A five-year plan for South African schooling

A report commissioned by the National Planning Commission

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1. What drives the crisis in schooling?

The endemic dysfunction of the country's school system rests on two pillars. The primary cause is weak capacity throughout the civil service – teachers, principals, and system level officials simply don't have the skills to do their jobs – which results not only in very poor schooling outcomes, but also breeds a lack of respect for the institution of government. The mirror image of this weakness in the technical core is a culture of patronage which permeates almost all areas of the civil service, with few departmental and, to a limited extent, one or two provincial exceptions. These two factors are closely related, with nepotism and the appointment of unsuitable personnel further weakening government capacity, and driving officials, in the absence of the technical skills, to entrench their positions by building their own patronage networks.

Together these two pillars of school dysfunctionality create a culture of impunity. Under these conditions it is surprising to find any schools that deliver excellent education, but there are many, often working under the most difficult conditions, which provide positive lessons for the system and hope for the children in their care. Unfortunately, there are far too many more that show us what not to do, revealing the horrific consequences of a society which neglects expertise, and allows gross inefficiency and predation by special interest groups to stifle commitment to learning. The result is a poorly literate nation in which inequality widens.

The solution to the first pillar of dysfunctional schooling – poor capacity in government – is technical: skills must be built to establish and maintain the systems which drive learning, and which enable officials to earn respect through competence and service. The solution to the problem of nepotism and corruption is political, and must be addressed, first and foremost, within the political sphere. Unless both pillars are addressed South Africa cannot rise to the kind of developmental state that provides real opportunities for the poor. We initially discuss these two issues separately below, although in reality they are closely related, and any action plan aimed at addressing them will need to coordinate the political and the technical.

2. The technical core

It has become well known that many teachers know a lot less about the subjects they teach than the curriculum expects of their learners (Taylor, 2009a; Spaull, 2011), while the majority of principals appear not to know that their main function is to lead and direct learning within the school (Bush and Heysteck, 2006; Hoadley and Ward, 2009). Since system level officials are promoted from within this very poor foundation, it is small wonder that principals and teachers constantly complain about the poor guidance provided by circuit, district and provincial offices. Weakness of the technical core of schooling is not principally the fault of the present government, having deep roots in the explosive expansion of school provision across South Africa between 1970 and 1990 (Crouch and Vinjevold, 2006), in unjust apartheid financing patterns, and in the need to radically restructure the bureaucracy in 1994 for reasons of both equity and efficiency. However, it does fall to the current administration to arrest the slide into what Zwelinzima Vavi has called a predatory state[1] (Vavi, 2010). Nothing short of a system-wide and sustained programme of public sector reorganisation and

[1] Habisso (2010) defines the predatory state as a developmental state without bureaucratic competence.

capacity building will significantly improve the quality of schooling in the short to medium term. The plan outlined below is intended to originate this process.

A change of direction

Building such capacity is essentially a technical task which will require significant resourcing. But it is unlikely to be effective if it is not accompanied by a radical change of direction. We propose that government signals its intention to build a professional education civil service, and that the process is initiated by an accord negotiated in the political sphere and driven by the highest levels of leadership. This accord needs to give a strong signal that the system is changing course, moving from incompetence and nepotism to a culture of expertise; changing to a system in which conflict is resolved through regulatory procedure rather than political accommodation, and in which competence not connection is the only criterion for judging performance.

Accountability

The Department of Basic Education (DBE), following many countries in both the developed and developing world, is in the process of implementing a series of accountability measures, including annual national assessments in key grades, and performance agreements for principals (DBE, 2011). Evidence from developing countries indicates that accountability systems that are well designed and faithfully implemented can play an important role in improving the quality of education (Ravela, 2005; Delannoy, 2000). However, a major impediment to the successful implementation of accountability measures is that they are prone to exploitation by gaming and other perverse practices. For example, reports of schools and even whole districts in the United States cheating in the tests used to measure progress on the No Child Left Behind programme are increasing (Jacob and Levitt, 2003; Ravitch, 2010; Jonsson, 2011; Ravitch, 2011). System-wide gaming of the South African Senior Certificate examinations is known to have occurred in the years 1999-2003 (Umalusi, 2004; Taylor, 2009b). Space is provided for the perversion of well intended policies when a simplistic set of indicators is used to measure progress such as the use of the pass rate as the sole measure of the quality of output of the National Senior Certificate (matric), or when an inappropriate instrument such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests is used as a measure of school performance[2].

But even if gaming can be obviated, the institution of a performance regime on its own will probably squeeze a certain quantum of inefficiency out of the system, but is unlikely to lead to greatly improved performance. Holding people accountable is important, and the institution of accountability measures in South African schooling is long overdue, but if educators don't know what to do or how to do it, no accountability system can improve matters. Nor can pressure from civil society extract higher performance in the absence of knowledge and skills on the part of teachers and principals. Elmore (2003; 2008) concludes that, at the school level, accountability systems can be effective in raising learner scores, but that there is wide variability among schools in their responses to such initiatives. The response of any particular school to external accountability measures depends on the state of what Elmore calls its 'internal accountability systems'.

[2] A test which reliably measures school performance would be administered and scored externally. Since the ANAs are administered and scored by teachers, they cannot provide a reliable standard across schools and, at worst, are open to gaming and even cheating. Nevertheless, they remain an important instrument for use by teachers in conveying curriculum standards, and in providing direct evidence of learner performance, and hence of pedagogical effectiveness.

Recent South African research (Malcolm et al, 2000; Christie et al, 2007; Taylor et al, 2010) indicates that strong internal accountability is led by a coordinated focus on teaching and learning by school leaders, teachers, and parents. Specifically, the school-level systems which drive improved performance in schools are a stable school governing board (SGB), effective time management, year-long curriculum planning and monitoring, the systematic use of assessment to focus teaching and learning, and the procurement and deployment of books (See Appendix A).

Effective principals are able to inspire their staff to achieve the true reward available to teachers: the satisfaction of seeing their learners acquiring knowledge. But under present arrangements, too few school communities have the capacity required to choose such leaders and, if they had, would be hard pressed to find a good principal, since the present system does not nurture this kind of professional leadership. Good principals, indeed good managers at all levels of the system, far too often arrive in their jobs by accident: the civil service for education needs to be reorganised so that it systematically recognises and develops expertise. It needs to be built into an institution that is a preferred employment destination for the country's best talent, not a last resort as it is in too many cases. The case of India is an example in point, and South Africa could do worse than to seek help from our BRICS brothers in this regard.

Training

If we are to improve the capacity of schools to respond positively to accountability measures we need to train educators – teachers, school level leaders, subject advisors, institutional management and governance advisors, and a host of other system level managers and administrators – to do the jobs they are paid to do. Faced with very poor capacity in the bureaucracy, there is a tendency in South Africa to hire consultants or to set up parallel structures to do the job of the civil service. Current examples are the decision by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to run a province-wide literacy programme from an agency set up for this purpose outside the GDE, and the establishment at national level of an office of planning and delivery. These are admissions of defeat and undermine the critically important project of building a state which delivers quality services. What follows in the next section is the outline of a plan to build such capacity in provinces and districts. But first it is necessary to take stock of two very hard lessons about training from the last two decades.

The first is that, to date, very few in-service training programmes have proved to be effective. The large majority of South African educators are considered to be appropriately qualified, as shown by the possession of a senior certificate and a minimum of three years post-secondary training. Educator qualifications have risen dramatically since 1990, when only 53% of educators were appropriately qualified. By 2008 this had increased to 94.4%, which meant that only 5.6% of educators were unqualified or under-qualified in 2008 (DoE, 2009: 65-66).

Table 1: Percentage of qualified educators by race, 1990, 1994 and 2005 to 2008

	1990	1994	2005	2006	2007	2008
African	37	54	90.5	92.1	93.0	93.9
Coloured	59	71	89.9	92.1	93.2	92.2
Indian	98	93	97.5	97.2	96.6	98.1
White	98	99	99.4	99.5	99.5	99.5
Total	**53**	**64**	**91.6**	**92.9**	**93.8**	**94.4**

Source: DoE, 2009: 66

However, this very significant increase in qualification status notwithstanding, the quality of schooling remains well below expectations and, even more distressing, has shown no improvement in the last 15 years. It appears that there is a large gap between the qualifications provided and the capacity required to teach effectively. An evaluation conducted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) concluded that the majority of programmes providing Accelerated Certificates in Education over the last decade, at a cost of billions of rands, have been of mediocre quality at best (CHE, 2010). An evaluation of training programmes for principals, other school managers and governors in Gauteng found mixed evidence of impact (Bush and Heysteck, 2006). This situation highlights an important distinction between qualification and competence. The former signals the possession of a piece of paper indicative of fulfilling certain course requirements, while the latter indicates the capacity to perform an occupational function. Given the gap between educational qualifications and competence, any programme designed to improve capacity must be guided by a set of competence standards for the jobs in question.

Although the evidence is very limited at this stage, the few programmes that have been shown to impact significantly on teacher knowledge and learner performance are block release courses of at least a fortnight in duration (de Chaisemartin, 2010). It would seem obvious that training of such intensity and duration will have a far more profound effect on the knowledge of beneficiaries than the kind of afternoon/weekend/holiday workshops which characterise most INSET programmes.

A second lesson arising from attempts to improve educator skills in South Africa over the last 20 years and more is that improving job performance is about much more than training. After completing a training programme, the beneficiary returns to an organisation that provides the same structuring conditions that existed before. If performance of the institution is to be enhanced, then in addition to providing individuals with the requisite knowledge and skills, team training needs to be conducted within a context of organisational development. Individual teachers can and do make a difference to the lives of individual children, but it is good institutions which consistently deliver excellent education to generation after generation of students.

3. Political culture

Rent-seeking behaviour in the terrain of schooling takes many forms, the most prominent of which is collusion and nepotism in the recruitment and promotion of staff. This process is destructive in two ways. First, it results in inappropriate people being appointed to positions for which they are ill equipped: under these conditions institutional dysfunctionality becomes the norm. Second, and far more important, channelling opportunity through networks of patronage signals that expertise is unimportant. There is no incentive for teachers to develop their subject knowledge because such expertise is irrelevant in building a career.

There is a general public perception that the unions exert a stranglehold on all appointments, that school timetables are subject to the whim of union activities, and that teachers come and go as they please under protection of their unions. While this may be true some of the time in parts of the country, the situation is far more complex. Union activity varies in intensity and the degree to which it adheres to legal and regulatory rules across provinces, districts and individual schools, depending on the quality of union leadership, the level of teacher support, and the capabilities of officials and school principals (see Appendix B for details). It seems, for example, that the events leading to the illegal Soweto strike in 2009 were exacerbated not only by equivocal political leadership, but also by the fact that the district did not always follow procedure. In the Eastern Cape, against the backdrop of widespread administrative collapse and political instability, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) has become a major player in political battles. Union leaders exploit bad practice in the bureaucracy, which in turn reflects academic and administrative incompetence in classrooms, schools, and government offices.

Under these circumstances, while an accord between national union leadership and government will provide an important context for engagement between districts and unions, the precise nature of such engagement in specific cases will depend on local circumstances, and in particular on the administrative capacity of district and school leaders. In districts where union officials transgress the law they must be prosecuted, where teachers exhibit gross indiscipline they must be disciplined and fired where appropriate. And all SGB selection panels should commence with a statement by the Chair that the role of union representatives is strictly confined to verifying procedures, and that any attempt to influence the substantive proceedings will result in the exclusion of the offending party. Acts of intimidation can be hard to distinguish from legitimate picketing, but successful prosecution of blatant instances of public violence will go a long way towards ensuring that union members act with greater discipline. In order to deal effectively with these challenges, leaders in both government and the unions need to be well versed in human resources (HR) policy, school regulations, and the relevant labour relations legislation.

But in the larger scheme of things a war with the unions would be counterproductive. Indeed, the country is blessed with well organised and representative labour structures which hold as much potential for improving schooling as for undermining it. Ways need to be found to strengthen the former and combat the latter, to re-establish the ideals of a professional union. If this process is not initiated by an explicit agreement within political structures that criminal and corrupt behaviour and educator indiscipline will be prosecuted, the current culture of impunity will continue to frustrate systemic reform. We propose that a formal pact is agreed between government, unions, political parties, and parents. At the same time, such an agreement must be backed by greatly increased management capacity to apply regulations fairly and efficiently, and by the academic skills required to implement the curriculum effectively.

4. A five-year plan

The polity is presently awash in plans, and the one sketched below is not intended to set a new direction, but to link with the DBE's goal of improving learning by establishing a performance culture in schools. We would assert that the following steps provide both a necessary precursor in the political terrain to any performance system finding serious traction, and the technical expertise necessary for officials, principals, and teachers to engage children in meaningful learning. The overall aim is to build a professional educational civil service. The first task it to construct consensus in the

political sphere. All other tasks are technical. The first year will see the development of policy and instruments, while subsequent years will focus on their implementation.

Forging a pact that is effective

In order to gain support from the participants in any pact, all parties should stand to gain significant benefits from participation. But the achievement of the goals depends on all parties making significant concessions too. The secret to forging a successful pact it to ensure that for all parties the benefits outweigh the concessions, and to ensure that the followers of leaders representing the parties understand that the concessions are an integral part of a package deal. One difficulty in the terrain of schooling is that the main benefits to all parties are indirect and long term: the intrinsic rewards that come from successful teaching, and watching the emergence of young citizens able to make their way in the world.

Goals of the pact

To build a professional civil service for the school sphere in which:

- There are clear career paths for educators. We propose two paths beyond the level of Deputy principal:
    - A management path, which commences with a principalship and proceeds to district institutional management and governance (IMG) advisor, senior management in the district, provincial IMG advisor, senior manager in a provincial or national office.
    - An academic path, which goes from school head of department, to deputy principal, to district curriculum advisor (CA), senior management in the district, provincial CA, and to senior manager in a provincial or national office.
- Expertise is recognised as the only criterion for appointing and promoting personnel within the civil service, commencing with teachers at the lowest post level.
- The following are achieved within 5 years:
    - Competency standards for all educator jobs;
    - Competency tests for entry into all jobs;
    - Training programmes for all jobs;
    - Organisational development and staff training is 9 provincial offices, 81 district offices, and 1215 poorly performing schools.

What will educators get?

- A clear system of career pathways, marked by competence standards;
- Leadership in provinces and districts which is able to assist school principals to manage schools more effectively, and to support classroom teachers to teach better;
- All officials above principal level will receive training;
- Principals and teachers in underperforming schools will receive training, mentoring and support.

What will educators concede?

- Entry into the profession and promotion within it will depend on passing competency tests.
- Principals and teachers in underperforming schools will receive training during the June vacation, and intensive on-site mentoring and support for a full year.
- Training courses will be followed by competency tests.
- The results of these tests will be followed by one of three courses of action:
    - Certified competent;
    - Identified as being in need of further development;
    - Retrenchment, with full benefits (this clause may prove to be a sticking point and may need to be dropped).
- All strikes must occur within the law. Criminal behavior will be prosecuted, and teacher indiscipline will be punished. There will be no 'political solutions' to incidents of lawlessness and indiscipline.

Achieving the pact outlined here in the political sphere will require extraordinary political leadership. It should be followed by a broader accord encompassing a wider set of interest groups: opposition political parties, parents, business, and professional groupings. Success will assure the legacy of the present administration, while failure will underline its impotence in the face of incompetence throughout the system, and predatory activity among elite interest groups. While the impact of the technical tasks which follow will not necessarily be negligible in the absence of a pact, it will certainly be significantly muted.

Year 1

- The President brokers the agreement described above within the political terrain.
- Training programmes outlined below are developed.
- Competency standards required for every job are developed, starting with existing job descriptions. For example, The head of a school subject department or phase must:
    - have a track record of success as a teacher, as shown by learner results;
    - have a sound knowledge of curriculum and assessment policy;
    - be thoroughly conversant with the knowledge requirements of one teaching subject at high school level and three teaching subjects at primary school level;
    - understand and be able to apply basic assessment theory for improving teaching and learning.
- Competency tests for entry into all jobs from head of department and above are developed. For example, appointment to head of department will require candidates to pass tests which assess high levels of knowledge of the relevant teaching subject(s), curriculum regulations, and assessment practices.

Year 2

- Train provincial Senior Management Teams. These include officials responsible for finance, HR, curriculum, exams and district management.
- Undertake organisational development of provincial offices: audit systems and revise where necessary. Train staff in teams to use new systems.

Year 3

- Train district directors, curriculum advisors (CAs), and institutional management and governance (IMGs) advisors.

- Undertake organisational development of district offices: audit systems and revise where necessary. Train staff in teams to use new systems. Provincial leaders should be involved in these developments.

Year 4

- Commence work on 5 most poorly performing schools in each district (5 X 81 = 405 schools nationally). This will be led by district staff. Retrench incompetent principals and other senior staff. Train principals. Undertake OD exercise with school management team.
- Monitor performance of remaining schools.
- Train teachers where appropriate.

Year 5

Continue development of poorly performing schools and teacher training.

Years 2 to 5

All appointments and promotions governed by competence standards and tests.

5. Conclusion

The country continues on a track of management-by-policy, looking for the magic bullet that will turn schooling around. Thus on the issue of systems management, over the last 18 years the Development Appraisal System (DAS) has been replaced by the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), which in turn is about to be superceded by performance contracts to be signed between principals and provincial departments. Each of these reforms has been preceeded by protracted collective bargaining processes in the Education Labour Relations Council. Yet, to date, each system has failed to make any impact on the quality of schooling, and been met by widespread teacher derision towards implementing officials. The reason for both the failure of these systems to gain traction and the accompanying lack of respect for authority boils down to poor capacity on the part of managers to execute the professional judgements necessary to make the respective management system work. In short, the policy reforms have fallen on stony ground. Delivery of any service by means of a bureaucracy depends on myriad expert judgements by a distributed set of actors occupying key slots in the division of labour. This expertise constitutes the fertile ground needed to make any expert system such as schooling function effectively.

The plan outlined above is intended to complement the DBE's *Action Plan to 2014,* which seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning by holding principals accountable for the performance of their schools. While this approach will probably incentivise some improvement in test scores, the impact is likely to reach a ceiling rather quickly. The same applies to the civil society initiatives aimed at adopting schools with the intention of improving them. The problem is that most schools are unable to improve their performance because they lack the requisite subject and pedagogical knowledge at classroom level, and the leadership and management skills at school level, while districts are unable to assist schools because of the same shortcomings. The larger aim of the plan outlined in this paper is to reorient the school system towards a culture of professionalism, and to set in place the systems and instruments required to build a professional civil service. An important precursor to success will be the forging of an accord – first within the political sphere and then within the broader educational community – which recognises expertise as the sole criterion for appointment and promotion within the civil service, and which resolves to address conflict through established regulatory processes.

A founding assumption of the plan is that, while outside agencies and in particular the universities are key to developing capacity in the longer term, such training must be directed by officials within the system. Consequently, the steps sketched above are aimed at improving the knowledge and skills required for curriculum delivery of educators at provincial and district levels. The programme will capacitate these educators to do the jobs they are paid to do, which is to guide, mentor, and train principals to improve school level accountability systems, and to work with teachers to improve teaching and learning in classrooms.

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Appendix A: School leadership – two contrasting case studies

A study commissioned by the Presidency in 2009 investigated eight high schools serving poor African children (Taylor et al, 2010). Schools 7 and 8 are situated in the same township adjoining a declining mining town in the Free State. They serve the same feeder community, many of whom are recent émigrés from the Transkei living in squatter camps. Schools 7 and 8 are, respectively, the worst and best performing schools in our sample of eight case study schools. Superficially the two schools have much in common: timetables, year plans, and assessment systems, for example. The most striking difference between them is in the dedication to teaching and learning of managers and teachers, and in the maintenance of strong management systems through which this dedication is transformed into practice.

Leadership

The energy and vision driving School 8 is obviously the principal, who has organised his school into a team effort. There is a clearly defined division of labour among staff: a learner welfare committee looks out for vulnerable children, and a book retrieval committee looks after the books, to name just two functions. Communication with parents is strong. Seven of the case study schools understand that parental involvement is important but have resigned themselves to very low levels of participation by their parent bodies. School 8 is an outstanding exception, connecting formally with parents through well attended parent teacher association (PTA) meetings, the hand-over of reports, and face-to-face discussions about learning difficulties. Parents are urged to engage with their children daily about homework and other school matters.

Systems

Effective systems are made possible by good leadership, which inspires staff to extend themselves in the interest of a greater goal. But it is the systems which channel this energy into productive activity. On the issue of **time management**, the way Schools 7 and 8 respectively manage the problem of learner absenteeism is instructive. At the weaker school, there is a cumbersome reporting procedure, which culminates in the principal disciplining tardy learners. But it seems to be a perennial problem that the reporting procedure may diminish but not solve. Compare this with the very simple but effective strategy at School 8, where the gates are kept locked during school hours, including breaks. The school is determined to use every hour of every school day available for teaching and learning. Interestingly, a number of schools in the sample, including poorly performing ones, held afternoon, weekend and holiday classes for Grade 12 learners, while at the same time exhibiting very loose timekeeping during the normal school day. It seems grossly inefficient to allow sloppy punctuality arrangements during the school day, and then to make up time after school. School 8 does both, obtaining optimal use of the school day and adding time around this.

Regarding **curriculum delivery** systems, School 8 gets ready for the new year in advance: timetables are prepared and books handed out at the end of the preceding year, so that teaching can start on the first day of the year, after a short assembly. Another example of the can-do problem solving skills of the principal at School 8 is the way he ameliorates the severe inhibitions placed on learning by book shortages. The school has a system of routine afternoon study classes, which teachers supervise in rotation, without additional pay, and where learners do homework exercises sharing available books. Apparently School 7 also has curriculum systems in the form of year plans, subject meetings, and book distribution, but there was no agreement among staff as to how these worked.
Similarly, both schools have **assessment procedures**, which include formal meetings on moderation, quality assurance, and implications for teaching. But here too, School 8 stands out with a tightly integrated system which engages learners, teachers, and parents in tracking the progress of individuals and classes. This is in sharp contrast to the inconsistencies in the accounts given by the different interviewees at School 7.

Professionalism

On the question of **professionalism**, the views of teachers at our two comparator schools are very similar, emphasising the ethical, and to a lesser extent, the knowledge components. However, the third element of professionalism – a sense of intrinsic motivation – is missing at both schools. One of our interviewees at School 8 spoke about the need for professional development:

> 'It is being fully trained to do your job and getting workshops to further your knowledge.'

The passive tense in this quote is revealing: even teachers at our most outstanding school are waiting for training. Dedicated, energetic, and innovative as School 8 is in giving its very poor learners a huge leg up in life, it lacks the one element that would make it truly self sufficient. This missing ingredient is the ability of individual teachers, and the institution as a whole, to be proactive in developing their own knowledge resources.

Appendix B: The relationship between government and the unions – some examples

The following case studies illustrate the very complex relationship between teacher unions, on one hand, and school principals and system level officials, on the other.

Soweto region

In a study conducted in a small sample of schools in two districts in Gauteng, Zengele (2009) concluded that during the filling of promotional posts, teacher unions tend to use undue influence to have their members promoted, to the detriment of deserving and better qualified educators. Even though the role of unions is restricted to observer status on school SGBs during the recruitment and promotion of school personnel, representatives become actively involved in the process, attending interview sessions with the name of a preferred candidate, lobbying interview panellists, and threatening to lodge a dispute if their candidate is not approved.

Zengele (2009) goes on to describe the causes of the illegal strike called by SADTU in Soweto in 2009. The problem cited by the union was the district director's refusal to sign appointment letters for applicants who were SADTU's preferred candidates for principal positions. One of these candidates had 18 years experience as an administration clerk and only six months as an educator, and another was the wife of a union official. In his analysis of these events, Fleisch (2010) notes that, while the union paid considerable attention to the procedural legalities associated with the educator appointment processes, they showed little concern about compliance with many other aspects of the legal framework, including damage to state property, absence from work without good reason, inciting other personnel to public violence, intimidating and in some cases assaulting fellow employees and learners, preventing other employees from exercising their rights, and refusing to obey a legal restraining order obtained by the provincial MEC for Education.

Instability in the region continues to the present day, with SADTU regional secretary Ronald Nyathi threatening to shut down Soweto schools if Moss Senye, one of the union's officials suspended from the principalship of Meadowlands High for assaulting a pupil, was not reinstated. Although SADTU regional chairperson Eddie Kekana has announced that the union respects the disciplinary process against Senye, it is reported that teachers continue to boycott classes at the school in support of their suspended principal (Mail and Guardian, 16-22 September, 2011:15).

Eastern Cape provincial office

Things are even worse in the Eastern Cape, where Modidima Mannya, superintendent general of the Eastern Cape education department, was forced to abandon meetings with principals and school governing bodies in Queenstown, Aliwal North, and Sterkspruit in the week of 12 September when members of SADTU disrupted the meetings to the extent that police had to be called in to restore order (Daily Dispatch, 14 September 2011: 1). The cause of the tension between the union and Mannya appears to be SADTU's support for Mathanzima Mweli, deployee of the national Minister of Education to the EC in terms of section 100 of the Constitution in order to restore order to the largely dysfunctional department. Mweli and Mannya have been at loggerheads since March over who is the legitimate accounting officer for the province. The matter came to a head at a meeting between members of the national and provincial cabinets chaired by the President on 13 September, where it was agreed that Mannya is the accounting officer, in contradiction to Minister Motshekga's statement that she could never work with Mannya, and that the national department

would restrict it's role to one of monitoring progress towards the achievement of 20 goals agreed by all parties (Daily Dispatch, 15 September, 2011: 1). To what extent this arrangement will work in practice is questionable. It would seem that a large part of the problem lies in Mannya's determination to prosecute some 30 SADTU members, many of them senior departmental officials, for corruption and maladministration (Daily Dispatch, 16 September, 2011: 4).

While they do not always attract public attention, the kinds of practices described above occur, to a greater or lesser extent, in many districts across the country. Consider the following scenarios observed by the author on visits to five school districts over a four week period in August/September 2011. In each district two primary schools were visited and interviews conducted with members of the SGB, school management team, and teachers. The purpose of the exercise was to investigate the kinds of leadership and management practices within the school. The relationships between the teacher unions, school management, and governance structures formed part of the research, and it is this aspect which is described below.

Township A, Western Cape

Township A is known as one of the 'tic nests' of the province and is occupied by mostly coloured residents. The schools draw pupils from very poor communities. Teachers at both schools belong to a variety of unions, and claim that there is a move away from SADTU towards the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA): one principal who had made this move himself explained that he did so because of NAPTOSA's greater interest in professional matters. Staff had been placed under pressure to observe the 2010 teacher strike through visits to the school by a SADTU delegation and street demonstrations. At one school these demonstrations provoked a great deal of nervousness among parents, and many kept their children at home over this period. However, one of the schools observed only a one day stayaway, while at the other some five SADTU members struck for the full two weeks, but the school was not closed at all.

No teachers attend union meetings during school hours. Regarding training activities organised by the district, staff attend regularly, and find them of great benefit. On the question of visits to the school by district officials, teachers welcome these for the learning opportunities they provide, and place no restrictions on the visits.

Township B, Western Cape

This is an African township some 10-15 km to the NE of Cape Town. It includes a large proportion of informal settlement dwellers, and poverty and the associated social problems are at high levels. It is clear that one of the two schools visited is in decline, having been without a permanent principal for three years. Conflict within the SGB is responsible for this problem. According to the Deputy Principal, during the first attempt to select a principal, two factions on the SGB had different preferred candidates, and after the selection had been made, the losing faction called a dispute; during this process the union observer played a manipulative role in favour of one faction. The essential elements of this account were confirmed by the SGB Chair, a recent émigré from the Eastern Cape, who is unemployed and has Std 8 as his highest level of schooling, but he attributes the failure of the first attempt to the fact that SGB members had not been trained in the correct procedure.

SADTU is very strong at both schools, and teachers were surprised to be asked whether the school observed the 2010 strike, with both schools closing for the duration. According to some of our

respondents at one school, there was a great deal of intimidation of teachers at the school to participate. SADTU's stance with respect to district officials visiting classrooms is that this may only occur if there is advance notice, the teacher concerned agrees, the visit serves a purely developmental purpose, and 'the official does not write anything'. No union meetings are held during school hours, and training provided by the districts is well attended. One teacher said: 'I would go to training even if SADTU tried to stop it: It's me and my learners'.

Rural district, Mpumalanga

This is a rural area situated in a former homeland, and both schools visited were formerly administered by the homeland authority. Although this is a rural area some 60km from the nearest town, it is densely populated, with people living in villages and on smallholdings, and levels of poverty are very high. Without being prompted, the principal at one school mentioned that it is common knowledge that this is the worst of the country's 81 school districts. He attributes this to a considerable extent to uncontrollable union activity in the area, and it would appear that the fact that all four top posts in the district are filled by acting personnel (apparently the district director has been acting for four years) is the result of a standoff between the provincial DoE and the union. There is a widespread perception in schools that the cause of the standoff is due to the union insisting on appointing the top officials in the district. Principals have appealed to the national Minister to intervene by calling a meeting between themselves and the union executive, but it appears that she too is powerless. In the meantime, 'These young boys interrupt things even when there is no need to'. The Deputy Principal at the second school confirmed this picture: 'The union uses us in the battles with the department to fight issues which are very far from us'.

Teachers have been ordered by the union to 'disengage' from circuit activities, and not to allow circuit officials to visit schools. The training on the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) curriculum scheduled for June was cancelled at the union's insistence that teachers be paid if they attend training in the holidays. According to one interviewee, teachers are forced by the union to strike 'otherwise they threaten to burn your house', and then suffer the consequences of having their pay deducted.

The above observations were made during a visit to the district early in September 2011. By late mid-October the situation had been escalated to a provincial level when SADTU's provincial leadership handed a memorandum to the MEC for education, Reginah Mhaule. Among the union's demands are that the provincial head of department be dismissed, teachers be refunded the one-day deduction in salary from teachers involved in the 2010 strike, teacher salary slips for February and March be provided, and all vacancies in the head office and four district offices (reputed to be around one-third of the 861 posts) be filled (Mail and Guardian, 7 October 2011:21).

Peri-urban/rural district, KwaZulu/Natal

This district is centred in a fair-sized regional town in the province. One school is a situated in a rural setting some 50km from the town and was formerly administered by the KwaZulu homeland authority. According to the principal, although most teachers at the school are SADTU members, the school is not disrupted during union meetings, and was not even closed during the 2010 teacher strike. When mass meetings are called during school hours, teachers decide to send a representative, and during the strike they kept the school going in relays. The principal is modest about this achievement: 'I am lucky' she says, but this is obviously an understatement and her 'luck'

is the product of her exceptional leadership ability, and the sense of dedication that she has inculcated in her staff.

The second school visited in this district is situated on the outskirts of the town in the suburb formally reserved for Indian residents, and the school was formerly administered by the House of Delegates. The principal used to be prominent in the local SADTU leadership, but resigned his position when he became principal. Nevertheless, he remains sympathetic to union causes: for example, when a strike is imminent he informs parents that curriculum activities will be disrupted, and they take the hint and keep their children at home for the duration of the strike.

Rural district, Eastern Cape

These schools are situated in the former Transkei, perhaps the most impoverished region in the country, albeit one which has the longest history of education of any African community. At the first school visited, teachers reported that both the district and the SADTU regional office run inservice training courses for teachers which are held during school hours, as teachers are unable to attend after hours because of the challenging conditions under which they work. SADTU has a programme called Operation Fundisa ('Go to school and teach'). During the 2010 strike the school was closed for the duration, which adversely affected teaching and learning, and teachers also attend union meetings during school hours.

At a second school, teachers confirmed that the district does provide training for teachers, which is useful but not very frequent. In addition, SADTU organises training: for example, it arranged for one of the publishers to deliver a workshop on CAPS. The union does hold meetings during school hours, but the principal allows only one teacher representative to attend. The school did observe the 2010 teacher strike, but teachers initially kept the school going and only joined the strike after being threatened by the union.

Conclusion

Public violence and lesser acts of indiscipline perpetrated by teachers under the auspices of their union do occur, but are relatively rare. It is clear that, contrary to popular belief, unions in general, and SADTU in particular are not a major cause of school inefficiency. Where school leaders and system-level managers have sufficient capacity, productive relationships with teachers, severally and collectively, can be maintained and directed to positive ends.