not properly understood. Pritchett essentially accuses donor organisations of facilitating this type of mimicry, to the detriment of the donor recipient countries.

²³ Mingat *et al*, 2003.

²⁴ Pritchett (2018) uses the term 'normative as positive', or NAP, to describe narrow models of educational development which exclude the wider political context. Such models fail to admit their normative bias, or the assumption that political factors work in simple enough ways to leave them out of the equation. This bias has been powerful enough to deflect attention away from the fact that the data do not support commonly held views. For example, governments one might expect to be more responsive to the population's demand for more schooling, have on average not been more responsive.

emphasises is important, but it provides an incomplete analysis. There has in recent years been a limited shift towards a political economy focus. One 'manual' which stands out in this regard is the 2018 *World Development Report* (WDR) of the World Bank²⁵, which focusses specifically on schooling. This report includes some emphasis on understanding 'unhealthy politics', where groups such as teacher unions or contractors with political connections providing new technologies shift the emphasis towards patronage in the hiring of teachers or the profits of the contractor, and away from learning outcomes. How one deals with these problems of corruption is outside the scope of the World Bank report, though it is implied that reliable and widely disseminated information on the problem can help actors in the system, and voters at the polling booths, deal with corruption.

The WDR does not deal with the detection of mimicry in policies and institutions as an analytical device. It also does not focus on second-best solutions, where to some extent one accepts the unhealthy politics and designs policies which limit the harm done to the task of improving learning outcomes. Identifying such second-best options, within a given political context, is something which receives attention in the RISE framework. One can illustrate this, using the example of patronage in the hiring of teachers. If there is a risk of this, it may be optimal to centralise hiring, even if this leaves well-managed schools with less choice, something which could reduce effectiveness in those schools. The benefits of centralisation, in the form of less inappropriate hiring in schools where the risk of patronage *is* high, may outweigh the quality costs incurred by schools where this risk is absent. Of course, one could differentiate hiring rules across schools in accordance with the risk, but information on where the risk is large or small is often not available. Patronage in the hiring of teachers could occur in a centralised model, of course, but the risks of this kind of corruption at the centre may be smaller, because the scale of the process means there are more rules-based procedures, and fewer personal connections.

The World Bank does also not examine in any depth how ideologies, or world views, play a role in education policymaking. This paper will deal fairly extensively with this, drawing from the case of South Africa.

What are the problems with approaching educational improvement *without* some political economy framework of the kind described above? A useful way of thinking of the problem is to consider the typical policy recommendation. Analysts inside and outside government commonly produce policy recommendations. These are often in the form of a data analysis, some finding, and then some recommendation directed at 'policymakers', in many senses the education authority discussed above. Anyone who works in the education planning environment will be familiar with the lament that those in power do not pay much attention to these recommendations, or the analysis behind them²⁶. Of course, there are instances where a policy analysis *can* be influential, but this seems rare. One likely explanation is that policy analyses seldom take into account the political context²⁷. Political alliances, for instance those with unions, can severely limit what is politically feasible. An analysis that takes this into

²⁵ World Bank, 2018: 189.

²⁶ Pritchett (2018: 39) identifies two categories of policy recommendations. First, 'mistake/information' recommendations implicitly state that the formal authority misunderstands something basic about the schooling system, and advocate for a more informed view of the problem. Second, 'hortatory', or exhortative, policy recommendations are about urging government to be more committed. Both categories are made very weak if there is no understanding of the broader political economy.

²⁷ There are many additional and likely explanations: an insufficient sense of the financial cost of the recommendation; insufficient advice on the legal ramifications of the recommendations; and at times limited success in taking very complex policy questions and simplifying them in ways which make sense to the reader.

account, narrows down its recommendations to fit the political context, and ventures into the important areas of communication and even ideological narratives, is more likely to be seen as interesting and useful by policymakers.

3 A basic historical account of the last three decades

Five distinct historical periods organised by head of state

The last apartheid president was **F.W. De Klerk**, who was president between 1989 and the country's first democratic elections in 1994. The white minority government he headed was essentially accountable to the white electorate only. At the time, whites constituted just 11% of the population. This percentage has dropped to 8% currently, though in absolute terms the white population has increased slightly. In 1990, faced with international sanctions and almost continual protests, especially in urban areas designated for black South Africans, De Klerk initiated a process of reforms. The dominant liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), its close political ally the South African Communist Party (SACP), and other previously banned organisations were unbanned, allowing exiles to return legally. Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years in prison, as were other political prisoners. Considerable political uncertainty arose as many whites opposed De Klerk's reforms, as De Klerk's government, and rogue elements of this, attempted to weaken the ANC, and as the ANC competed with the party which had historically controlled the KwaZulu apartheid 'Bantustan'. In the period 1990 to 1994, there were around 14,000 political killings. Tensions rose to critical levels when a white assassin killed Chris Hani, leader of the SACP, in 1993. The ensuing crisis forced De Klerk to drop many of his demands in the negotiations for a new constitution, which had started in 1991.

In 1994, an interim constitution was agreed on and democratic elections held. The new constitution, finalised in 1996, created nine provinces based roughly on past boundaries. Schooling was to be run by the provinces, specifically provincial education ministers known as Members of the Executive Council, or MECs, with the national minister exercising powers in areas such as curriculum and examinations.

Many schools serving black learners were disrupted by the ongoing violence. Schools serving white learners were a key matter in the negotiations, with many whites attempting to increase the governance powers of parents in their schools, while retaining as much of their historical funding as possible. Just before 1994, spending on every white learner was around five times higher than for every black learner²⁸. White state schools were given permission to admit black learners already before 1994, an opportunity some schools made use of. Private schools, known as 'independent schools' in South Africa today, had been allowed to mix races since 1986, but accounted for just 2% of grades 1 to 12 school learners in around 1994.

In 1990, the ANC-aligned South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) was founded. It was already then by far the most politically influential teacher union.

Nelson Mandela easily won the 1994 elections, with the ANC obtaining 70% of votes. Mandela remained president for his entire five-year term, until 1999, before

²⁸ Gustafsson and Patel, 2006. This source explains that between 1991 and 2005, public spending per white learner in the public system declined in real terms by 85%. This was achieved largely through retrenching personnel in historically white schools. Crucially, it seems few left historically white schools to move into historically black schools. Most left public teaching altogether. In historically black schools, spending per learner doubled in real terms between 1991 and 2005.

retiring from politics. The Mandela presidency is generally remembered by South Africans as a time of hope and relative stability. The political violence largely subsided. The ANC's policy proposals formulated prior to 1994, especially those focussing on how to dismantle the apartheid system, were translated to legislation. Mandela, and his deputy president Thabo Mbeki, prioritised economic stability, while aiming for sufficient redress of the apartheid injustices. Obviously, the depth of these injustices made it impossible to make a large dent on them in a short space of time. The redress focus was two-pronged. On the one hand, there was a focus on strengthening and expanding the small black middle class, which had been deprived of many economic opportunities in the past. For instance, affirmative action was quickly built into government procurement rules. Appointments of more black people into the public service were a further measure. Affirmative action required continuing with the apartheid-era classifications of the population into four groups, the current terminology being (percentages are percentage of the population in 2019): black African (80%); coloured (9%); Indian (3%); and white (8%). On the other hand, government policies focussed on improving the plight of the poor, commonly understood to constitute around 40% of the population, and nearly all black African or coloured. This was done through, for instance, housing projects and the expansion of basic water and electricity services.

By the end of the Mandela presidency, there had been substantial demographic shifts in historically white, and Indian, state schools. For instance, in historically white state schools in Gauteng, the province encompassing Johannesburg and Pretoria, by 2001 31% of learners were black African and white enrolment was down to 59%²⁹. While formerly white schools only covered around 9% of all public school enrolments nationally, the shifts came with the promise of a more mixed middle class, which was seen as essential for social stability. In historically black schools, a key change was that apartheid-era salary differentials, based on race, were eliminated from 1995. Essentially, the salary scales which had applied to white teachers only were now applied to all teachers. This obviously pushed the salary bill up for government³⁰. Crucially, the teacher unions cemented a system whereby salaries would be determined nationally, even if provinces were the employer.

Two key pieces of legislation were passed in 1996: the South African Schools Act and the National Education Policy Act. The former specified the legal status of schools and the powers of each school's governing body, in which parents would form the majority. Crucially, this act allowed public schools to augment their spending through the collection of fees from parents, something white parents had advocated strongly for. This right, however, came with a duty to run some system of fee exemptions for learners from poorer households³¹. The second act specified the policymaking and oversight role of the national minister.

In 1998, a new school curriculum, Curriculum 2005, began to be rolled out (the roll-out was meant to end in 2005). It was an idealistic and ultimately unpopular curriculum grounded on 'outcomes based education', or OBE. It emphasised a departure from the autocratic culture of apartheid schooling, but de-emphasised subject content. The curriculum documents were seen as overly theoretical and

²⁹ Chisholm and Sujee, 2006.

³⁰ Gustafsson and Patel, 2008.

³¹ In 2009, 10% learners in fee-charging schools were fully exempt from the payment of fees – see Department of Education (2009: 126).

impractical³². This was one of the few areas of education reform where foreign advisors played a relatively prominent role³³.

In 1999, the ANC again won the national elections, and **Thabo Mbeki** became president. Mbeki emphasised the need for implementation and action, after the 1994 to 1999 years of intense policy design and promulgation work. Mbeki was widely seen as a technocratic president, without Mandela's ability to appeal to a wide audience. Though ostensibly supportive of the democratic constitution, he came across as autocratic. Many government officials recall that the space for debate, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS, was very limited. Bureaucrats commonly spoke about 'marching orders' from the president. Some felt that this was necessary in a country where debates over even minor policies had become protracted, during the Mandela era's liberating openness and attempts to cater for all. Arguably, it was Mbeki's failure to accommodate the powerful trade unions adequately which led the ANC's National Executive Committee to request him to step down, which he did in 2008. The emerging political narrative was that Mbeki had betrayed the revolutionary ideals of the ANC and was not redressing past inequalities fast enough. Jacob Zuma led this opposition to Mbeki within the ANC.

In the schooling system, shortly after 1999 new policies aimed at equalising, across schools, non-personnel public funding, and the ratio of learners to publicly paid educators, were implemented. This helped to reduce class sizes in historically black schools, but also pushed up the number of publicly employed teachers. The resourcing changes occurring in the space of a few years have been described as possibly the most ambitious structural changes ever experienced in any schooling system³⁴. With the apartheid legacy of unequal learner funding largely undone, the minister of education assuming office in 2004, Naledi Pandor, initiated a number of policy changes aimed at improving quality and accountability in schools. She began replacing OBE with greater curriculum specificity, improved access to textbooks and took the first steps towards an ambitious national assessment system, to complement the existing Grade 12 examinations.

After a short caretaker presidency under Kgalema Motlanthe, of less than a year, following Mbeki's 2008 resignation, **Jacob Zuma** became president upon winning the 2009 elections for the ANC. He also won the subsequent 2014 elections, but was himself forced to step down in 2018. The Zuma presidency came with many uncertainties. Above all, the possibility that he would shift economic policy towards the left was met with both enthusiasm and fear. Zuma's style, in contrast to that of Mbeki's, was populist. He had no formal schooling as a child, where Mandela was a lawyer and Mbeki had a master's degree in economics from Sussex University. During Zuma's first five-year term, much of the more technocratic work was left to Trevor Manuel, minister of finance under Mbeki. Manuel, as the planning minister in the presidency, initiated a process that would lead to the release, in 2012, of South Africa's first national development plan (NDP). Curiously, neither Mandela nor Mbeki had attempted this. Manuel also oversaw the establishment of the National Planning Commission, and a centralised planning bureaucracy focussing on alignment across sectors. For many planners in government, this was a good time. More structure was being introduced, and under Zuma critical debate of policies in government became more possible than it had been under Mbeki. Manuel left the Zuma government in 2014, apparently due to frustration with the lack of focus on service delivery.

³² Crouch and Hoadley, 2018.

³³ Schmidt, 2017.

³⁴ Crouch, 2005b.

While Zuma would often use the rhetoric of revolution and redress, there were no fundamental changes to the structure of the economy. Instead, Zuma's government increasingly became associated with a series of corruption scandals. The beginning of the end for Zuma occurred in 2015 when he fired the minister of finance, Nhlanhla Nene, for attempting to block dubious deals, in particular a murky nuclear deal with Rosatom of Russia. In 2018, the ANC forced Zuma to resign, and the deputy president, Cyril Ramaphosa, a lawyer by profession, took over.

Meanwhile in Parliament, in 2014 Mmusi Maimane became the first ever black leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition. This reflected shifts within the DA, which had been seen as representing white interests, though the 22% of votes obtained in the 2014 elections point to a broader support base. In 2019, Maimane, but also other black leaders, left the DA, citing racial tensions within the party as a reason. In 2014, the position of second-largest opposition party was taken by the newly formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), led by a former Zuma ally, and former head of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema. The EFF has attracted many young black supporters and defines itself as revolutionary and socialist. The ANC has benefitted from the relative weakness and lack of unity among opposition parties.

Soon after assuming power, Zuma increased the number of ministries. Education was split into 'basic education' and 'higher education and training', with two ministers instead of one. The basic education minister, Angelina Motshekga, was appointed in 2009 and at the time of writing still occupied this position, making her the longest serving current minister in one portfolio. Under Motshekga, many of Pandor's reforms were taken forward. The Annual National Assessments continued for four years, from 2011 to 2014, after which the unions essentially stopped this programme. An ambitious 'national workbooks' programme was launched, which involved providing every learner, up to Grade 9, with voluminous full-colour books for languages and mathematics. Corruption and nepotism became prominent concerns, leading to an independent inquiry, initiated by the minister, and a report sometimes referred to as the 'jobs for cash' report³⁵.

Cyril Ramaphosa is seen as heading one of two factions in the ANC, the other being under Zuma. Ramaphosa set up the Commission of Enquiry into Allegations of State Capture, commonly referred to as the Zondo Commission, to bring into the open corruption that occurred during the Zuma years. Zuma's supporters have often claimed that Ramaphosa's true motive is not stemming corruption, but blocking the radical economic transformation of the economy supposedly initiated by Zuma. While these arguments are patently not credible, Zuma retains considerable support in the ANC, and among many South Africans frustrated with high unemployment, large income inequalities, and the apparently slow pace of change.

Under Ramaphosa, the key change experienced by schools had nothing to do with political intentions, but with the the COVID-19 pandemic. The South African government's response has in general been considered evidence-driven, though increasingly it has prioritised the continued functioning of the economy, and schools, as opposed to restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. As in virtually all countries, the disruptions to schooling have been severe and very worrying.

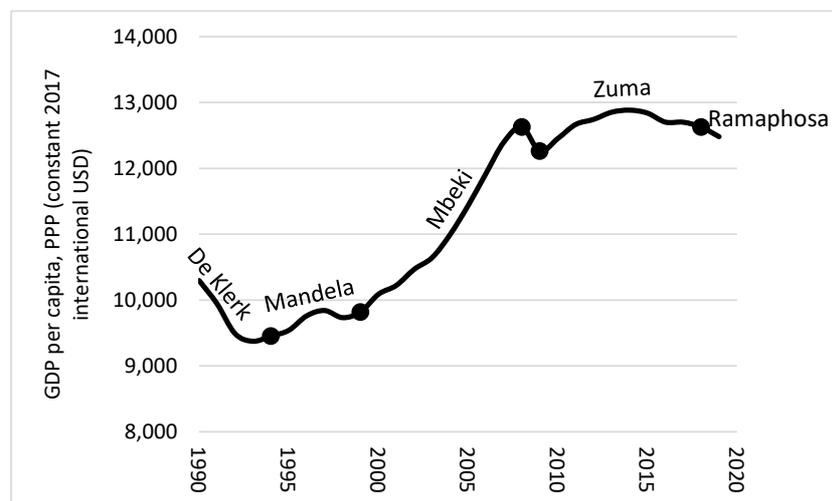
³⁵ Department of Basic Education, 2016b.

Income per capita and poverty trends

Examination of a few key indicators helps to identify what differentiates the five periods identified above, but also how persistent problems span across more than one period.

While poverty is relatively well studied in South Africa, poverty trends receive surprisingly little attention. In the World Bank's dataset of poverty ratios determined *nationally*, South Africa has four values for the period 2005 to 2019. Middle income countries such as Peru and Indonesia have fresh values for every year in this fifteen-year period³⁶. Currently, the most widely used trend analysis seems to be a 2017 Statistics South Africa report³⁷, which focussed on four annual data points in the period 2006 to 2015. That report concluded that poverty decreased up to 2011, before increasing. This is obviously very concerning, but also not surprising, given trends shown in the next two graphs. After 2007, the economic situation clearly worsened, in part because of the 2007 to 2008 global financial crisis. High unemployment is probably South Africa's most widely discussed economic concern. As seen in Figure 3, since 2000 the official unemployment rate has never been below 20%.

Figure 2: Income per capita 1990 to 2019

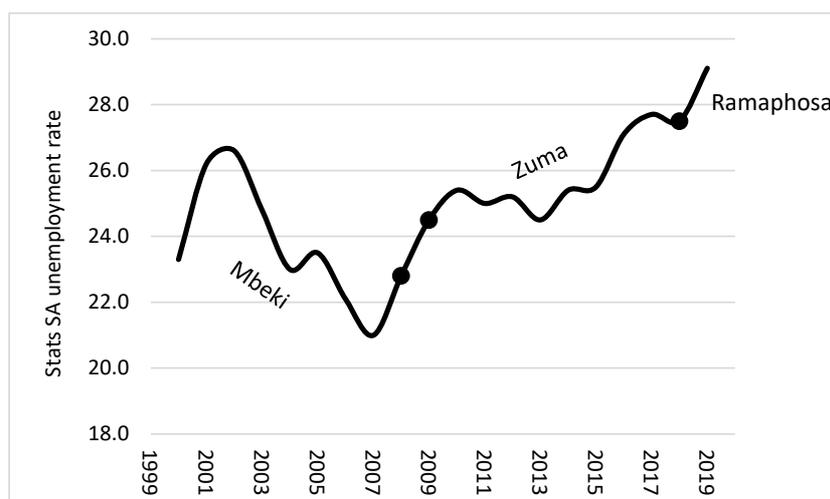


Source: World Development Indicators of the World Bank.

³⁶ Indicator 'Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)'. South Africa's four values are for the years 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2014, suggesting that measurement has become less frequent over time.

³⁷ Statistics South Africa, 2017.

Figure 3: Unemployment rate 2000 to 2019



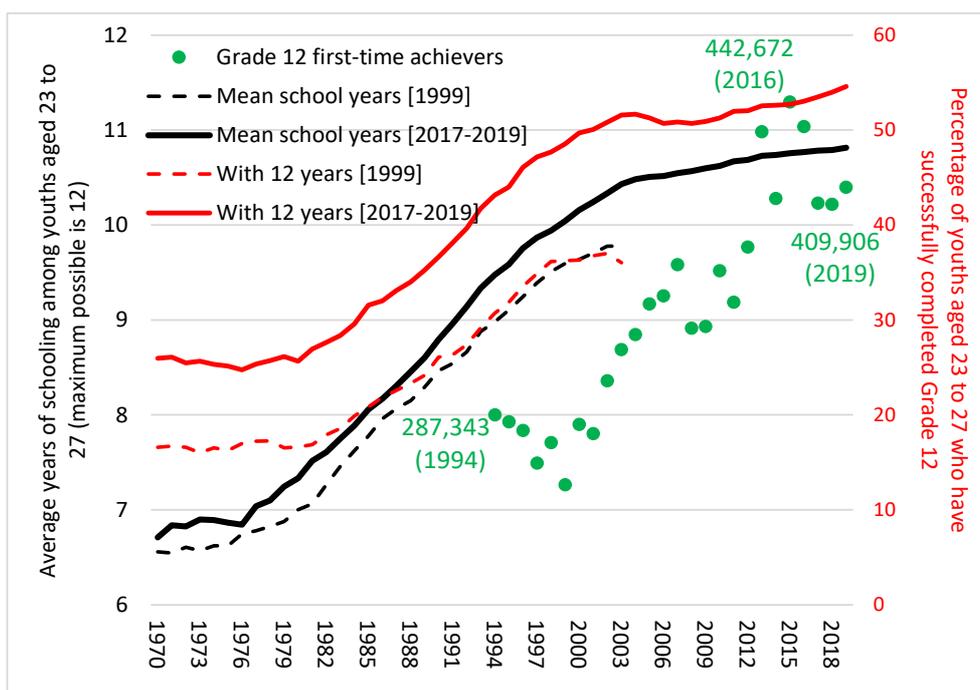
Source: Stats SA quarter 3 unemployment rate. For 2000 to 2007, revised values released in 2009 were used.

Historical trends for grade attainment and learning outcomes

What are the key **long-range trends with respect to grade attainment and learning outcomes** in the South African schooling system? Figure 4 illustrates the trend over almost half a century with respect to school grade attainment among youths aged 23 to 27. The four curves drawing from household data point to a steep and continuous improvement in years of schooling attained between around 1980 and 2006, after which improvements continued, but at a slower pace. What is clear is that participation in schooling ‘took off’ after the 1976 school uprisings, sparked off in Soweto, Johannesburg. These uprisings, conducted largely by secondary school students, prompted the apartheid government to expand schooling, partly as a means of controlling the youth population. The fact that the 1994 transition to democracy is not reflected in any specific change at that point in the trajectory supports Pritchett’s argument that the correlation between democracy and the supply of schooling is in general not strong. States often expand schooling for reasons that are not idealistic or altruistic, but rather based on considerations of the survival of governing elites. The current attainment level, of around 55% of youths successfully completing twelve years of schooling, is within the typical range for a middle income country³⁸.

³⁸ Van der Berg *et al*, 2020.

Figure 4: Grade attainment of youths 1970-2019



Sources: Own analysis of 1999 October Household data and pooled 2017 to 2019 General Household Survey data. In the key, years in square brackets are the years of the data source. To illustrate the approach, statistics for youths in 1970 were obtained by examining older people in the 1999 or 2017-2019 household data. The green markers reflect values seen in Department of Basic Education (2021: 15), which in turn are partly obtained from Taylor (2009).

Note: Black curves should be read against the left-hand vertical axis, red curves against the right-hand vertical axis, and green markers should not be read against either vertical axis.

The fact that later household data point to higher levels of grade attainment in Figure 4 is noteworthy. For instance, using 1999 household data, around 18% of those aged 23 to 27 in 1976 had successfully completed Grade 12, while the later 2017 to 2019 household data point to an attainment statistic of around 26% for the same group of people. The most likely explanation of this is that many youths obtain the Grade 12 certificate rather late in life, beyond age 27. This is likely to occur outside of full-time schooling, through some part-time route³⁹. The green markers in Figure 4 reflect the number of Grade 12 learners obtaining the 'Matric' national qualification, following their initial sitting in the examination. What is not illustrated are the results of subsequent sittings, when candidates unsuccessful in the first sitting may succeed in obtaining the results needed for the qualification. The green markers represent a steeper incline than the household-based attainment curves: the number of Matrics increased by 43% between 1994 and 2019, against a figure of 26% if the recent household data are used. Here too, a key explanation would be the acquisition of the Matric at a later point in life.

Curiously, government reports rarely break down learner achievement by race. The preference, for instance in the official Grade 12 examinations reports, is for breakdowns by school quintile. This is curious given that employment equity rules, which carry penalties, require employers to demonstrate a striving for demographic representativity among employees, which in the case of skilled positions depends on the outputs of the education system. It could be the persistent racial inequalities

³⁹ Successful completion of upper secondary education at a rather late point in life is not uncommon in developing countries. See for instance the peaks of the country curves in Van der Berg *et al* (2020: 52).

which make government reluctant to report educational attainment statistics by race. With respect to the crucial matter of successful completion of Grade 12, inequalities are still considerable, though they have declined. For instance, the probability of obtaining the Matric for whites born in 1960 was 4.5 times higher than for black Africans born in the same year⁴⁰. For the population born in 1980, this inequality ratio had dropped to 1.9. Inequalities with respect to the achievement of high performance benchmarks in the Matric are larger. For instance, among Grade 12 examination candidates (not the population of youths) the probability of obtaining the kind of mathematics results required for engineering studies at a university has in recent years been 4.5 times higher for white (and Indian) candidates than for black African (and coloured) candidates⁴¹. More black African candidates than white candidates now reach this performance benchmark, but their probability of achieving it is lower.

Figure 5 illustrates the remarkable quality gains made by South African schools, off an extremely low base, over the 1995 to 2019 period. From perhaps as early as 2006, improvements were seen in PIRLS Grade 4 reading, and SACMEQ⁴² Grade 6 reading and mathematics. These improvements, of around 0.07 standard deviations a year for PIRLS 2006 to 2016, and 0.09 standard deviations a year for SACMEQ mathematics 2007 to 2013, are among the steepest one can expect, given what has been seen elsewhere in the world⁴³. Yet it needs to be kept in mind that even after these improvements, South Africa remained an exceptionally weak performer internationally. In fact, Pritchett (2019) points to South Africa being the most striking outlier, relative to its general level of economic development, among developing countries, with Vietnam being the striking outlier at the top end of the spectrum. South Africa's recent improvements have not been sustained long enough to substantially change this pattern.

At the lower secondary level, improvements may have started as early as 2002, judging from TIMSS Grade 9 results⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Department of Education, 2008: 39.

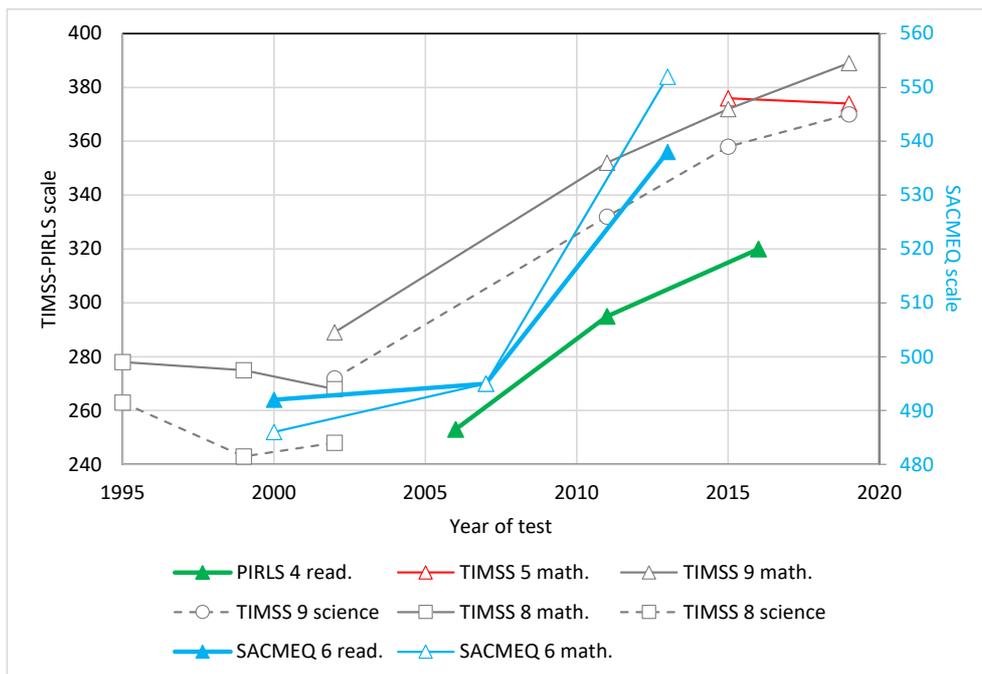
⁴¹ Gustafsson, 2016.

⁴² Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

⁴³ Department of Basic Education, 2020: 33.

⁴⁴ Household data indicate that youths completing Grade 8 rose from around 82% to 88% between 1995 and 2002. From 2002 onwards, the figure has remained highly constant, at around 88%. The 1995 to 2002 slope for TIMSS should thus be somewhat more positive than what is shown in the graph. However, some modelling suggests that if there was an upward trend, it was unlikely to be more than 2 TIMSS points a year, much less than the around 6 TIMSS points a year improvement seen for 2002 to 2019, in Grade 9. A relatively static trend before 2002 thus seems highly likely. There is virtually no participation bias at the primary level. Already by around 1995, 95% of children were successfully completing Grade 7, with this figure being around 97% in recent years – see Department of Education (2008: xiii) and Gustafsson (2020b: 20).

Figure 5: Results from international tests 1995-2019



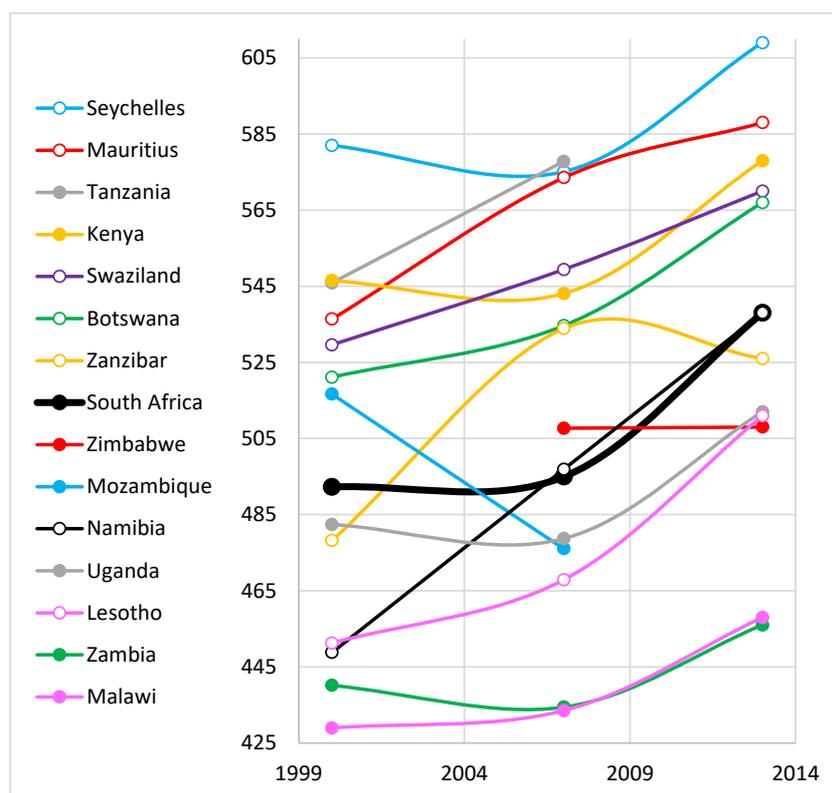
Sources: The authoritative reports providing the values shown here are referenced in Department of Basic Education (2017c). The PIRLS 2011 revised value is explained in Department of Basic Education (2020), also IEA (2021).

What is concerning, is that TIMSS Grade 5, for which tests were first administered in 2015, displays no progress in mathematics between 2015 and 2019. Though this is a trend from just one programme, it is a particularly reliable programme, and could thus point to a stalling of the upward trend at the primary level.

To illustrate further the weakness of South Africa’s performance at the primary level, Figure 6 shows regional patterns, now somewhat dated but still among the most informative available, according to SACMEQ. While the 2007 to 2013 trends across all countries are steeper than what is easily believable, the level of South Africa relative to that of other countries can be considered reliable, and would be in line with other data sources⁴⁵. It is clear that South Africa under-performs relative to other countries which would generally be considered less developed, including Swaziland, Kenya and Tanzania. This picture does not change if the focus switches from the SACMEQ reading results to the SACMEQ mathematics results.

⁴⁵ While there have been problems with the conversion of classical scores to item response theory (IRT) scores – see discussion in for instance Gustafsson (2020c) – the classical score trends using just common items can be considered reliable, and in the case of South Africa there is publicly available analysis of these classical score trends – see Department of Basic Education (2020). This trend moreover aligns with the PIRLS trend. The difficult history and politics around SACMEQ warrant a paper on their own, and have to some extent been documented – see for instance Burdett and Rawle (2017).

Figure 6: SACMEQ Grade 6 reading results 2000 to 2013



Source: 2000 and 2007 values from Makuwa (2010). 2013 values from Department of Basic Education (2018).

South Africa's trends with respect to the World Governance Indicators

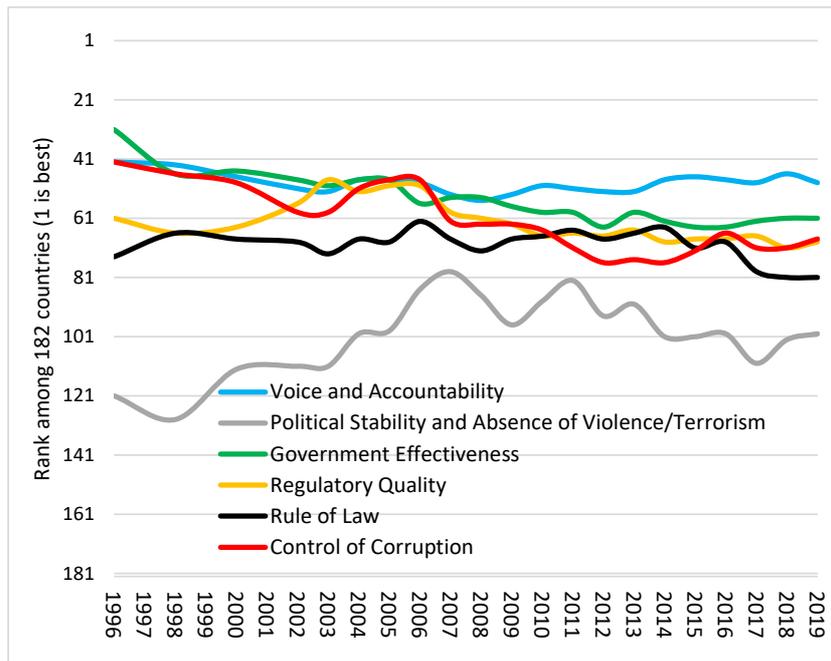
Especially given how large a concern corruption has become in South African politics, it seemed relevant to present trends seen in the World Governance Indicators (WGI) dataset. This dataset, compiled by the World Bank, draws from 32 sources, each dealing with multiple countries, where each source draws from surveys of households or surveys of experts. Crucially, values largely reflect people's perceptions, not objective measures, which are difficult to find in a complex area such as governance.

Figure 7 reflects South Africa's ranking with respect to the six dimensions used by the WGI. With the exception of political stability, South Africa's ranking is well within the top (better) half of the graph. However, all trends over time, with the exception of political stability, are downward, with the largest deterioration seen with respect to control of corruption⁴⁶. This is not encouraging, but broadly in line with the historical narrative presented above. Interestingly, control of corruption clearly began worsening already in 2006, three years before Zuma became president. It will be interesting to see whether Ramaphosa's anti-corruption drive impacts on perceptions, as reflected in future values of the WGI.

Of particular importance for this paper are the dimensions rule of law and government effectiveness. In 2019, South Africa's rule of law was roughly on a par with that of Greece and Thailand, and government effectiveness was similar to that in Indonesia and Panama.

⁴⁶ Linear trendlines used.

Figure 7: The quality of governance in South Africa



Source: 2020 World Governance Indicator dataset of the World Bank, obtained at <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wqi> in April 2021.

Note: The 182 countries considered are those with values in all years.

One area where South Africa does relatively well is voice and accountability. This reflects the robustness of the post-1994 democratic order. On this dimension, South Africa is on a par with Poland.

4 The current context: Prospects for future progress in learning

Sections 4 to 6 provide Martin Gustafsson's responses to the three questions posed in the introduction.

The paper's first question reads as follows: ***Given South Africa's current political economy context, how likely is it that desired educational quality improvements in future will be realised?*** Below, this question is answered, drawing from the political economy framework discussed previously.

The 'desired educational quality improvements'

What are the 'desired educational quality improvements' in South Africa? It turns out that rather clear but also realistic targets exist. The Department of Basic Education's five-year plan for the sector lays out an improvement trajectory which is informed by speeds of improvement seen in the fastest performing countries, with South Africa in fact being within this group of countries since around 2002 (though improvements have occurred off an extremely low base, as explained in section 3)⁴⁷. Government's 2019 to 2024 five-year plan, known as the MTSF⁴⁸ and covering all sectors, puts forward targets which are in line with the basic education sector plan⁴⁹.

South Africa is fortunate in having realistic targets for learning outcomes, or a clear 'expressed intent' in terms of Figure 1 above. Many, and possibly most, developing countries do not set targets with respect to learning outcomes at all, and when this happens, targets tend to be over-ambitious and uninformed by the evidence⁵⁰. With respect to indicators dealing with inputs and processes, and opposed to learning outcomes, South Africa often does experience the problem of over-ambitious and poorly informed targets.

How the argument will proceed

This section of the paper will arrive at the conclusion that there are fairly good prospects for future improvements, perhaps of the magnitude seen in the last almost two decades. However, several features of the current system, relating to both the more traditional realm of planning, and to the political realm, pose risks that could undermine progress. The thrust is that *both* of the two realms are powerful predictors of progress, and that they are very much intertwined. It will be argued that much of the intertwining between the two, but also complexities within each, hinge on ideological narratives, which one could alternatively label paradigms, following the US study mentioned in section 2, or theories of change, to take a term that is popular among many education researchers⁵¹.

It will be argued that policy analysis, which should include an examination of underlying, and often hidden, ideological narratives, needs to become more rigorous. For this to happen, what must improve is the capacity of planners to employ wider analytical frameworks, or systems thinking, and to produce and present statistics. Politicians need to become better at what should be a core concern, ideological

⁴⁷ Department of Basic Education, 2020: 31.

⁴⁸ Medium Term Strategic Framework.

⁴⁹ Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020: 81.

⁵⁰ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019: 8.

⁵¹ While the concept of a 'theory of change' is generally associated with research into the efficacy of a specific intervention, it can also be used more broadly as a theory to explain change in the schooling system as a whole. The South African basic education sector plan has such a theory of change (Department of Basic Education, 2020).

discourse, but they also need to become better consumers of statistics. Underpinning their discourse should be a clear understanding of the role of human capital. Education politicians need, firstly, to have a firm grasp of education system realities in the face of allies within government who often do not understand this system and, secondly, to be able to build alliances with teacher unions in a context where ideological narratives are complex and influential.

The terrain one could cover in answering the question addressed in this section and the ones that follow is vast. In the interests of a manageable scope, I employ two catalysts. One is the government plan. Plans are of course ubiquitous in any government. They are also very concrete and analysable. I hope to demonstrate that they could be used to a greater extent to focus and concretise discussions around how to advance learning outcomes.

Secondly, I will employ as a catalyst one area of policy: the accountability of primary schools. As will be seen, this area of policy is particularly prone to politics and ideology, while also being of great importance for educational progress.

The background to the primary school accountability question in South Africa

Government's latest MTSF, released in 2020, puts forward several sensible interventions for improving learning outcomes. The intervention that receives special attention here is the following⁵²:

Introduce a better accountability system for principals, which should be fair, based on appropriate data, and take into account the socio-economic context of schools.

This relates largely to the primary level, where reliable data on learning outcomes on a school-by-school basis is absent. At the secondary level, the Grade 12 national examinations provide relatively good data that can point to under-performing schools. The information gap has been at the primary level.

The large-scale ANA programme began collecting data from primary schools in 2011, using tests which were externally designed. However, marking of tests remained largely controlled by schools, and despite some moderation by external officials, results were not truly comparable across schools or over time. There was no clear policy framework specifying how these only weakly comparable results should be used for accountability purposes, yet to some degree the results were used to make judgements about the performance and trends of provinces, districts and schools. A 2011 guideline for interpreting and using ANA results envisages, very optimistically, the results being used to target support to under-performing schools, and to pursue improvement targets, with no indication at all that the assessment process could not guarantee comparability across schools at one point in time, or over time in the case of individual schools⁵³. After teacher unions, but also many education academics, put pressure on the national minister to discontinue ANA, the programme was halted in 2015⁵⁴. In 2016, an important 'post mortem' report of ANA was jointly produced by government and the unions⁵⁵. It was highly critical of ANA, meaning government essentially rejected its own creation. The ANA experience has shaped the politics of accountability in several ways, as discussed below. This experience easily warrants an extensive historical account, as it offers several policy lessons for schooling systems everywhere. To date, no such account exists.

⁵² Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020: 79, 81.

⁵³ Department of Basic Education, 2011.

⁵⁴ Gustafsson, 2019a.

⁵⁵ Department of Basic Education, 2016a.

At least three ideological narratives at play

Surprisingly, there is little written about how ideological narratives influence progress in education. Even if one searches using equivalent terms, such as ‘theory of change’, one finds little. Yet if one speaks to education stakeholders and analysts, one recognises how ideological narratives underpin policy debate and contestations to an enormous extent.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to the adherents of the *nominally* dominant ideology as Empiricists⁵⁶. Empiricism is the ideal put forward in section 2. It is an expandable ideology. The RISE political economy framework can be seen as an attempt at expanding the more traditional Empiricist framework. RISE’s framework is not about overturning an evidence-driven planning approach. Instead, it is about enlarging the approach, so that it incorporates the politics of education in better ways.

In South Africa, Empiricism predominates in high-level official policies, but its predominance is often superficial. If there is a definitive South African document capturing this ideology, it is the 2009 *Green Paper: National Strategic Planning*⁵⁷, driven by Trevor Manuel. Empiricism permeates much of the National Development Plan (NDP)⁵⁸, and is an ideology one may wish to *appear* to subscribe to in order to enhance one’s status. However, in many cases, and certainly in the primary school accountability case, one could argue that two other modes of thinking eclipse Empiricism.

One of the two is found among the advocates of teacher professionalism and autonomy, or what I will call the Professionalists. Globally, perhaps the best statements of what Professionalists promote are the resolutions of Education International (EI), the world federation of teacher unions, and the largest federation of unions in the world. Teacher autonomy is seen to be under continual threat from those who are not education specialists and who aim to replace the educational and nurturing functions of the teacher with routine and frequent measurement, as part of a misguided effort to improve learning⁵⁹. What is prominently used is evidence regarding poor design in past testing systems, and even corrupt testing practices, particularly in the United States. This evidence is easily compelling. A Washington Post article of 2016 provides an excellent and widely-quoted summary⁶⁰.

Professionalists may use the term ‘managerialism’ to describe the movement they oppose⁶¹. This managerialism is often seen as part of a wider effort to defend capitalism and permit higher levels of inequality, in part through the privatisation of schooling, with the result that many, though not all, Professionalists see their struggle as a broader societal one in opposition to ‘neo-liberalism’.

The Professionalist narrative is powerful among teachers, but also faculties of education⁶² in South Africa and elsewhere. South Africa’s links to EI are strong, with

⁵⁶ The terms ‘Empiricism’ and ‘Empiricists’, as used in this paper, are not intended to reflect the philosophical school of thought going by this name, though there are clearly overlaps.

⁵⁷ Presidency, 2009.

⁵⁸ While the MTSF covers a five-year period, the NDP, released in 2012, has as its horizon the year 2030. The MTSF is based on the NDP.

⁵⁹ Education International, 2011.

⁶⁰ Strauss, 2016.

⁶¹ 2019 EI resolution titled ‘Education union renewal: The new imperative’, at <https://www.ei-ic.org/en/detail/16461/resolution-on-education-union-renewal-the-new-imperative>.

⁶² See for instance Maistry (2014).

the General Secretary of SADTU, Thulas Nxesi, serving as President of the EI in the years 2004 to 2009.

It was this Professionalist narrative which had appeared to make it difficult to gather comparable data on learning outcomes from primary schools, though when government eventually did launch ANA, in 2011, opposition to the programme was actually not strong.

The second of the two ideological narratives which has been influential in the policy case in question is one which could be labelled 'Rationalist Steering'. This narrative may appear similar to the Empiricist narrative, and the Professionalists will often see the two as the same problematic phenomenon. Above all, Empiricists and Rationalist Steerers both value having rich data in the planning process. However, while Rationalist Steerers tend to specialise in information systems and value universal and real-time 'big data'⁶³, Empiricists tend to have an economics and statistics specialisation and are more inclined to value sample-based data. Where Rationalist Steerers tend to favour centralised decision-making informed by data, Empiricists are more interested in de-centralised decision-making, but with centrally determined 'enabling frameworks' and monitoring. But perhaps most fundamentally, Empiricism as understood here draws from human capital theory, meaning Empiricists should understand the role of human capital, including foundational learning outcomes, in social and economic development. While Rationalist Steerers are unlikely to find human capital theory problematic, this is not at the core of their approach. The distinction between the Empiricists and Rationalist Steerers is not watertight, but anyone who has worked in government is likely to recognise the two tendencies.

Rationalist Steerers may be inspired by the Deliverology movement, influential during the Blair premiership in the United Kingdom⁶⁴, and viewed favourably by many in the South African government in the years after 2010. One could further argue that Rationalist Steerers have been energised by the status enjoyed by South Africa's Office of the Auditor-General (OAG), which during the Zuma period came to be seen as one of the few state institutions not 'captured' by corrupt forces, and hence a bastion against corruption. The impartiality and relative success of the OAG, led by the widely respected Kimi Makwetu between 2013 and 2020, in uncovering financial irregularities facilitated a process whereby the OAG increasingly examined non-financial performance data too. Such a process has not been unique to South Africa, and the efficacy of using auditor-general staff, who tend to have a financial auditing background, in the evaluation of non-financial data, remains a controversial matter⁶⁵. While the OAG's venturing into non-financial performance data occurred largely after ANA was established, the two are informed by a similar Rationalist Steering approach to service delivery. It was this approach of elevating data collection to almost an end in itself, combined with a lack of clarity around purpose and a 'theory of change', which made the ANA programme, ultimately, difficult to defend. Since ANA's demise in 2015, Rationalist Steering has continued to be strong in the education sector, and in government as a whole, though it has avoided the area of standardised information on learning outcomes.

⁶³ United Nations (2014) presents what can be considered an authoritative argument for 'big data', meaning very large volumes of data drawing from multiple sources, and related solutions in the area of sustainable development. Crouch (2014) explains how big data, when taken too far in education planning, can be problematic.

⁶⁴ Richards and Chegus, 2018.

⁶⁵ Gustafsson, 2019b.

What has been described here, in broad brushstrokes, are three ideological narratives, each of which has the potential to appeal to, and guide, large numbers of influential education stakeholders. What is striking is how absent debate around these powerful underlying assumptions is at education stakeholder meetings. If politics is to be made more explicit in education policy analysis, it seems these narratives need to be analysed more explicitly. Why does this not happen? There seem to be concerns that they are too divisive to be brought in. Their exclusion is not that different from the imperative that policy discussions remain secular, with no mention of religion. However, these ideological narratives are not religions, and they influence policy in profound ways.

What are some of the more interesting questions which could be addressed in policy meetings, media articles and in the academic literature? Here are some possibilities. Are there ways in which standardised information on learning outcomes could be gathered without impinging on teacher autonomy, without repeating mistakes from the past, and without facilitating a neo-liberal agenda that disadvantages the most vulnerable? How might historical inequalities be perpetuated if there is *not* reliable and comparable information across all schools on learning outcomes? How might both the Rationalist Steerers and Empiricists, by not paying enough attention to the dangers of faulty monitoring systems, have facilitated the design flaws and overly hasty introduction of ANA? Did ANA, and does Rationalist Steering more broadly, perhaps facilitate progress through some shock effect which the Empiricists do not fully grasp? Would the demise of ANA have occurred had the more top-down 'marching orders' political culture of the Mbeki era not been superseded by the more stakeholder-friendly Zuma era?

Planners and the problem of misleading planning instructions

The ten annual performance plans of the ten education departments dealing with schooling, one national and nine provincial, can be considered microcosms of planning mistakes and opportunities. These plans, widely known by the acronym APP, are key. They are backed by legislation, budgets are justified by them, and they are designed specifically to allow legislatures to hold the executive to account. Their role is to bring together the various strands and silos of the education bureaucracy in the service of the core business of improving learning outcomes. Yet these plans are widely viewed as weak guides for the system⁶⁶.

A key reason why, is that the instructions behind these annual plans are complicated by ideological undercurrents. There is a problem of 'normative as positive', to use Pritchett's language. Instructions to plan are presented as if their logic were obvious and indisputable. Many planners believe this, and respond to the criticism that their plans are incoherent or unhelpful by referring to their capacity problems. If I had more training, or more staff, I could do a better job. The capacity development planners typically ask for, in areas such as statistics and report-writing, is undeniably necessary. But they also need capacity development in less technical, and more political, areas.

Instructions for the APPs of government departments are grounded in the Public Finance Management Act, or PFMA, and were originally a responsibility of National Treasury, essentially South Africa's Ministry of Finance. This responsibility shifted to the new Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) under Zuma. This shift, in turn, reflected dissatisfaction with the fact that under Mbeki there was an

⁶⁶ Space does not permit a very detailed account here of the design and capacity problems behind the weaknesses of these plans. However, this has been documented, for instance in Treasury (2017).

emphasis on planning with a strong awareness of budgetary constraints. To put it crudely, the role of economists was seen as too strong. At the same time, the role of the independent OAG expanded, partly due to its growing role in holding government departments accountable for non-financial targets. Again crudely, the role of the accountants in planning was on the rise, while that of the economists declined. And Rationalist Steering, relative to Empiricism, strengthened.

How can an excess of Rationalist Steering weaken a planning process? Three problems seem to stand out. First, in the absence of some Empiricist theory of change, for instance on how better learning outcomes advance national development, plans become unfocussed. This is not just a technical problem, but a political one. South Africa's plans are commonly accused of being unimaginative and un-revolutionary, which in turn easily leads to the conclusion that they simply perpetuate a 'neo-liberal' agenda. In education, this is a particularly serious problem as good education is so much more difficult to define than, say, access to electricity. The link between improving learning outcomes and tackling South Africa's immense social inequalities should be made far clearer, in every plan.

Secondly, an excess of indicators on non-financial inputs and processes, without a proper sense of the costs and benefits of collecting and processing the data, leads to malicious compliance and large volumes of unusable statistics.

Thirdly, the instructions behind the APPs specify that targets should be set through a rational process that considers what is possible. This is perhaps the most glaring sign of the political naivety of these instructions. The political culture in South Africa dictates that politicians must put forward targets which tend to be over-ambitious. Moreover, politicians enjoy the institutional power to force planners to specify politically-driven targets. The only way to conduct professional planning in such an environment is to accept that planners will simply advise politicians on targets, and will devote their efforts to understanding whether there has been sufficient progress towards the target, rather than a pointless analysis of why targets were missed.

Planners with the required technical capacity, *and* an understanding of the problems with the instructions they are expected to follow, are likely to be in a position to navigate their way to the best possible plan. Such planners would perfect the art of paying attention to some instructions, in particular those relating to the *purpose* of the plan, and ignoring other instructions, for instance in relation to numbers of indicators or rational target-setting, while being armed with a clear rationale for not following every instruction to the letter. This is what true bureaucratic capacity is about.

Education politicians and their need to satisfy unions and the political executive

A key tension any South African national minister of education needs to contend with is that between pressure from cabinet colleagues, and particularly the President, to pursue official education goals, and pressure from teacher unions to satisfy their demands. A minister is, in a sense, caught between Rationalist Steerers and Professionalists.

What are the opportunities a national, or provincial, minister committed to improving learning outcomes could take advantage of? What are the largest obstacles? At the national level at least, one enabling factor is that despite the culture of setting over-ambitious targets, a small number of critically important targets are ambitious, but not unreasonable. These are the targets dealing with learning outcomes, discussed previously, but also attainment. Successful completion of twelve years of education,

either in a school or technical college, is supposed to rise to around 85% only by 2030, the current figure being 57%⁶⁷. With regard to learning outcomes, even outside education circles the importance of focussing on measurable learning, and not just participation and grade attainment is widely understood. South Africa's own version of Germany's 2001 'PISA-shock'⁶⁸ occurred around 2003, with the release of regional SACMEQ test results, which pointed to South Africa performing below her neighbours, if one discounts Namibia, whose schooling system was essentially run by South Africa until 1991, and under-developed Lesotho. South Africa moreover performed far below Kenya and Tanzania⁶⁹. This shattered a certain complacency, and almost arrogance, around South Africa's level of development in Africa. It also helped to instil an appreciation among government planners, inside and outside education, of the importance of monitoring learning.

The difficulty relates to more operational targets, such as those governing school infrastructure, where litigation against government is common⁷⁰, tech innovations and policy and systems development, for instance in relation to assessments. An education minister is likely to set overly ambitious targets, but cabinet colleagues are likely to raise them even further. This can be seen as part of a wider political culture in South Africa of looking forward a lot, and seldom looking backwards. Put differently, the political costs of not promising a lot are high, while the political costs of not attaining service delivery targets are relatively low. While this may be a favourable arrangement for politicians with a poor track record, an effective politician clearly stands to gain from looking backwards, being rather explicit about lessons learnt from the past – such as the lessons from ANA – and letting this inform the future.

How could a minister promote primary school accountability? There is a key 2007 amendment to the 1996 South African Schools Act (SASA), which serves as a flawed, but possible, point of departure. The flaws provide insights into typical problems in the governance of education. The section in question⁷¹ requires every school to submit an annual report on academic performance to the provincial department, and requires the province to assess whether the school is under-performing, in which case the province should formally engage with the school, following certain steps. Each year, the provincial head should submit a report to the national minister on under-performing schools. Certainly at the primary level, these policy prescripts are ignored. Given the flaws in the policy, this is understandable.

The flaws should be obvious. The thinking here is neither that of the Professionalists nor the Rationalist Steerers. One could label this an example of Little Country Thinking. The approach could work in a province with, say, 30 schools. But seven provinces have 1,000 or more primary schools. Clearly, the policy needed a sense of scale, and of systems capable of realising effective governance where personal relationships are not possible. How one generates comparable performance data, and data on the socio-economic contexts of schools, is a critical question. The section in SASA is one of many examples of a well-intentioned but impractical policy on improving learning outcomes. There was no attempt to use it, or adapt it, to serve as a basis for the ANA programme.

⁶⁷ Van der Berg *et al*, 2020: x.

⁶⁸ Waldow, 2009.

⁶⁹ Gustafsson, 2019a; Makuwa, 2010.

⁷⁰ Xolo, 2020.

⁷¹ Section 58B, introduced into the South African Schools Act through the 2007 Basic Education Laws Amendment Act.

Turning to the relationship between education politicians and unions, this has mostly been tense, even in the case of SADTU, despite its being formally allied to the ANC. Paradoxically, national ministers, who have all been from the ANC since 1994, have probably experienced more friction with SADTU than with any of the other, smaller unions. A common narrative, among planners and in the public debates, is that SADTU holds the education authorities hostage, using threats of the non-cooperation of teachers, and ultimately strikes, in order to maximise teacher salaries.

There is some truth to this popular narrative, but a further, less widespread, narrative which appears credible is that the hostage theory is used as an excuse for paralysis and inaction in government. SADTU itself will often argue that the employer should stop blaming the union for ill-disciplined teachers, while the employer is not pursuing established disciplinary procedures. The NDP in fact describes poor human resources management by the education authorities as a serious problem⁷².

What is rare is engagement by government with unions based on a thorough analysis of the unions' own policies and formal commitments. This could be one way of making the relationship more constructive. EI expresses a relatively clear commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise better monitoring of learning proficiency. EI does also express its usual reservations, as in the following⁷³:

Observing, with concern, the growing tendency ... to define quality education through measurable learning outcomes and test scores alone, mainly focusing on numeracy and literacy

It is not a rejection of the measurement of learning outcomes, but rather an insistence that it should not monopolise the policy debates, which is reasonable. SADTU's stand is not nearly as clear as EI's. In a statement supporting the 2019 EI world conference resolutions, SADTU, under the heading 'On ensuring Free Quality Public Education for All', places nearly all its focus on the dangers of privatisation, 'intergovernmental agencies' facilitating this, and neo-liberalism⁷⁴. SADTU can justifiably be asked to express a clearer opinion, which could be critical, on the education SDGs, and government policy aimed at supporting them.

On the related, but separate matter of holding schools accountable through universal accountability systems, it is interesting that SADTU has essentially lent support to a new Grade 9 national qualification and certificate, an initiative whose data will undoubtedly inform school accountability at the lower secondary level. SADTU is not so much opposed to externally administered testing as to a one-sided emphasis on just this form of assessment, at the cost of an emphasis on 'assessment for learning'⁷⁵, by which reference is made to the global formative assessment movement. This movement, and its role in shaping the politics around assessment, seems poorly understood, even by unions themselves, but especially by the education authorities⁷⁶.

There is no obvious answer to the question of what is to be gained if there were more discussion of the underpinning ideological narratives in the meetings between unions and education politicians. Ideally, overlaps between the narratives, for instance between SADTU's opposition to neo-liberalism and government's notion of the

⁷² National Planning Commission, 2012: 309.

⁷³ Education International, 2019.

⁷⁴ SADTU, 2019a.

⁷⁵ SADTU, 2019b.

⁷⁶ Bennett (2011) provides an important (but non-South African) critical review of this movement.

'developmental state'⁷⁷ would be identified, and formal statements of areas where there was a common understanding, even if the terminology were different, could be produced. It seems important for government to challenge the notion that standardised testing is only implemented by governments on the political right. The assessment programmes introduced by Cuba and the socialist government in France provide evidence that this is not the case⁷⁸.

Conclusion

To conclude, what are South Africa's prospects for future progress in learning outcomes, having examined issues of a more political nature which are often not on the radar of the typical policy analysis? And what are the benefits of this wider lens?

Arguably, the most significant cause for optimism is a matter not discussed so far. It is the fact that for various historical reasons, South Africa values the rule of law. South Africa produces an enormous number of laws, strategies and resolutions, and often, though not always, these are taken seriously. It is this rule-of-law culture which allowed South African institutions to recover, or at least begin recovering, from the 'corrosive effects of corruption' of the pre-2018 years, as President Ramaphosa put it in his February 2019 State of the Nation Address⁷⁹.

Why does this matter for the future of learning outcomes? Perhaps most specifically, a culture of corruption allows for inappropriate appointments into the public service. The problem that started receiving attention around 2014, of applicants paying bribes for entry-level teacher positions and promotion posts in the schooling system, seems to have subsided in the last couple of years⁸⁰.

'Learning by doing', a term used not just in theories of education, but also development economics, seems relevant. Democracy in South Africa came with a change in the leadership, staffing and design of key institutions, of a magnitude seen in few political transitions around the world. Leaders had to learn by doing. In the schooling sector, the ANA experience described above has helped stakeholders arrive at a more pragmatic understanding of assessments and accountability. Of course, that understanding must be translated to systems that avoid the mistakes of the past. Fortunately, the beginnings of a better approach to accountability seem to be taking shape in the MTSF.

Learning-by-doing should help planners and politicians avoid repeating mistakes. Among planners, there is a growing appreciation of how one plans for specific outcomes, such as better learning outcomes. While structure and indicators are needed in the planning process, what has been called the Rationalist Steering approach has the potential to undermine planning. As planners mature, and build capacity, they are likely to find new ways of planning effectively, despite planning instructions which are often impractical and idealistic.

⁷⁷ This term, which is used extensively in government's 2019 to 2024 plan, and whose widespread use began during the Mbeki presidency, draws from development modalities seen in East Asia. It is noteworthy and unfortunate that there has been little work in defining the meaning of the concept in the South African context. It remains more of a buzzword than a carefully worked out South African model of development.

⁷⁸ Ferrer, 2006: 84-85; Fowler, 2001.

⁷⁹ Presidency, 2019.

⁸⁰ While there is no empirical evidence of this, reliable sources are under the impression that these abuses have been in decline in recent years.

Education politicians, through a combination of maturation and the entry of 'new blood' into the political sphere, may find better ways of engaging politically, even ideologically, with unions. There appear to be several opportunities for creating a better working relationship.

However, the difficulty of achieving further progress should not be under-estimated. South Africa's recent improvements have been relatively easy, given how low the starting point was. The evidence is clear that the better the level reached, the more difficult it will be to realise further gains⁸¹.

There appears to be value in moving beyond the typical apolitical approach to education planning. Politics matter. Above, much of the emphasis has been on analysing ideological narratives. One could of course delve deeper and examine how exactly these narratives reflect the strategies of specific groups and elites. But the narrative itself seems like a useful port of entry, because it is visible and mostly documented.

5 How historical factors shaped policies, ideas and systems in education

Our second question reads as follows: ***What historical factors, over the last four decades or so, have shaped the policies, institutions, leadership and quality trends in South Africa's education system?*** Below, I answer this question, drawing from the political economy framework discussed previously, while elaborating on the historical narrative already presented in section 3.

Existing historical accounts as a point of departure

I will answer the over-arching question by using as my point of departure existing accounts by historians, particularly influential ones responsible for establishing what are now widely known historical narratives. Have they focussed on South Africa's exceptionally low foundational learning outcomes, and if so what exactly was identified as the root causes for this? Have they focussed on what was identified as enabling and disabling factors in section 4? I will continue to pay particular attention to primary school accountability, one of the two threads introduced above, in the interests of focus.

I will argue that South Africa's extreme form of inequality, with its apartheid-era race-based public funding inequities and pernicious curriculum, have distracted historians and others from the specifics of a learning process that was weak and unequal. Such issues seem to have got lost in the glare of more politically charged questions. This sidelining of learning persisted into the early years of the democratic era, an era characterised by contestations between stakeholders. When learning did move up the policy agenda, serious limitations in both policymaking and implementation capacity hampered progress – some of this I introduced in section 4. I explore whether these capacity constraints could have been tackled better by politicians and bureaucrats.

Reasons why the focus on learning outcomes has been limited

Pritchett's (2018) understanding of the expansion of schooling systems as primarily a process of socialisation is very graphically demonstrated in apartheid South Africa. From 1910, when a unified South African state came into being, education policies on the schooling of the disenfranchised black majority openly aimed at producing a

⁸¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019.

pliant labour force with elementary skills only⁸². What apartheid, introduced in 1948, did was to strengthen segregation, formulate a more explicitly racist ideology, and make it almost impossible for black South Africans to escape the so-called Bantu Education system set up for them⁸³. This socialisation element would in part explain why South Africa has for over half a century been ahead of all or nearly all other African countries when it comes to the completion of at least primary schooling⁸⁴. The state needed to socialise as large a part of the black population as it could for social control purposes. It was only after major secondary student protests beginning in 1976 that the apartheid government began seeing its approach as unsustainable and better skills among at least some black workers as valuable from an economic perspective⁸⁵.

Arguably, the most important historical volume on the schooling of black South Africans before 1994 is a 2002 book produced by 26 authors and edited by Kallaway. Its scope is the 'grand apartheid' period beginning in 1948. Much of the emphasis in the book is on two glaring injustices of apartheid education. Firstly, the under-funding⁸⁶ of black learners relative to white learners resulted in over-sized classes and a shortage of educational materials for the former. Secondly, the separate curriculum for black pupils was oppressive, both in terms of its signals around the role of black people in the country and its avoidance of higher-order skills. Given the background of many of the authors as activists, and the need before 1994 to explain to the world why pressure against the apartheid government was needed, these points of emphasis are understandable. Moreover, the resourcing and curriculum injustices of apartheid are plausibly key reasons for South Africa's particularly poor learning outcomes, even if the historians did not dwell much on these causal effects.

Many topics of importance to the history of learning did not receive attention by the authors. In particular, the segregated teacher training system, and the way in which it produced inferior training for most black teachers, by design, received little attention⁸⁷. This would arguably become the most enduring element of the apartheid schooling legacy after 1994. Yet potentially it was a sensitive topic in the post-1994 context where the salary scales of black and white teachers were being equalised.

Similarly, the politically complex, but educationally vital, matter of language policy is hardly dealt with. Apartheid promoted the use of the nine indigenous African languages to reinforce segregation in the schooling system. Yet the educational arguments for mother-tongue instruction in the initial grades appeared strong, and have become stronger since⁸⁸. This should be seen in a context where evidence has suggested that black parents often, even mostly⁸⁹, prefer English to be the medium of instruction in the early grades, due to the perceived social advantage associated with English. Against such a background, it is understandable that historians would have approached the sensitive and under-researched medium of instruction question with much caution, if at all.

⁸² Hartshorne, 1992.

⁸³ Fleisch, 2002.

⁸⁴ Barro and Lee, 2001. In 1975, 37% of South Africans aged 25 or above had completed primary schooling.

⁸⁵ Thobejane, 2013.

⁸⁶ In 1991 the state spent around 4.5 times more per white learner than per black learner (Gustafsson and Patel, 2006). Before this point in time, the inequalities had been even worse.

⁸⁷ Some accounting of this is found in Seroto (2020) and Wolhuter (2006).

⁸⁸ Taylor and Von Fintel, 2016; Mohohlwane, 2018.

⁸⁹ Mhlanga, 1995; Phindane, 2015.

Though TIMSS Grade 8 tests had been run in South Africa twice, in 1995 and 1999, by the time Kallaway (2002) was published, there appears to be no discussion of this in the book. Had this source been considered, the observation might have been made that not only were learning outcomes very unequally distributed, even white learners performed below what one might have expected. Mathematics performance near the top of the national distribution, specifically at the 95th percentile, was below the *average* seen in the Netherlands⁹⁰. Thus, the 'First World' resourcing enjoyed by whites was not being translated into skills as one might expect. This suggests that beyond the undermining of the schooling of those who bore the brunt of apartheid's oppression, there were broader obstacles to learning that affected even whites. It can be assumed that with whites effectively protected against competition from the country's majority in the labour market, the incentive for whites to excel at school was reduced. Moreover, the fact that most whites spoke Afrikaans as their mother tongue, and that the apartheid government actively discouraged the use of English among Afrikaans-speakers⁹¹, is likely to have insulated the white political elite from educational innovations from abroad.

Weak accountability of schools at the primary level, and the related matter of poor information on learning outcomes at this level, would not have been raised as a concern among historians examining Bantu Education for a simple reason: what was put forward as accountability by the apartheid authorities was in many respects policing aimed at taking action against teachers who were political activists⁹². The iniquitous 'school inspector' of the apartheid era is commonly referred to in policy discussions around accountability, to this day. Even though South African policies studiously avoid the term 'inspector', efforts by the education authorities to conduct classroom observations are sometimes resisted on the basis that that this symbolises a regression to apartheid-style practices. Such an argument is obviously opportunistic, given South Africa's current democratic system.

To conclude, factors that are likely to have adversely affected learning outcomes among black children under apartheid include the under-resourcing of black schools, a curriculum for black learners with low learning expectations that was moreover antithetical to critical thinking, a segregated and unequal teacher training system, and language policies which often isolated South Africans from each other and the outside world. To these education-specific hurdles, should be added the broader socio-economic hurdles facing black children in apartheid South Africa. Malnutrition, arising out of poverty, resulted in high levels of physical stunting and impaired brain development, the migrant labour system broke up families, and exposure to high levels of violence harmed children both physically and psychologically⁹³. While the advent of democracy alleviated these ills, they did not go away, and they continue to affect children adversely today.

From socialist vision to stakeholder politics

When the ANC was unbanned in 1990, its policy positions were largely socialist, with the South African Communist Party (SACP) operating as an influential party within a party. SACP members are expected to be ANC members too and the SACP has never participated independently in the country's elections. The influential Freedom Charter⁹⁴ of 1955 envisaged the nationalisation of mines, banks and large industries.

⁹⁰ Mullis *et al*, 2000: 32.

⁹¹ Hofmeyr, 1982.

⁹² Kgari-Masondi, 2019: 49; Biputh and McKenna, 2010; Rakometsi, 2008: 373-374.

⁹³ Lockhat and Van Niekerk, 2000.

⁹⁴ African National Congress, 1955.

It foresaw 'free, compulsory, universal and equal' schooling. In terms of the section 2 framework above, the ANC had made a 'pure' ideological choice in favour of a highly equal and public schooling system. In the South African context, this implied equalising per learner public funding, and possibly redistributing teachers in a manner that would disrupt historical patterns of inequality.

Though a major 1985 ANC conference⁹⁵ resolved to 'recruit and train specialists in career guidance, educational statistics, educational planning', the ANC was under-capacitated in these areas in 1994, when it assumed power. The ANC's school for exiles in Tanzania had provided limited experience. Opportunities to pilot features of the ideal post-apartheid school were explored, but much of this focus appears to have fallen on what to do at the secondary level, not in the early grades. The fact that students wrote the British General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations precluded experience in assessment innovation⁹⁶. Blade Nzimande, an education specialist and general secretary of the SACP since 1998, expressed concerns that the lack of education policymaking capacity in the ANC meant that longstanding vested interests in civil society would prevail, and that the kind of innovation the ANC was seeking may not be realised. He moreover worried that policies formulated largely by white academics, even if sympathetic to the ANC, would have difficulty being passed within the ANC. Nzimande expressed these very South African concerns as follows⁹⁷:

[The National Education Policy Initiative] classically represents the problem of this division of labour, that your experts are you academics, university-based people largely, who are predominately white; whilst the [National Education Coordinating Committee] structures are mass-based, community people who are predominantly black. That has got the potential of creating severe tensions

Unfortunately, 25 years into democracy, the problem of an under-representation of black South Africans within the policy analysis and policymaking space remains a concern, and can hinder policymaking.

Kallaway (2002), in the introduction to the book he edits, laments the fact that capacity gaps in the ANC were being filled by the World Bank during the transition to democracy. Yet insofar as this was true, it was understandable. Technical capacity in areas such as unit costs, demographics and budgeting was in short supply, at least outside the set of planners who had worked for the apartheid government, and who were viewed as unsympathetic to the ANC. In areas such as psychometrics, sampling and the design of system-wide learning assessment programmes, even the apartheid planners had almost no capacity. It was arguably possible for the ANC to learn from the World Bank within certain technical areas without buying into any World Bank ideological position. The alternative, used by Mozambique after independence, of relying on technical advice from Eastern Bloc countries had been almost completely wiped out with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In fact, direct involvement by the World Bank in education planning in the 1990s was minimal⁹⁸. Its relatively low level of involvement in South African policymaking, compared to other developing countries, in the 1990s but even later, would in part be

⁹⁵ African National Congress, 1985.

⁹⁶ Serote, 1992.

⁹⁷ Nzimande, 1992.

⁹⁸ The notable exception was a World Bank-funded accounting exercise, completed in 1994, that brought together the complex public spending statistics of the various ethnically-based apartheid education authorities. This important report, by Buckland and Fielden (1994), is unfortunately not available online, but an electronic version can be obtained from the authors.

a result of South Africa's relatively low national debt, and hence less leverage for the World Bank to become involved⁹⁹. What seems easily more influential than any World Bank 'Empiricist' influence, was the rather messy process of stakeholder politics, where policies became an expression of compromise between interest groups. In terms of the two dimensions of the political settlement described in Figure 1, the new political settlement within which policy was being formulated was highly competitive, as opposed to dominant. Put differently, the South African settlement then, and now, veers more towards the rule of law than towards personalised power relationships¹⁰⁰.

Stakeholder politics produced a hybrid schooling system somewhere between the ANC's revolutionary ideal and apartheid. Public funding per learner was equalised, and even made slightly pro-poor, but historically white public schools were allowed to augment their funding through school fees, the tacit condition being that they open their doors to a substantial number of black learners, especially from the growing black middle class. This arrangement has perpetuated a rather stark and apartheid-like difference between privileged historically white schools and everyone else within one public system. However, to avoid having dividing lines exactly like those of apartheid, a system of poverty quintiles, rather than the historical race category of schools, have been used to determine which schools can and cannot charge fees. This has led to some dissatisfaction among those historically black schools which are considered fee-charging schools, and thus receive less public funding. The arrangement has indeed been complex and messy. Importantly, the distribution of teaching skills was barely affected by the changes. There was virtually no re-allocation of existing teachers, and new teachers essentially choose which schools they want to work in. In other words, teachers with a middle class background, and with the human and social capital advantages that this implies, tend to end up in middle class schools.

When it came to school governance arrangements, compromises were reached fairly easily as two key stakeholder groups largely agreed on what was needed, for rather different reasons. On the one hand, influential organisations representing largely white parents wanted as much school autonomy, and specifically parent power, as possible. They were fearful of how the post-apartheid state might influence the learner demographics, teacher hiring procedures and curriculum implementation in historically white schools. On the other hand, vocal proponents of the democratisation of South Africa saw strong local community ownership of the affairs of schools as desirable after the oppressive centralism of apartheid. There was an implicit and, on hindsight, over-optimistic understanding that communities could successfully hold schools accountable for providing quality education. As the two prominent education academics Bush and Heystek (2003: 127) put it two decades ago, 'despite the significant difficulties facing the educational system in South Africa, [school] governing bodies provide a good prospect of enhancing local democracy and improving the quality of education for all learners'. What was *not* strongly advocated at the time, despite the ANC's history, was state-driven centralism in the schooling system of the kind found in many Eastern Bloc countries¹⁰¹. The favouring of relatively powerful school governing bodies in South Africa was influenced by a global move in this direction¹⁰². It found expression in the 1996 South African Schools Act. It was only after a decade that the limitations of relying this strongly on parent oversight, in particular in historically black schools, started becoming clear and an amendment to the Act was promulgated. This amendment, discussed in section 4

⁹⁹ Gustafsson, 2019b: 10.

¹⁰⁰ South Africa is within the better half of Figure 7 with respect to the rule of law.

¹⁰¹ Gyuris, 2014.

¹⁰² Crouch and Hoadley, 2018.

above, attempted to bring in stronger bureaucratic oversight with respect to learning outcomes. As discussed previously, it was well-intentioned but in many respects flawed.

The evolution of South Africa's sample-based national assessment, the Systemic Evaluation (SE), reflects the tensions between expert-driven and more stakeholder-oriented approaches. This is a programme whose history is worth looking into as it is currently being resuscitated after a hiatus of over a decade. Unlike ANA, the SE did have a basis in a policy explaining its purpose, albeit briefly¹⁰³. The first run of the programme, in 2001, tested Grade 3 learners. The resultant report¹⁰⁴ goes to great lengths to explain how stakeholders were consulted in arriving at a set of indicators. Test results are presented only in terms of mean scores, without proportions of learners achieving specific benchmarks, or descriptions of the meaning of the test statistics in terms of what learners know. A methodologically problematic series of regression analyses were run which essentially arrived at the conclusion that poor school facilities largely explained weak learning in the majority of schools. This may have played a role in the subsequent emphasis on infrastructure building programmes.

The 2004 run of the programme, focussing on Grade 6, resulted in a more expert-driven report¹⁰⁵ of almost 200 pages, which included broad descriptions of learning achievement such as 'outstanding' and 'achieved' – only 28% of learners fell into these two top categories in the language tests, which would be roughly in line with recent PIRLS results. This report was at pains to explain that correlations between background variables and test results should not be understood as cause and effect.

Unfortunately, with the 2007 run, which focussed on Grade 3 again, the momentum was lost. Data collection appears to have proceeded as planned, and a short 12-page summary¹⁰⁶ was published, which included some comparisons against the 2001 Grade 3 results. However, an envisaged 'comprehensive report' was never released, and political and bureaucratic interest in the programme appeared to wane. This was not due to union opposition to the programme – unions tend to have no problem with sample-based testing – but instead human capacity limitations within the national Department of Education¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰³ Regulation 1718 of 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Education, 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Department of Education, 2005a.

¹⁰⁶ The 12-page summary is no longer available on a government website, but is available on the blog of the South African education researcher Nic Spaull:

<https://nicspaull.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/doe-2008-systemic-evaluation-grade-3-2007se-leafle.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Before the 2009 split into basic and higher education, the one department was known as the 'Department of Education'.

The difficulty of imagining alternative systems of accountability

Following South Africa's 'SACMEQ shock' of around 2003, described in section 3 above, leaders in the education sector became more acutely aware that something new had to be done, and that the 'educational political settlement' embodied in the policies of the 1990s, such as the South African Schools Act, were perhaps not enough to bring about the required qualitative change. In many ways, discussions around the required innovations could be grouped into those dealing with better support to schools and teachers, and those dealing with accountability. How the complementarity of support and accountability was understood has been articulated in a few places, including in a chapter by Dieltiens and Mandipaza (2014) within a book commissioned by the Gauteng provincial education authorities.

Support to schools and teachers is inherently less politically complex than accountability, and has proceeded with relative success in South Africa, especially since around 2007. An especially prominent support intervention is the national workbooks initiative, started in 2011, which has involved providing each learner with his or her own full-colour books. This intervention has been considered exemplary by UNESCO¹⁰⁸. What is sometimes referred to the 'triple cocktail' intervention, consisting of lesson plans, additional books for learners and the coaching of teachers, has been implemented in sizeable pockets of the schooling system and been found to impact on early grade learning positively¹⁰⁹.

The area of accountability has been far more difficult. Many realised there was a need to find an alternative to the oppressive, and educationally ineffective, school inspectorate of apartheid. In many ways, ANA was put forward as the alternative. As described in section 4 above, this very ambitious testing programme was not clearly situated within a viable accountability framework and ended up being a very visible failure. While the new Systemic Evaluation is expected to enhance accountability down to the province level, the question remains how the accountability of around 17,000 individual primary schools can be improved.

Though accountability in the schooling system as a broad concept seems popular with some researchers, and among virtually all politicians, interest in clarifying what exactly this concept means in the South African context, in evaluating past attempts to promote accountability, and in envisaging future systems, has been weak.

What factors have shaped the accountability debate over the years? The argument is often made that the teacher unions, and in particular SADTU, are the key hurdle to accountability in the schooling sector. This argument is made very publicly by opponents of the ANC¹¹⁰, but also less publicly by government officials, often officials who were themselves once union officials. Unions have clearly opposed specific systems which were intended by government to promote accountability, such as ANA. However, as explained previously, in the case of ANA union opposition was arguably justified. There are nuances in, for instance, SADTU's position that are important to understand. Professional accountability systems, such as the performance management system for teachers, known as the Quality Management System, were in part designed by SADTU, and are hence officially endorsed by the union. Importantly, learning outcomes are not linked to the appraisal of teachers in any way in this system. It is when learning outcomes are brought into an accountability system that SADTU, and other unions, typically raise many concerns.

¹⁰⁸ UNESCO, 2014: 285.

¹⁰⁹ Motilal and Fleisch, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Van Onselen, 2012.

Yet even here, SADTU's position is nuanced. The basic principle is that teacher accountability, and by implication school accountability, are accepted, conditional on there being accountability by managers in the education administration¹¹¹. Essentially, if it can be demonstrated that officials in the administration do their job, teachers are happy to participate in accountability systems. Conceivably, accountability on the part of the officials could take the form of ratings of administrative support by staff at schools, something which has been explored to a limited degree in South Africa but has not really taken root¹¹². As has been pointed out above, SADTU and other unions have not opposed the *introduction* of new ways of gauging learning outcomes, such as ANA and the planned Grade 9 examination (the opposition to ANA arose a couple of years after its introduction). The argument that unions are the only or even the largest barrier to proper accountability is a debatable one.

A look at what special enquiries have been requested by ministers of education over the years is instructive, and helps to explain why learning outcomes, and accountability for this, has not received more attention. Investigations initiated by ministers have led to public reports on the curriculum (in 2000), financing and school governance (both in 2003), rural education (2005), learner retention (in 2008), learning materials (2010), the structure of the Grade 12 examinations (2014), the payment of bribes in the educator appointment process (2016) and history as a school subject (2018). While there has been some officially sanctioned research¹¹³ into South Africa's exceptionally low learning outcomes at the primary level, this matter has never enjoyed the focus of a special ministerial enquiry, and recommendations are virtually never *both* realistic *and* policy-focussed. A part of the problem seems to be silo effects. School funding and the Grade 12 examinations, for example, can each be neatly linked to specific directorates in each of the ten government departments dealing with schooling. The responsibility for learning outcomes cuts across many bureaucratic silos, making it more difficult to generate the momentum for a special study.

The specifics of accountability in schooling systems can be surprisingly elusive. More clarity from researchers in the past might have assisted the policy debates. While the call for more accountability on the part of individual teachers for learning outcomes is commonly made, this type of accountability is technically extremely difficult and very likely to face union opposition. In contrast, holding school principals accountable is technically doable and politically not that difficult. I have argued that an earlier analysis of the political economy of schooling in South Africa, by Levy *et al* (2018), could have evaluated the question of accountability in better ways had they focussed on school accountability, instead of teacher accountability. There is a telling difference between the 2012 National Development Plan and a pre-final version released for comment in 2011. Between the 2011 and 2012 texts, the accountability focus shifted from teachers to schools after some debate¹¹⁴.

International cooperation, particularly within the Africa region, is valued within South African politics. However, given South Africa's position as a significant economic power in the region, it has been difficult to convince policymakers that South Africa can learn from its neighbours. The question of why around half of SACMEQ countries out-perform South Africa is seldom asked, at least not by policymakers. A clue seems

¹¹¹ SADTU, 2016.

¹¹² Department of Basic Education, 2021: 131.

¹¹³ Department of Basic Education, 2013.

¹¹⁴ National Planning Commission, 2011: 265; National Planning Commission, 2012: 309.

to lie in the fact that among the sixteen countries of SADC¹¹⁵, only three do not have some form of universal and standardised testing or examination at the primary level: South Africa, Angola, and Democratic Republic of the Congo¹¹⁶. This does not mean that the remaining countries have ideal assessment systems, but even imperfect systems are arguably better than no system, as they provide at least a rudimentary sense of what learners can do, to principals, administrators and parents.

One may ask whether South African planners made sufficient use of the available manuals aimed at developing countries on *how* to design accountability systems. In fact, this is a moot point if one considers that the manuals that exist fail to address key design issues. For instance, I have argued¹¹⁷ that World Bank and IIEP¹¹⁸ guides on national assessments, while useful up to a point, are essentially guides on how to run such assessments *once*, without details on the critical and technically complex matter of comparing results over time, and hence gauging progress. Moreover, how to reconcile the clear need for sample-based assessments, with the need commonly expressed by politicians, but also planners, to have information across all schools in a system, something which is necessary for school-level accountability, has not received the attention it should.

One solution to the capacity problem in the bureaucracy would be to have more flexible hiring practices. Gauteng Province, the industrial heartland of the country, has followed a rather different route to the other eight provinces by putting large numbers of senior officials on contracts of, usually, five years. Anecdotal evidence suggests this facilitates innovation and accountability in the bureaucracy, though this comes with additional costs as employees are put on higher salary notches to compensate for not enjoying permanent tenure. These practices could in part explain why schools which moved into Gauteng when boundaries were redrawn displayed significant improvements in their Grade 12 national examination results¹¹⁹.

Party political divisions between Western Cape, the only province which has mostly been ruled by parties other than the ANC, and the national government are part of the reason why lessons learnt from this province's universal testing programme, which covers the primary level and has existed since 2002, have not influenced national policy. A further reason is the very limited availability of technical documentation on the Western Cape's programme, and hence a lack of clarity around how difficult technical issues would have been resolved. In fact, it is unclear how comparable results really are over time, a matter of obvious importance if schools are to be held accountable for improving their learning outcomes¹²⁰.

Given the various constraints, how could the schooling system improve accountability at the primary level, in line with the vision in government's five-year plan (discussed in section 4)? First, it seems necessary to take capacity constraints explicitly into account, and allow an accountability programme to evolve hand in hand with the development of better capacity in areas such as psychometrics.

Gauteng Province has been experimenting with an approach that could serve as a starting point for the country as a whole. District officials who visit schools are equipped with a tablet and software which is used to assess the ability of a random

¹¹⁵ Southern African Development Community.

¹¹⁶ The UIS 'Database of learning assessments', consulted 2021.

¹¹⁷ Gustafsson, 2019b.

¹¹⁸ International Institute for Educational Planning.

¹¹⁹ Gustafsson and Taylor, 2018.

¹²⁰ National Treasury, 2017b.

sample of learners in the school to read aloud¹²¹. The data are currently used for planning and as a basis for discussions with school principals. However, there is no formal ranking of schools, and currently socio-economic context is not taken into account. In other words, a very informal level of accountability is pursued, which is the only level really possible unless the measures of reading become more rigorous and comparable.

Improvement against all odds?

The improvements beyond 2007 in South Africa's learning outcomes, according to three international testing programmes shown in Figure 5 above, are large by global standards, though they have occurred off an exceptionally low base¹²². The reaction to these trends by leaders inside and outside government is often sceptical, in part because two of the three programmes, SACMEQ and PIRLS, initially produced incorrect trends which subsequently had to be corrected¹²³. But this scepticism is also rooted in assumptions that improvements should be rapid, when history teaches us that these improvements occur gradually. Thus, if very visible improvements are not seen, it is believed that there was no improvement. There is thus a lack of appreciation of how important even small incremental improvements are, and how important it is to sustain such trends over a longer time period.

What is likely to have driven the improvements? Recent analysis of the PIRLS data of 2011 and 2016 suggests that improved circumstances in the home, for instance a gradual increase in the highest level of adults in the household, have played a role¹²⁴. Using the support-accountability framework, it is quite conceivable that on the support side interventions such as the national workbooks and clearer curriculum documents (see section 3) contributed to better learning. On the accountability side, the situation is less clear. It is possible that ANA, despite its flaws, assisted in shifting the focus to learning outcomes in schools. This raises an important possibility: a flawed accountability system, while perhaps not sustainable, may be better than no accountability at all.

The likelihood of a stalling of progress, after over a decade of progress, suggested by the flat 2015 to 2019 trend in Grade 5 TIMSS (see Figure 5) is concerning, and begs an explanation. It is possible that the factors driving improvements before 2015 have taken the system as far they could. In other words, additional interventions are needed. This would underscore the importance of greater effort in one area where clearly not enough has been done in recent years: school accountability. Moreover, even on the side of support to teachers, not all opportunities have been exhausted. In particular, the 'triple cocktail' interventions focussing on the primary level have been implemented only in pockets of the system, often with demonstrable positive impacts, and could be rolled out across all schools. What seems important is to ensure that support and accountability complement each other properly, both in the technical sense of what is actually done, but also in the policy narratives that must convince the relevant stakeholders.

It is also possible that the stalling of progress – at the primary level only, as TIMSS results continued to improve at the secondary level – is due to a deteriorating socio-economic context, including worsening unemployment (see Figure 3). A third possibility is that a worsening fiscal situation, felt most directly through an increased

¹²¹ This simple words correct per minute (wcpm) approach has been used to provide vital information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning losses in South Africa – see Shepherd *et al* (2021).

learner-teacher ratio and larger classes, have put a brake on further improvements¹²⁵.

Conclusion

To conclude, the deliberate undermining of education for black South Africans under apartheid, and in particular the racially segregated teacher training system, easily explain why the country's point of departure in 1994, with respect to the quality of learning in schools, was so low. Moreover, the unfavourable context of poverty and violence in which many children grew up would have limited further opportunities for learning.

From the advent of democracy in 1994 to around 2003, it was almost taken as a given that the wide range of reforms which had been undertaken would lead to better quality schooling. However, this was a risky assumption, at least at the primary level, as learning outcomes were poorly measured, or measured without a clear benchmark of what these outcomes should be, and the reforms did not focus specifically on how to improve things like reading competencies. Yet it is difficult to imagine the trajectory having been very different in this period. Inevitably, policymakers had to devote much of their efforts to undoing the unequal resourcing practices of apartheid. Perhaps if some of the efforts that went into designing the new outcomes-based education curriculum had instead gone towards the improvement of basic skills, in particular reading in the early grades, more progress would have been made. Similarly, if the sweeping changes occurring to the school governance arrangements had been more sensitive to the need for accountability for learning, and the limited capacity and power of parents in poorer communities, the trajectory may have been different. But at the time, the extent of the learning problems in the early grades had not become clear yet. There was not really a sense that a learning crisis existed.

That understanding began to take root only with the release of the 2000 SACMEQ results in 2003. By benchmarking South Africa's Grade 6 learning outcomes against those of other countries in the region, these results provided insights which education planners in the country had never previously had. While the harm done by apartheid to society had become widely understood, the finding that South Africa's children read no better than children in Mozambique, a much poorer country which had recently suffered a civil war, was probably not expected. This realisation prompted considerable innovation both with respect to supporting schools and teachers, and with respect to school accountability. The flagship school accountability programme, ANA, survived for just four years, before mounting opposition to the programme halted it, and even the education authorities admitted it had been poorly designed. This was a tumultuous experience, which eroded trust between the employer and unions, and the authorities' own confidence in running school accountability systems. Despite these setbacks, every result after 2007 emerging from the three international testing programmes the country participated in pointed to relatively strong quality gains, at least up to just before 2019. Clearly some combination of factors was leading to desirable educational improvement. It is likely that the support initiatives,

¹²² Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019.

¹²³ Department of Basic Education, 2020; IEA, 2021. Where the initial PIRLS 2016 reports pointed to no improvement where there had in fact been considerable improvement, initial reports following SACMEQ 2013 testing pointed to improvements which were unrealistically steep due to calculation errors.

¹²⁴ Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022.

¹²⁵ Department of Basic Education, 2020: 30.

including certain curriculum reforms, were bearing fruit. Conceivably even ANA helped schools pay more attention to learning outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly compromised educational progress, and even our ability to monitor progress. The next important international test results to be announced for South Africa will be the PIRLS 2021 results, expected at the end of 2022. If the PIRLS trend between 2016 and 2021 is flat, it will be virtually impossible to determine to what degree this confirms the apparent stalling of progress already seen in TIMSS, and to what extent this is the result of losses in contact time experienced by learners during the pandemic. Either way, it is clear that a weakening economy in South Africa, due in part to global conditions, has brought about considerable hurdles, and has made it more difficult to return to the upward learning trajectory seen previously.

6 Analytical frameworks to guide South Africa's discourse on progress

The third and final question reads as follows: ***What conceptual frameworks seem particularly effective for taking South Africa's political economy debates forward in the area of education?***

The importance of considering the political realm

The responses to the previous two questions, presented in sections 4 and 5, point to the need for a wider understanding of how South Africa's schooling system, and schooling systems in general, work if we are to achieve truly productive policy discussions on, for instance, foundational skills in the early grades. Much of what is needed involves incorporating political dynamics in better ways into policy analyses.

The approach to answering the third and final question will be to present elements of a hypothetical and augmented education planning curriculum which could inform the training of planners, but even politicians. I will outline both the more traditional economic elements, and the often ignored political economy elements. The two are of course closely inter-linked, and I am not arguing that the traditional elements are unimportant. They are extremely important, and though I use the word 'traditional', even these elements are often ignored or not well understood in the typical education bureaucracy. To illustrate, a recent survey of perceptions among education policymakers from several developing countries revealed a weak understanding of the human capital model, and particularly the importance of foundational skills, among respondents¹²⁶. The political economy elements presented below encompass more topics than what the RISE framework has contained up to now, as this seemed necessary. Specifically, it seems important for the education planner to be capable of analysing carefully not only how political elites influence the system, but also the ideological narratives that underpin education policy debates.

Spheres of policy analysis

In Figure 8 below, the 'traditional' policy analysis layer is the bureaucracy, with its planning and curriculum issues. This is coloured in grey. The remaining four colours represent other layers which have arguably received insufficient attention in past education planning curricula. Political economy questions permeate all five layers. How does Figure 8 relate to the earlier Figure 1 in section 2? The earlier diagram essentially focusses on political, ideological and organisational processes that enable, or hinder, the translation of political responsibility for educational progress, to

¹²⁶ Crawford *et al*, 2021.

actual educational progress. Figure 8 focusses on the different layers of analysis that are necessary to understand the elements of the earlier diagram, where each layer involves focussing on distinct sets of actors and sources. Figure 8 could thus help one to compile and conceptualise a planning curriculum.

The discussion that follows will use the structure of Figure 8, while drawing from the discussions around Figure 1. Below, I repeat as little as possible from section 2, meaning that section must be read to understand what follows.

The popular layer

In education policy analysis, it is especially important to understand perceptions in the general population, or at the popular level, and how these perceptions are shaped. Unlike in the health sector, in education everyone tends to view himself as an expert on schooling, and households would feel the effects of weak schooling, for instance in the form of weak school discipline, on a daily basis. This ‘expert’ opinion typically focusses on what is immediately experienced: the commitment of teachers; class sizes; educational resources; and the attainment of qualifications, which in South Africa means the Grade 12 ‘Matric’. Politicians, especially in democracies, are under considerable pressure to prioritise concerns parents consider important. Acquiring the right foundational skills is typically not a priority, mainly because middle class children tend to be taught relatively well, and poorer parents are often not in a position to monitor whether skills have been learnt as they should.

Figure 8: Spheres of policy analysis



It is especially important for the planner to understand the nature of the public’s under-appreciation of learning. This must influence planning around tools that fill information gaps, such as school report cards, which have only recently entered the South Africa policy agenda. Yet sharing information on learning with parents will not automatically translate into better school accountability for learning. The intelligibility of the information, and its reliability, are critical factors.

There are a number of sources which provide insights into this popular layer. South Africa’s household surveys have for years collected responses from households on

their complaints about schooling. Analysis of this data has helped to establish that a strong policy focus on providing books to learners has translated into fewer household complaints about this input¹²⁷. This should signal to politicians that it has become easier to shift the focus to other issues.

Reports and opinion pieces in the mass media are both reflections of, and shapers of, public opinion. A critical analytical task for any policy analyst is to evaluate the accuracy and completeness of the media's analysis. Such an analysis in South Africa quickly reveals the relative invisibility of foundational learning. This topic only really features when the results from PIRLS are released. Mostly, the media understands the quality of schooling in terms of visible resources and attainment of the Matric. The Matric is extensively covered after the release of the national results in January of each year. An extraordinary amount of time is devoted to competing versions of one statistic: the percentage of youths who obtain the Matric, or the 'throughput rate' – a term not used outside South Africa, it appears. The schooling quality problem is frequently reduced to youths who do not obtain the Matric, without an understanding that South Africa's successful completion of twelve years of education is not atypical for a developing country. Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation, has played an important role as a trustworthy arbiter of the various statistical claims¹²⁸.

Bureaucracy

Planners are from the bureaucracy, yet they, like researchers outside government, struggle to understand the optimal behaviour of the bureaucracy, and its members. As argued previously, the traditional training curriculum for education planners, which largely centres round the human capital model, is important, and serves as a useful point of departure before wider analytical frameworks are used. Pritchett (2019) has referred to three levels of analysis, from least to most comprehensive: 'institutional mono-cropping' views the bureaucracy as essentially all-powerful; the 'accountability triangle' view takes into account the benefits of strong accountability at both a national level, through elections, and at a local level, through accountability by schools to parents; finally, an 'analytic typology of the types of politics and compact' incorporates a more nuanced and historical view of the politics around education. This three-tier hierarchy, or something like it, should be understood by planners.

Manuals of the 'mono-cropping' variety, such as the World Bank manual discussed in section 2, are valuable for what they explicitly teach, and as a basis for discussing their limitations. These manuals must be viewed together with actual policy analyses to understand the 'messy' reality of, for instance, imperfect data. Data imperfections warrants considerable attention in any planning curriculum. Data quality problems will not simply disappear soon, and ways of working around this problem is the bread of butter of any good planner. Conversely, the misguided assumption of perfect data underpins the more problematic indicator manuals emerging out of the Rationalist Steering tradition.

Planners should all be conversant with typical pitfalls when it comes to the measurement of learning outcomes. Sampling techniques must be understood. It is remarkable how many planners believe, incorrectly, that it is the percentage of learners tested, and not an absolute number of learners tested, which primarily

¹²⁷ Department of Basic Education, 2015: 14.

¹²⁸ Africa Check, 2018.

informs confidence intervals¹²⁹. The need for secure anchor items to realise comparability over time, and the difficulty of achieving this where all schools are tested, must be understood. When the conversion of classical scores to some form of Rasch scores becomes necessary is also an important matter¹³⁰. These things are not easy to learn, so they require enough time in any course.

Planners need to understand the typical pitfalls in the design of policies such as the accountability policies discussed above. Again, a combination of theory and practice, as seen in reviews of actual policies, is needed.

Planners do not only need capacity building for themselves, they should be able to come up with working definitions of the desired capacity in specific bureaucratic contexts. This is not easy, and there is in fact very little literature to draw from. Pritchett *et al* (2012) warn that better bureaucratic capacity is easily wasted when politicians set agendas which are too ambitious, and which spread the available capacity out too thinly. This is certainly a risk, but the experience of many in the South African education bureaucracies is that better capacity among planners makes it more difficult for politicians to over-extend the agenda. Politicians can be expected to ask for too much of their bureaucracies. It is in the nature of their roles. The problem arises when they make their requests to under-capacitated planners. Such planners have no solid basis for arguing that an agenda is over-ambitious. At a personal level, not having the capacity required for one's job is disempowering, and is likely to result in, first, an inability to push back effectively against unreasonable demands and, secondly, strategies that will allow someone else to be blamed when failure hits.

There are many silo effects in education bureaucracies, but discussions with planners within and outside South Africa point to one particularly striking division: that between the more economically focussed planners and the more educationally focussed curriculum officials. Frequently, this division coincides with the division between a more Professionalist ideological narrative, on the side of the curriculum officials, and Empiricism and Rationalist Steering among the planning officials, with competition between these latter two narratives occurring within the planning group. The planning-curriculum division also frequently overlaps with the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. Debates around 'correct' research methodologies can absorb considerable time in the bureaucracy. A good planner should form his or her position based on a firm grasp of certain details. For instance, there is obviously good and bad research on both the quantitative and qualitative sides, and publication in a peer-reviewed journal provides only limited guarantees of value. The value placed by the Empiricists on statistical, or econometric, models that pinpoint cause and effect is justified, but not all important enquiries into causality are able to follow this approach¹³¹. For instance, reaching a better understanding of why South Africa's learning outcomes have improved requires a multi-disciplinary approach drawing from statistics, a historical view of policies and practices, and expert opinion. This cannot be done in a single econometric model.

¹²⁹ One way of illustrating this is to point to the fact that Botswana and the United States, despite being vastly different in size, draw from similarly sized samples in the TIMSS programme, and produce equally reliable statistics.

¹³⁰ To illustrate, the universal testing system of the Western Cape is based on classical scores, specifically percentage correct scores for each learner. This is arguably adequate if exactly the same tests are used over time, and tests are kept secure, or secret. However, if tests are made to vary over time, for instance due to concerns around test security, then Rasch scoring and the presence of anchor items linking tests over time become necessary.

¹³¹ Pol, 2013.

Actual plans and reports produced by education bureaucracies, in particular those which focus on the sector as a whole, as opposed to one silo such as financing, are invaluable starting points for discussions around predominant ideological narratives, the use and misuse of statistics, and the harm caused by silo effects. How such documents mimic functionality, to use Pritchett's terminology, through matrices of activities and indicator values that, in a sense, use volume to conceal limited depth and coherence, is something every planner should have thought about.

Silo effects come about in part because people cannot cope with the merging of different specialisations and ideological outlooks, and with an excess of information. This paper, and RISE's political economy framework, essentially argue that the universe of concepts and information a planner should deal with is even *larger* than previously thought. This clearly raises the question of *how* to deal with complexity. An OECD paper¹³² suggests ways of incorporating complexity theory into education planning, but its focus is rich countries. It provides some useful pointers, but a truly useful guide that could help, for instance, the South African planner deal specifically with complexity remains to be written. It is of course a fascinating discussion point, and roughly equivalent to the question of how to bring about 'systems thinking'. Perhaps the most visible way the South African education bureaucracy attempts to break through silos is by means of a large number of meetings where officials from different sections of the bureaucracy exchange information, largely through PowerPoint presentations. The pandemic has facilitated the holding of such meetings, online, and there are thus more of them. Most education officials seem to complain that there are too many meetings, and that this slows down 'real work'. Whether this is true, and what the alternatives are, warrants far more discussion.

In 2014, South Africa's education sector, but also some other sectors, began employing the Big Results Now (BRN) approach of trying to conduct more effective planning meetings. This approach, which draws from Deliverology, was pursued with the assistance of the World Bank. The initiative involved isolating groups of planners from their usual work for many days, and facilitation by external non-government experts. In education, this work consumed considerable effort while yielding few results, according to those who were in some way involved. Why? One explanation one hears is that the approach was politically naïve. The approach tried to bring about 'objective' planning in part by raising the status of 'experts' relative to politically powerful actors. The latter naturally resented this. This experiment in South Africa would be worth documenting to draw lessons for the future¹³³.

Non-government activism

The layer of non-government activism includes advocacy groups working in the country, commentators in the media, opposition politicians and researchers outside government.

Xolo (2020), though providing an account of the litigation work of one organisation, describes areas of focus which have generally been pursued by other advocacy groups too. Above all, school facilities and resources, particularly textbooks, have received considerable attention. Litigation has been a highly influential form of advocacy in South Africa. This reflects the robustness of the judicial system, and government's willingness, on the whole, to submit to the rule of law. Despite the inherently conflictive relationship between the education authorities and advocacy groups, cooperation between the two sides, in part to prevent future litigation, occurs

¹³² Snyder, 2013.

¹³³ Tanzania's BRN experience has been evaluated in Janus and Keijzer (2015).

from time to time. While litigation has clearly resulted in, for instance, more detailed school infrastructure policies, litigation aimed at resolving the situation in specific schools can be problematic. Xolo describes a case involving seven schools said to suffer particularly bad infrastructure deficiencies. The Eastern Cape education authority argued that there were schools which were in a worse situation, and that it was necessary to work according to an existing priority list, which included the seven schools. The education department lost the case, presumably due to weaknesses in the design of the priority list. Using such a list is obviously optimal. A key question a planner should consider is what such a list should look like to withstand scrutiny in a court of law.

Analysing critically the policies of opposition parties is an obviously interesting and informative policy analysis exercise, yet researchers typically steer clear of this in order not to appear to be aligned to, or in opposition to, a particular party. This is a pity. Sufficient neutrality should be possible. The Democratic Alliance's 2019 election manifesto reflects concerns which would be popular among voters. The supposedly low rate of achievement of the Matric is identified as the central manifestation of the country's educational quality problem. A new 'inspectorate' is seen as critical for improving the quality of teaching. However, the difficult details around measuring learning and the trade-offs between focussing on teacher versus school accountability, are not tackled in the manifesto or any other publicly available document of the party. An in-depth critique of the ANC's policies, and an assessment of how the DA's experience as the government in the Western Cape influences its national education policy position, also appear to be absent.

The 2019 election manifesto of the very different Economic Freedom Fighters emphasises a new 'decolonised' school curriculum, and major increases to resourcing, including a massive expansion of the teacher workforce to reduce pupil-teacher ratios. The way the approximately 1,700 historically advantaged suburban schools are viewed as the standard, at least in terms of facilities, for the remaining 21,000 schools is striking. By 2023 it is envisaged that all schools would have swimming pools. This reflects how public perception often does not draw a distinction between the pedagogical aspects of 'quality education' that substantially change future prospects for society and aspects, such as swimming pools, which do not. That such perceptions should exist is understandable in the South African context, where inequalities manifest themselves very starkly in the physical infrastructure.

Research production in Figure 8 spans both the layers of the bureaucracy and non-government activists. This reflects extensive collaboration between government and non-government researchers. This is a clear strength of the current knowledge generation system. This system has its weaknesses, in particular weak engagement with the available data and insufficient specificity in the 'policy recommendations' sections of academic papers, yet without the existing collaboration, the situation would have been worse.

The political layer

The term 'political economy' can be used in a number of ways. At times, it is an informal way of indicating that the history of organisations will be taken into account¹³⁴. It can also be used in a formal manner, with an analytical framework explicitly spelt out. The more formal approach is relatively new as far as the analysis of education systems is concerned, but there are some substantial texts, from which

¹³⁴ This is essentially the approach of Bruns *et al*'s 'The political economy of testing in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa', which presents no formal definition of a political economy approach.

the RISE framework draws. As an education expert examining a political economy framework, without much prior experience of the latter, I have two concerns when looking at work which is essentially that of political economists examining education. First, there is a concern that the political economy frameworks, especially if they come with very little historical and country-specific narrative, could be seen as somewhat inaccessible, and overly theoretical, at least to a typical education planner. Put differently, if the intention is to influence education policy debates, the key messages need to be expressed in language that is widely understood. Of course, this is not necessarily the intention. The aim of certain political economy texts with an education focus may be to influence political economy academics more broadly, and to widen the study of political economy. Insofar as this is the aim, what I argue below is somewhat irrelevant. My focus is on how studying the political economy of education can impact directly on education.

Secondly, the typical political economy view of education seems limited in scope. While that may facilitate academic rigour, it may reduce the policy impact. To illustrate, the title of Hickey and Hossain's book, 'The politics of education in developing countries', suggests a wide scope in line with what we have discussed in this paper so far. However, the core focus is in fact narrower: 'the political factors that shape the extent to which elite actors become committed to adopting and implementing educational reforms aimed at improving learning outcomes'. The book is explicitly 'not addressing the question of how political factors help shape the nature and extent of the learning crisis per se, or of educational outcomes'¹³⁵. The main focus is thus how a political settlement, or historical arrangement, in a country is created by, and in turn empowers, specific elites, which have specific strategies, possibly selfish ones, in relation to the schooling system. Sometimes, the formal political economy approach casts its net wider. For instance, Kingdon *et al* (2014) place a relatively strong emphasis on understanding the role of teacher unions in corrupting promotion processes. What is left out even with this wider scope are the ideological narratives, which are clearly political, utilised by unions and others in competing for power. What I see as a narrowness of scope is likely to reflect the background of the academics involved: of the 23 authors of Hickey and Hossain's book, only five could be considered specialists in schooling systems. Many key tensions within the education sector would be unfamiliar to those approaching the sector from, say, a broader political economy background.

In short, political economy texts would certainly enrich the hypothetical education planning curriculum envisaged here, but their practical applicability to solving education policy problems would have to be sufficiently clear, and there should be the flexibility to widen the scope to include what planners would commonly think of as the 'politics of education systems'.

In the South African context, the political economy notion of elite capture is most obviously reflected in the way the middle class, which has become increasingly diverse, successfully retained considerable public funding for its schools and resisted any radical redistribution of teachers.

Another interesting dimension of elite capture, which has received little attention, has been the perpetuation of the powers of traditional leaders in the former apartheid 'Bantustans'. Around a third of the South African population lives in areas where these leaders continue to wield considerable power, most notably with regard to the use of communal land. Historians have considered the lobbying of these traditional

¹³⁵ Hickey and Hossain, 2019: 23.

leaders as a form of political populism¹³⁶. The ANC was initially not inclined to support their demands, in part because these leaders had on the whole facilitated the Bantustan system under apartheid. Yet traditional leaders, using arguments around the preservation of African culture, were able to extract major concessions from the ANC. The influence traditional leaders exert in the area of schooling is not well known. The 2005 ministerial enquiry into rural education¹³⁷ found that traditional leaders do at times block education interventions where they feel that they have not been sufficiently involved. It has also been found that traditional leaders can contribute positively to schooling in the local area¹³⁸. The political sensitivity of the matter of traditional leaders, in addition to the urban bias of many researchers, seem to explain why the role of traditional leaders in schooling have not received more attention.

Returning to Figure 8, the 'political settlement' should be understood by planners. In South Africa, this includes understanding why the ANC, according to its own narrative, will often refer to the post-apartheid settlement as a compromise, why unions, and in particular public sector unions, have remained relatively powerful, and what factors have contributed to repeated ANC victories in national elections which are clearly free and fair. Unions, given the power of SADTU, straddle the political and non-government spheres in the diagram. Zengele (2014), in an article examining the political narrative of SADTU, provides an example of the argument that while narratives may appear to be contesting the political settlement, they may also indirectly fortify that settlement through a process of distraction: more superficial elements of the settlement receive all the criticism, while more fundamental elements are ignored.

The contestation between National Treasury, DPME and the Auditor-General with respect to the design of the government-wide planning system, and how different modalities of planning influence what is prioritised and even the quality of service delivery, is also important. Parliamentary debates should be analysed. This is enormously facilitated by the online records maintained, since 1995, by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group. Systematic analysis of meeting minutes of the parliamentary committee dealing with basic education suggests that there is in fact little coverage of learning outcomes in general, or foundational skills in particular¹³⁹.

The global layer

South Africa is not a major recipient of international donor funding for schooling. At 8 USD per primary learner per year in 2018, the country was on a par with Brazil. Kenya and Pakistan receive about double this and Namibia seven times this¹⁴⁰. Yet the influence of global donor organisations such as the World Bank and UNICEF, and even national donors such as USAID, remain strong, largely through the policy advice directed at developing countries in general. An increasingly influential global organisation in recent years, at least in South Africa, is the World Economic Forum (WEF).

While some politicians and planners express strong views, positive and negative, about these organisations, these are often not well informed. Planners need to be able to sift rationally through the large amount of policy advice on offer. Two

¹³⁶ Maloka, 1996.

¹³⁷ Department of Education, 2005b: 17.

¹³⁸ Mbokazi, 2015.

¹³⁹ Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2017: 15.

¹⁴⁰ Calculated using UNESCO (2020) and UIS.Stat.

observations seem important in the South African context. One is that the World Bank is often regarded with suspicion, while UNESCO is generally considered benign, with the OECD fitting in somewhere between the two. This is despite the fact that the three organisations, at least today, offer very similar advice. This leads to a situation where advice emanating from UNESCO put forward in a policymaking meeting is more likely to be favourably received than the same advice from the World Bank. What seems to explain this is the World Bank's past record of scepticism about public, relative to private, schooling, and not having supported the abolition of school fees earlier than it did.

The second striking observation is how influential the WEF has become in the country's policy debates, despite the WEF having a miniscule history of education systems analysis compared to UNESCO, the World Bank or the OECD. Specifically, the WEF's Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) idea, something barely featuring in the documents of the other three organisations, has been embraced by policymakers in South Africa, but also several other countries, including Kenya and Malaysia, while others, such as India and Mexico, have not embraced it¹⁴¹. In 2018, President Ramaphosa established a Fourth Industrial Revolution Commission. In the education policy space, 4IR has manifested itself in pilots focussing on coding and robotics from the earliest grades. Some planners and analysts have argued that this distracts from foundational skills, while others have argued it supports such skills and is necessary to prepare children for the twenty-first century. Whether 4IR represents a justifiable 'pure' ideological choice, to use the language of the section 2 framework, or an undesirable competing priority, is a question planners need to grapple with as sensibly as possible. There is no easy answer, especially if political realities are taken into account.

The WEF has promoted Finland as a 'simplifying model' (the language of the earlier framework) that helps to understand educational improvement¹⁴². The use of such global role models should proceed with caution. Around twenty years ago, Singapore was a commonly cited role model in South Africa. Those on the political left like to use Cuba as a standard. There is nothing wrong with using very different systems as a source of inspiration, but it needs to be accepted that policy borrowing may be impossible. Planners ought to familiarise themselves with established comparative education methods for drawing from the experiences of other countries¹⁴³.

Education specialists, in particular those with a curriculum focus, understandably see their role as bringing about deep societal change, not just by empowering learners with academic and vocational skills, but also by instilling values in areas such as gender, race, the environment and economic justice. In this sense, basic education is perhaps the most politicised of all sectors government and planners work in. It is important for planners to understand why particular values would feature prominently in the work of some, but not all, global organisations. The policies of Education International, like the education policies of South Africa, continually emphasise the role of schooling in promoting social equity *and democracy*. United Nations documents, and specifically the SDGs, promote greater social equity, in part through more equal schooling, but are silent on democracy. This is due to the complex geo-political process behind the SDGs, where authoritarian states essentially blocked any

¹⁴¹ This I established through some online Google hits analysis of government websites in various countries.

¹⁴² World Economic Forum, 2017.

¹⁴³ For instance Phillips and Ochs (2003).

emphasis on democracy¹⁴⁴. In South Africa, education planners would of course be free to discuss critically whether existing policies strengthen democracy.

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¹⁴⁴ Langford, 2016.

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7 A different angle on the three questions

Section 7 provides Nick Taylor's responses.

I see my task as supplementing Martin's very thorough exposition in two ways. First, to give some substance to his notion of 'education specialists with a curriculum focus', and to provide an added dimension to his account from this particular perspective. While there is some truth in his characterisation of the proponents of his 'Professionalist' ideology, the specialists I describe below exhibit a far greater depth and substance to their expertise than that of the one-dimensional characters Martin cites. Second, while Martin's account is confined largely to providing a national picture of the South African school system, I illustrate a number of his points from a provincial perspective, drawing in particular on data from Gauteng, the country's industrial heartland and most extensively urbanised of the nine provinces. Although there are many poor and unemployed people living in informal settlements (squatter camps) and townships in Gauteng, it has the highest provincial per capita GDP, at R111 000 against a national average of R82 000¹⁴⁵.

What is an 'Education Specialist'?

Martin asks this question, explicitly and implicitly, a number of times, and in responding, I start by elaborating his 'ideal but unrealistic' arrangement under which learning outcomes, and those for early grade literacy in particular, would be optimised. The school system of any nation consists of a set of hierarchically arranged institutions nested within each other and focused on teachers in classrooms, the smallest units of the system. Ideally, teachers of language and literacy will have been thoroughly educated with respect to three components. First and foremost, they need to have a very thorough knowledge of the language they are teaching, which involves not only understanding the various rules of the language - phonetic, spelling and grammatical - but also being able to apply these rules appropriately in spoken and written forms. Teachers need to be able to deploy any language they are teaching as a subject or use as a medium of instruction at relatively advanced levels of cognitive sophistication. Although language proficiency for teachers involves much more than being able to score highly on the Progress in Literacy Studies (PIRLS) tests, at a minimum, teachers of language and literacy should be operating comfortably at the high and advanced benchmark levels of the PIRLS Assessment Framework¹⁴⁶ if they are to assist their learners to master the reading comprehension processes which characterise these levels.

Second, our ideal teacher would be thoroughly versed in the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) which has been amply demonstrated by research over more than two decades to be effective in scaffolding learners onto the lowest PIRLS level of reading comprehension and supporting them as they advance to mastering the more complex tasks which mark higher levels¹⁴⁷. PCK includes knowledge of strategies for developing the verbal vocabulary required for learning to read; it includes knowledge of systematic phonics (which includes knowledge of sets of phonemes in the language concerned, of words made up of these phonemes and of stories containing those words); it includes strategies for promoting reading fluency and understanding simple and complex inferential reasoning and, once learners achieve the more advanced PIRLS levels, of analysing text in a variety of genres, of discussing authorial intent and of comparing different texts dealing with the same topic.

¹⁴⁵ HSRC, 2022

¹⁴⁶ Mullis et al, 2009

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, forthcoming

Interspersed with exercises designed to develop these reading and talking skills, the teacher will set writing exercises designed to provide new perspectives on those skills which are shared by reading and writing activities and to develop those which are unique to writing. Finally, because any teacher in any class is inevitably faced with a plethora of individual differences among her learners, PCK includes an agile understanding of both how to diagnose the reasons why a struggling learner is unable to master a particular task (which could range from a lack of understanding of letter-sound relationships, to more complex perceptual or cognitive hurdles such as dyslexia), and how to remediate such obstacles.

The third area of teacher proficiency is pedagogical competence: it is one thing to know a language well and to be familiar with the research concerning effective pedagogical strategies, but quite another to blend these successfully into effective classroom routines. In this regard, the initial lessons in pedagogical competence which our ideal teacher was introduced to during the teaching practice component of her university-based initial preparation will be consolidated and elaborated as she¹⁴⁸ tries out various activities in her class, blending content knowledge and PCK in the search for teaching strategies that are effective in different contexts. During her first few years of teaching, she is mentored by an experienced teacher who has demonstrated high levels of success in teaching reading, and throughout her career our ideal teacher is supported by her peers during regular discussions, mutual classroom observation, attendance at conferences, and keeping up with the literature. As she hones her skills at the classroom level, she develops a rhythm of teaching cycles with successive curriculum topics: here assessment plays a key role, in continuously monitoring the progress of individual learners and of the class as a whole, and evaluating the success or otherwise of the teaching strategies she employs. Assessment is coordinated and monitored at the grade level by the subject head, who may or may not be the mentor described above, and is herself a highly experienced school-level education specialist.

School level specialists are thoroughly familiar with the relationship between curriculum, materials, pedagogy and assessment, although they may develop a specialisation in one or more of these components of the teaching repertoire. They may decide to remain at the subject level, or may pursue promotion to the head of a school, or to district, provincial or national offices, in order to widen their scope of influence. Smart human resources (HR) practices at all levels of the system relentlessly search for and develop talent, in building a high-performing school system. School principals are a key cog in this machine. They understand all of the above from the perspective of their particular subject specialisation, and they appoint senior teachers to the leadership team as advisors for the other subjects. In addition, principals will exhibit talent in the sensitive management of their staff, and in the fields of administration, financial management and the law. Training programs to prepare potential leaders in these skills are offered by the province, attached to rigorous procedures for screening those appointed to positions of institutional leadership. Similar procedures are followed at district, provincial and national levels.

Between them, the education specialists selected to drive the system from the national and provincial vantage points will have arrived from a variety of positions and bearing an array of the skills described above: some come from district offices, a few from principalships, perhaps even some straight from classrooms; some may have come directly from the university sector, hired for particular talents in specialised areas such as curriculum design, research, the psychometrics of testing, or, like Martin, a background in Economics and an aptitude for working with large

¹⁴⁸ Any reference to one gender encompasses all the others.

data bases. Some may even enter from the private sector bringing skills in, say, materials development. Extensive classroom experience is not a prerequisite for occupying a leadership positions at higher levels of the system. However, there will be a sufficient number of skilled former teachers able to exercise the judgement required to, for example, reject out of hand South Africa's Curriculum 2005, launched in 1998 and responsible for the widespread confusion of teachers and destabilisation of the system before being reviewed and replaced within four years¹⁴⁹.

Research is a key tool in informing judgements about competing curriculum designs. For example, our ideal education specialists situated in the national office will be aware of the trend towards the adoption of competency-based curricula (similar to the outcomes-based Curriculum 2005) which has been sweeping through Africa over the last two decades, and they will also know that these attempts have, without exception, not been successful¹⁵⁰. The latest country to adopt a competency approach is Kenya¹⁵¹, a move that is likely to jeopardise the thus far highly successful Tusome initiative from achieving its full impact, a point I return to below. However, research considerations don't necessarily come to mind when our ideal head office team receives the latest high-power delegation of consultants from Washington, Paris, Toronto or London offering a curriculum which promises to groom children to reach their full potential, to become autonomous, democratic and economically productive citizens. Such were the assurances given at the 1996 Conference of Education Ministers in Francophone Countries (CONFEMEN) which urged member countries to undertake curriculum reforms following the competency-based model¹⁵². With support from development agencies such as UNDP, UNESCO, World Bank, UNICEF and USAID, the Conference undertook to assist curricular reforms in its 23 member countries. Along with a number of others, Benin accepted this offer, implementing a competency-based curriculum from 2008. On evaluation, the reform was found to be less than optimal, for the same reasons which led to the failure of South Africa's Curriculum 2005 exactly 10 years earlier, including teacher confusion in the face of a very complex design, and the prolix new terminology in which the many documents necessary for implementation were cast¹⁵³.

Coming back to my ideal set of education specialists who would populate the head office of the school system, I return to the question: how are seductive offers of advice, such a those aired at the CONFEMEN Conference of 1996, objectively assessed and, where appropriate, resisted in the face of extravagant promises and enticing gifts? The answer is that, unless the system is led by people who collectively have an excellent theoretical and practical understanding of the various components comprising specialist educational knowledge – curriculum design, pedagogy, materials, assessment, curriculum management, teacher professional development, planning and institutional leadership – the system is a sitting duck for making bad, expensive decisions in all these areas. The one thing that the South African school system seems to have specialised in over the last 28 years of democratic rule is making bad decisions, and in this regard it continues the tradition set by the previous 342 years of colonialism and apartheid. While the system now looks very different – non-racial, ostensibly equitable, gender neutral, etc – and while the significant upward trajectory of learning outcomes traced by Martin in Figure 5 is most encouraging, the question arises: can the gradient of these trends be accelerated and, if so, how?

¹⁴⁹ Hoadley, 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Gauthier, 2013; Lassnigg, 2015

¹⁵¹ Kaviti, 2018; Wafuba, 2021

¹⁵² Yessoufou, 2014

¹⁵³ Jansen, 1999

If they were to be parachuted into the present time, our ideal set of education specialists would immediately see that the universities are currently not producing the kind of highly educated and skilled teachers I describe above. According to Zuilkowski et al, a pattern common to a number of low- and middle-income countries, is where interventions to improve foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes in primary schools have neglected initial teacher education (ITE), focusing largely on the in-service training of current teachers, on the assumption that doing so will lead to faster results in terms of raising learning outcomes¹⁵⁴. Consequently, these authors argue, ITE programs are frequently disengaged from what is happening in schools, which means that new teachers enter the workforce without the skills needed to teach literacy and numeracy effectively. South Africa is a case in point, with poor to mediocre ITE¹⁵⁵ and the allocation of considerable resources annually to in-service teacher education. Regarding the latter, although international donor interest has declined considerably since the nineties and noughties when agencies such as USAID, DFID, and the like supported several large school development programs, and although some are still active in the country, Martin is right in saying that, compared with many other developing countries, South Africa is currently not a large recipient of international donor funding. However, the local corporate sector remains very active in supporting educational causes: in 2020, corporate social investment programs (CSI) spent an estimated R10,3bn, of which 39% was in the education terrain¹⁵⁶. In addition, provinces are obliged to spend 1% of their payroll budgets on training, and I describe below some of the details of how government training unfolds in Gauteng.

In-service training initiatives are increasingly being subjected to research and evaluation in order to identify the most effective programs, and our dream team of head office education specialists will know that interventions such as the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) hold considerable promise for ameliorating the worst effects of the South Africa's ineffective ITE sector. Thus, after two years of implementation of a randomised control trial (RCT) of the EGRS in NW Province in the years 2015-2017, around 10% more Grade 2 children in the experimental group were reading at 40 words correct per minute when compared with those in the control group¹⁵⁷. This is the benchmark taken to indicate that learners read sufficiently fluently to attain the PIRLS Low International Benchmark of reading comprehension (literal understanding, or finding information explicitly stated in the text)¹⁵⁸. This assumption is supported by the fact that around 10% more children in the experimental group scored either 3 or 4 out of 4 simple comprehension questions than in the control group¹⁵⁹.

Our dream team will be aware that, important as these findings are, there is a world of difference between demonstrating such results in the hermetically sealed hothouse conditions of a rigorously controlled RCT, on one hand, and replicating them in the real-life conditions under which teachers and their support staff conduct their daily work, on the other¹⁶⁰. Consequently, they would ensure that attempts to implement such a program at scale follow some of the lessons established by the successful Tusome intervention in Kenya, including the close involvement of district- and school-

¹⁵⁴ Zuilkowski et al, 2021

¹⁵⁵ Taylor and Mawoyo, forthcoming.

¹⁵⁶ Trialogue, 2021

¹⁵⁷ S Taylor et al, 2018

¹⁵⁸ Wills et al, 2022

¹⁵⁹ S Taylor et al, 2018

¹⁶⁰ Banerjee et al, 2017 provide a detailed description of the painstaking journey faced by interventions of this kind in moving from proof of concept to implementation at scale.

level curriculum leaders in monitoring and supporting teachers, setting benchmarks and tracking performance at the class level against the benchmarks¹⁶¹. A good assessment program is essential to this enterprise, as strongly argued by Martin, but, as he points out, the way in which curriculum leaders are currently employed in South Africa provides insufficient time and space for these activities. Consequently, implementing such a program would entail making significant adjustments to their work schedules. This, in turn, would entail engagement with the unions in order to reach agreement that classroom visits are not aimed at finding fault and punishing teachers but at improving the teaching of language and literacy. Martin raises the question as to whether the arguments advanced by the unions in favour of teacher autonomy is a ruse to avoid accountability. This is a good question, but organised labour does advance one legitimate argument when they question whether curriculum leaders are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to undertake these tasks substantively, or whether, because of lack of expertise, monitoring inevitably degenerates into a meaningless, tickbox exercise.

At the same time the ideal head office team of education specialists would realise that in-service training is capable of addressing only a fraction of the PCK described above and can make little attempt to address the even more fundamental aspect of teachers' poor language proficiency. Both of these knowledge fields are large and relatively complex and thus best studied systematically during ITE. Furthermore, our head office team will realise that attempting to make up for poor ITE by means of in-service training is a Sisyphean enterprise in that it would need to be repeated with every cohort of incompetent teachers emerging from the universities and that the long-term solution would be to reform ITE. Towards this end, they would engage with the relevant regulatory (Department of Higher Education and Training) and quality assurance (Council on Higher Education) bodies and the universities themselves. Ideally, this would be done at a national level in order to reform the whole system of ITE, but there is nothing preventing a province from approaching the universities situated in the province and working closely with them not only on the issue of quality but also on the number and type (by subject and grade level) of new teachers required.

Why does South Africa perform so poorly? Lessons from Gauteng

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to understand just how poorly the country does perform. For example, take the reading scores for the latest iteration of PIRLS shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of learners reaching PIRLS International Benchmarks¹⁶²

	Advanced	High	Intermediate	Low
South Africa	0.2	1.9	7.5	22.1
Gauteng Province	0.7	4.7	14.7	31.5
SA Quintile 5	1.6	12.2	38.0	64.9
International median	10	47	82	96

What is perhaps most striking about Table 1 is the very poor performance of Quintile 5 learners, the most affluent 20%, whose performance one might expect, at the very least, to rival that of the international median. However, this is very far from the case. Why does the most highly advantaged segment of the population perform so poorly? Although the racial composition of this segment has changed significantly over the last three decades, the majority of families here are those who benefited from

¹⁶¹ Piper et al, 2018

¹⁶² Howie et al, 2017

apartheid, and one might expect them to be outperforming their international peers. Pritchett contends that South Africa is the single biggest learning underperformer relative to GDP per capita among low- and middle- income countries¹⁶³. Furthermore, he adds, students in the poorest quartile of schools in Kenya do better than students in the richest quartile of schools in the best performing province of South Africa (the Western Cape), despite the fact that the school average per capita consumption is 18 times higher in the Western Cape top quartile schools than in the Kenyan lowest quartile schools. This argument reinforces the picture of underperformance of the country's most advantaged learners.

There is undoubtedly a lot of truth in Martin's contention that the country's under-performance is due to apartheid. I would add that the gross levels of inequity which continue to plague the country were established long before the apartheid regime assumed power in 1948. In my view, this explanation also accounts for the poor showing at the top end of the distribution: while those discriminated against by apartheid were held back through lack of resources, racist curricula and poorly training teachers, those who benefited from apartheid were lulled into a state of complacency. The question is, why do these patterns persist after nearly 3 decades of democracy? This is what I attempt to explain below.

Politics

The political head of provincial education departments is the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education, and the bureaucracy is led by the Head of Department (HOD). The majority of MECs for Education in the nine provinces have played a very active part in setting policy and getting involved in management issues. The new MEC for Education in Gauteng installed in 2014 following national elections, has been particularly active. There is no better example of this than his closing the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS), an initiative set up by the previous MEC for Education, and replacing it with his Paperless Classroom initiative.

The GPLMS, a forerunner to the EGRS, was structured along similar lines to both the EGRS and Kenya's Tusome program, providing scripted lesson plans, quality reading material and on-site coaching of teachers¹⁶⁴. These are the 'triple cocktail' interventions referred to by Martin above, known in the literature as Structured Pedagogy programs¹⁶⁵. In the years 2011-14, the GPLMS worked with teachers in the first three grades in 1000 schools serving the poorest learners in the province. By the end of that period the program was showing an impact on reading scores of between 0.2 and 0.7 of a standard deviation, results which promised much in addressing the very poor outcomes reflected in Table 1.

According to the MEC for Infrastructure Development in Gauteng at the launch of Paperless Classroom in one Soweto school, the program supplied learners with tablets, teachers with laptops, classrooms with interactive smart boards and schools with connectivity, training, maintenance and security¹⁶⁶. The MEC motivated for the program in terms of its potential to effect '... a truly non-racial and inclusive education

¹⁶³ Pritchett, 2019: 2

¹⁶⁴ Fleisch, 2016

¹⁶⁵ Snilstveit et al, 2015

¹⁶⁶ Mayathula-Khoza, 2015

system. Technology as a game changer will assure equity to any learner irrespective of their race, class or gender'¹⁶⁷

The replacement of GPLMS by the Paperless Classroom initiative represents a major missed opportunity for the province. Had our dream team of education specialists been in place in the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) in 2014, and had they had the authority to over-ride the MEC, and had it not been for COVID, GPLMS might have ensured that reading scores from PIRLS 2019 in the province might have shown a significant upward kick in the gradient of the GDE component of Martin's green curve in Figure 5. Our dream team would have opposed the MEC's plan using two main arguments. First, reading is the most fundamental of all school knowledge and without it, further learning is extremely slow. Second, our dream team would be aware of the many abandoned computer laboratories in schools throughout the province, testament to the failure of the earlier Gauteng Online project (dubbed 'Gauteng Offline' shortly after its launch, for obvious reasons). They would also be aware of the findings of the OECD investigation into attempts to bolster the efforts of weak teachers by ICT means, which concluded that:

...to reduce inequities in the ability to benefit from digital tools, countries need to improve equity in education first. Ensuring that every child attains a baseline level of proficiency in reading and mathematics will do more to create equal opportunities in a digital world than can be achieved by expanding or subsidising access to high tech devices and services. ... In the end technology can amplify great teaching, but great technology cannot replace poor teaching¹⁶⁸

One small-scale study on the use of Paperless Classroom technology in teaching high school mathematics concluded that the program had not been as successful as anticipated due to connectivity problems and a lack of ICT skills among teachers; furthermore, replacing textbooks with technology limited the resources available to teachers and learners, who preferred a blended teaching and learning environment, in the belief that Mathematics cannot be taught solely with ICTs¹⁶⁹. Nevertheless, despite all evidence to the contrary, when additional funds were made available to the GDE in 2022, the provincial government decided that this was another opportunity for Gauteng to '... continue to be the national benchmark in as far as technology-based learning is concerned', and allocated a further R1.2 billion to increase the number of devices, data and security¹⁷⁰.

Since raising reading scores is a slow process, and not likely to show spectacular gains over 5-yearly political cycles, it is understandable that politicians would favour flooding schools with headline-grabbing shiny new hardware and sophisticated software, particularly where it is accompanied by a fanfare proclaiming the end of inequality. In addition, lucrative contracts for IT goods and services provide very effective mechanisms for dispensing patronage. Not that there is any evidence of illegal practices in dispensing goods and services under Paperless Classroom, but patronage is just as easily dispensed by legal as by illegal avenues.

This example reveals the absence of a coherent vision for education within the ruling political party, one MEC prioritising early grade reading and her successor choosing the supply of technology to schools. In the general case, it reveals a tendency among politicians to want to stamp their personal identities onto the system for political

¹⁶⁷ Mayathula-Khoza, 2015

¹⁶⁸ OECD, 2015: 16, 17. See also Piper, 2017

¹⁶⁹ Minty and Moll, 2020

¹⁷⁰ Ndaba, 2022

purposes, without regard for what would be best for the education of their constituents, and hence for the public good.

Corruption

In 2011 South Africa's National Planning Commission (NPC), an institution established by the President and working from his office, issued a vision for the country, the National Development Plan (NDP), which identified goals for the next two decades¹⁷¹. Aside from a chapter *Improving education, training and innovation* the NDP devoted a chapter – entitled *Building a capable and developmental state* – to professionalising the civil service. The latter noted several weaknesses, including tensions in the political-administrative interface, instability of the administrative leadership, skills deficits, the erosion of accountability and authority, poor organisational design and low staff morale. This chapter gave considerable space to the issue of corruption and how it could be countered and prevented, and called for the separation of political and bureaucratic functions and the appointment of civil servants on the basis of merit.

However, at the time of the publication of the NDP, the trend was accelerating in the opposite direction under the infamous 'State Capture' period in the country's history, aided and abetted by the President at the time, Jacob Zuma. Just weeks prior to his removal as President by the ruling party in 2018, and under direction from the Public Protector¹⁷², Zuma established the *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture*. Chaired by the country's Deputy Chief Justice (promoted to Chief Justice towards the end of the process), taking four years to complete and costing an estimated R1 billion, the final report comprised 6 volumes and ran to a total of 5 437 pages¹⁷³. Uncovering what it termed corruption of 'industrial proportions' at every level of government, state owned enterprises and many sectors of the private sector, the Commission declared that the ruling ANC had been and continued to be the beneficiary of State funds, through receipt of payments from third parties alleged to have corruptly acquired government contracts¹⁷⁴. Furthermore, the party had conflated the interests of the party and the constitutionally enshrined public duty of those in government, and, in protecting Zuma during his presidency, had sacrificed its public duty in order to protect the party, which had become '...an instrument for the project of wealth accumulation'¹⁷⁵. According to the Commission, for over 20 years, the party and individual members had been involved in '... the looting of public resources; the abuse of state power; patronage; bribery; vote-buying; nepotism; state capture; and others'¹⁷⁶.

One example involving the GDE illustrates the 'industrial scale' of some of this corrupt activity. Requested by President Ramaphosa, Zuma's successor, to investigate media reports about the awarding of contracts for the supply of personal protective equipment and sanitising schools in preparation for their post-lockdown opening in 2021, the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) reported that 270 contracts were awarded irregularly, accompanied by kickbacks to officials, and the gross overpricing of services resulting in over-payment of some R418m out of a total of R427m¹⁷⁷. In other words, had the contracts been awarded to firms with experience in supplying medical equipment, and had they been correctly priced, the total cost

¹⁷¹ National Planning Commission, 2011

¹⁷² Public Protector, 2016

¹⁷³ Judicial Commission of Inquiry, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid: 202

¹⁷⁵ Ibid: 202

¹⁷⁶ Ibid: 202

¹⁷⁷ Special Investigating Unit, 2021

would have been a mere R9m, 2% of the total amount paid. Amid accusations that the sanitising of schools which had been closed for months was unnecessary, the MEC said that he had not been aware of the tender and declared himself 'shocked' at the SIU findings¹⁷⁸. There are liberal democracies in the world in which, under these circumstances, the political and bureaucratic heads of the government department concerned, mindful of their lack of oversight, would have resigned, and in which the president, in shame at what his party had done, might have resigned and called an early election. South Africa is not one of those countries. Nevertheless, as Martin points out, one principle that has been largely maintained since the advent of democracy in 1994 has been the rule of law, as shown, for example, in the presence of an independent Public Protector and judiciary, with the capacity to issue the respective reports described above. The ultimate test of this principle will come in the 2024 national election, which a number of commentators are predicting the ANC is likely to lose. In the meantime, President Ramaphosa has revived the idea of professionalising the civil service, first raised in the NDP. In 2020 government issued a draft bill titled *A National Implementation Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service*¹⁷⁹. According to the President, this legislation is aimed at: '... building an efficient, capable and ethical state free from corruption...'¹⁸⁰.

Assessment

At all levels of the system, the GDE lists a myriad of inputs (training, curricula, materials) but only at the level of Grade 12 are any output measures provided. For Grade R, the goal of *school readiness* is measured solely in terms of the proportion of 5-year olds attending a Grade R class¹⁸¹, even though a well-established outcome measure to track the physical, social and academic development of preschool children is in use by the DBE¹⁸². In the Foundation, Intermediate and Senior phases, the indicators targeted by GDE to measure learning outcomes are obsolete (such as the defunct ANA system), or applied too infrequently and are not sufficiently fine-grained to identify areas of greatest need (such as the international test programmes PIRLS, SACMEQ and TIMSS). Nevertheless, the GDE declares that results are 'on track' in both languages and mathematics at Grade 3 and Grade 6 levels¹⁸³. A close look at the trends in PIRLS results, reveals that, while scores for all provinces rose between the 2011 and 2016 iterations, Gauteng, along with the Western Cape, showed the least improvement (Table 2)¹⁸⁴, something which should concern the province, if they were paying attention.

¹⁷⁸ Macupe, 2021

¹⁷⁹ Republic of South Africa, 2020.

¹⁸⁰ Ramaphosa, 2021: 1

¹⁸¹ GDE, no date

¹⁸² Dawes et al, 2016

¹⁸³ GDE, 2021

¹⁸⁴ DBE, 2020: 73

Table 2: Provincial PIRLS trends, with SES controls¹⁸⁵

	Percentage point gain (coeff. on 'ls 2016')	p value
EC	3.8	0.311
FS	13.1***	0.005
GP	1.7	0.706
KN	5.0	0.152
LP	14.1***	0.000
MP	7.3**	0.027
NC	11.7***	0.001
NW	12.3***	0.002
WC	0.6	0.875
SA	5.8***	0.000

*** indicates that the estimate is significant at the 1% level of significance, ** at the 5% level.

The SACMEQ results show very similar trends for both language and mathematics¹⁸⁶. But even at Grade 12 level, rather than focusing objectively on the results and how they may be improved, the GDE boasts of outperforming the country's poorer provinces, declaring that the province has 'retained the crown' of the best results in the NSC examinations. This is a dubious claim, at best, and contributes to the sense of triumphalism and complacency which is quite out of place in a school system widely regarded as the most inefficient and poorly performing in the world. And, although the Grade 12 output indicators are measurable and, arguably, comparable from one year to the next¹⁸⁷, and are used to motivate schools to attain marginal gains, there is no evidence that they are used to assess the efficacy of the support activities provided to schools by the GDE. Similarly, rather than crowing that the province's achievement in the TIMSS Grade 9 mathematics test indicates that '... Gauteng becomes one of the provinces that is able to compete across the world'¹⁸⁸, the province could use these results to much greater effect in addressing the mediocre teaching of maths and science at high school level.

In the absence of a psychometrically sound and administratively reliable assessment system, Gauteng schooling continues to 'fly blind', with no way of identifying problem areas, designing remediating interventions and tracking their effects or of holding schools accountable. For all the province knows, the millions spent annually on teacher training might be a complete waste of money. A second problem lies with the triumphalist rhetoric used by both the political and bureaucratic leaders, which continues to feed the air of complacency with which they conduct their business. This is another effect of the dominance of politics over educational considerations: it is in the interests of the political class to project the impression that everything is going well and that they are doing a good job. Unfortunately, learners and ultimately the nation are the losers.

Conclusion: what hope for the future?

To obtain a quantum leap in the improvement of learning outcomes two moves are necessary. First, the universities need to produce competent teachers. In the field of literacy, the foundations for the kind of specialist educational knowledge I describe above are a high level of proficiency in the language concerned and a very thorough grounding in the theory and practice of reading pedagogy. Thereafter specialist

¹⁸⁵ DBE, 2020

¹⁸⁶ DBE, 2020

¹⁸⁷ Rendering the results comparable from one year to the next is not an exact science, as Martin has pointed out. See Gustafsson, 2020

¹⁸⁸ GDE, 2021: 73

knowledge is acquired on the job, through a variety of professional development activities and under expert guidance from seniors and peers. The good news here is that there are moves in the ITE sector to produce teachers which are far better equipped to teach literacy and languages and mathematics¹⁸⁹.

The second thing that needs to happen to move South African schooling onto a better footing is that HR practices in the education bureaucracy should provide opportunities for specialist expertise to grow: above all this requires the application of meritocratic principles in the employment and deployment of personnel and the systematic development of talent. President Ramaphosa's latest attempt to professionalise the civil service provides some hope that this might begin to happen.

Political developments within the ANC and in the wider political sphere, and the outcomes of the 2024 elections will be key to determining both whether the country is able to build a professional civil service and whether capable civil servants are able to make good policy decisions free from interference by politicians. The results of the election are important in terms of both which party or coalition wins at national and provincial levels and, even more important, on the calibre of the public representatives which emerge. If there is a critical mass of political leaders who work in the interests of the public good and recognise their own shortcomings in making technical decisions in the education sphere, then the long and hard journey to building a strong school system may begin.

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¹⁸⁹ Taylor and Mawoyo, forthcoming

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8 A final conclusion

Political economy and ideology are important determinants of educational development. This paper has confirmed this in the South African context, and with special reference to the acquisition of foundational skills in the early grades.

South Africa's apartheid legacy, and the predominance of the upper secondary school-leaving certificate, shaped the policy discourse in ways that often marginalised the question of foundational skills. As was explained in section 5, apartheid's unequal and race-based school funding system, and the iniquitous apartheid school curricula, were things that policymakers had to devote considerable effort to changing. This, and the absence of truly relevant information on learning outcomes at the primary level, at least up until the widespread distribution of the regional SACMEQ results after 2003, made it difficult to devote the right kind of attention, political or technical, to foundational skills.

Post-1994, the political urgency of providing quality schooling to the emerging black middle class could have diverted attention from improving the quality of education for the poorest segments of society, despite official policy commitments to serving the poor. A political economy lens, and specifically the theory that existing and emerging elites in society attempt to shape the education system to serve their interests, permits some novel insights into the history of schooling in South Africa. That the post-1994 government, under the ANC, placed considerable emphasis on empowering and expanding the black middle class, after decades of an apartheid government which had specifically empowered a white Afrikaner middle class, is widely accepted by historians. But how this played itself out in the public schooling sector has received limited attention among academics up to now. A plausible hypothesis is that the interests of both white and black members of the middle class coincided during the transition to democracy. In the new equal funding regime, whites succeeded in retaining much of the public funding they had enjoyed under apartheid, plus a special concession that allowed them to augment public funding with private fee-based funding within public schools, on condition that fee exemptions were granted to learners from a few low-income households. The outcome could easily have been very different. There were good economic arguments for spending considerably less on historically white schools, and perhaps privatising them, given the ability of many whites to pay fees. The fact that this did not happen facilitated access by the black middle class to schooling that in the South African context was of a relatively high standard. The implied justification, never made explicit, was that this was a stop-gap measure while quality in historically black schools, which continued to serve parts of the black middle class, was built up. A further obvious benefit of the arrangement was that it facilitated a more racially integrated middle class, an important social cohesion imperative.

None of this middle class 'capture' was specified in policy, nor could it be. The ANC's policies on schooling were aimed at undoing the apartheid legacy, meaning promoting equity was an explicit theme throughout. South Africa has in fact seen substantial gains in learning outcomes in the last twenty years, driven mainly by improvements among the least advantaged. The gains are substantial insofar as they mirror some of the steepest improvements seen around the world in the international testing programmes. Yet the point of departure in South Africa in 1994 was so low that outcomes today, even in the middle class, remain well below those seen in other middle income countries.

Curiously, why South Africa experienced these improvements has received little attention. While the enormous education policy changes that occurred after 1994

were a significant national achievement, it would be difficult to argue that South Africa has been an exemplary country when it came to formulating policies and systems focussing specifically on improving foundational skills. Certain interventions, such as providing more books to learners and moving all teacher training to universities, even if the quality of university-based training remains far from ideal, would have improved learning in schools. However, a critical sample-based national assessment programme, started in 2001, had petered out by 2010, largely due to capacity constraints. South Africa's knowledge about foundational skills has had to rely mostly on international programmes. Silo effects in the bureaucracy have made it difficult to make various actors unite around the overriding goal of sustaining improvements in learning. To illustrate, in the planning of teachers, where unions play a large role, a focus on remuneration has tended to crowd out proper analysis of the trade-off between the size of the teacher workforce and pay, in a context of shifting enrolments. The unintended consequence of this has been a continuation of a situation where at the primary level half of learners, mostly the least advantaged, experience class sizes in excess of what the physical classroom was designed to accommodate. The effects of this on the teaching of foundational skills, while under-researched, are presumably significant¹⁹⁰.

Assuming improvements continue at the rate of the last almost two decades, it would take South Africa another ten years to reach the level of a typical middle class country. However, several political and non-political factors could impede further gains. These risks have been magnified by the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper it has been argued that politicians and planners will need to focus better on learning, especially in the early grades. But to what extent are the challenges in the political realm, and to what extent in the more technical realm? Much of the motivation behind the study of the politics of schooling is a suspicion that it is within the political realm that the most fundamental change needs to occur. One cannot bring about the necessary change by focussing just on the traditional realm of education planning and policymaking. This paper has argued that education planning capacity remains weak in South Africa, and that this is a critical obstacle. For instance, improving the quality of teacher training at universities is largely an apolitical task which could be achieved regardless of what occurs in the political realm. While there is a risk that over-ambitious political agendas can render capacity building among planners ineffective, because capacity is spread out too thinly, it has been argued above that better capacitated planners are far more able to push back against unrealistic political agendas.

Many of the obstacles in the political realm are difficult to change, span all government sectors, and are not education-specific. Such obstacles need to be tackled through strategies and policies which span, for instance, the entire public service, though some education-specific action, perhaps within individual provinces, could serve as a demonstration of what can be done. The electoral system rewards politicians who respond to popular demands, but such demands tend to focus on very visible phenomena such as school infrastructure, access to new technologies and obtaining the Grade 12 certificate. Learning in the early grades has become more visible due to work occurring in samples or pockets of the system. How to make this visible across all primary schools through better availability of information, and better systems development capacity, and how to link information to school

¹⁹⁰ The notion that reducing class sizes does not improve learning is common in education planning. However, as argued in Gustafsson and Mabogoane (2012), this draws almost exclusively from research in developed countries, and relates to marginal changes in class sizes where the point of departure is completely different to that found in South Africa.

accountability in ways that avoid pitfalls experienced in South Africa's recent past, are politically and ideologically charged questions.

The paper has analysed some of the ideological narratives used by contesting elites, and has advocated a more systematic analysis of these narratives. For instance, planners need to understand the more ideological side of the arguments made by unions. However, there are also competing narratives *within* the education planning sphere which need to be properly understood.

Corruption has adversely affected the schooling system, most noticeably with respect to who is promoted, but the wider erosion of institutions caused by corruption undermines schooling in more insidious ways. The opportunity cost of corruption is large. If concerns around corruption predominate in the policy discourse, other themes, such as pedagogy, do not receive the attention they should.

The South African experience confirms that a more politically informed approach to education policy analysis is illuminating and necessary. The emergence of a specialist literature on the political economy of education, in part as a result of work being undertaken by RISE, is helpful. However, a complete treatment of politics in the education policy arena should include analysis of ideological narratives employed by contesting elites, and how these narratives almost gain 'a life of their own', independently of what their proponents may have intended. RISE is well placed to take such analysis further. Terms such as 'neo-liberal', 'managerialism', 'accountability', 'standardised testing', 'big data', 'evidence-driven', and 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' are often used very loosely in a manner that polarises actors and hinders productive policymaking. Behind these terms are important and interesting concepts which warrant a deeper engagement by all education stakeholders. Moreover, less contested terms such as 'professionalism' provide a useful catalyst for policymaking that advances the education of children.