

## **Defining Dysfunctional Schools and Systems – Desktop Research**

### **1. The dysfunctional school – Uncomfortable truths and awkward insights on school, learning and teaching**

Here is a book that looks at schools from the inside, from the point of view of a classroom teacher who has spent a career trying to understand how schools work – and don't work.

In a collection of short reflections, the author describes some of the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours that diminish learning and hurt children.

The Dysfunctional School is a call to all adults responsible for the care of young people to question the traditional approaches of what Michael Reist refers to as “factory schooling.”

“The processes of school have lead to the loss of the love of learning in most students. If you go into any kindergarten class, you will see a hive of enthusiasm for learning – a sea of hands raised for every question posed by the teacher. Fast forward to the grade 12 class. You see stress, fear, apathy and “acting out.” What has happened in between? School has happened.”

“Institutions become dysfunctional when they do not accomplish the purposes for which they were created. Schools were created to be places of true learning, places where the true natures of children would be allowed to grow and flourish. By this definition, there are too many students for whom school is not ‘working.’” - from The Dysfunctional School

### **2. Keshni (2005), THE LEADERSHIP OF A FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL IN A DYSFUNCTIONAL AREA (PhD – UJ)**

- Dysfunctional schools are schools in a state of chaos (Shipengrower & Conway, 1998, p.xv). Chaos is a word used to describe a system that is unstable (ibid.). “The current turbulent environment of education requires a response so different from the traditional approach of diagnose-plan-implement-evaluate that only the term chaos expresses the dynamism, fluidity, and extraordinary complexity that contemporary

educational administrators face” (Shipengrower & Conway, 1998, p.xvi).

- Altogether, the South African education system consisted of fifteen separate departments of education, which were linked through weak co-operative arrangements and separated by marked resource imbalances. This resulted in the absolute inadequacy of black schooling. This inadequacy has led to, among other things, dysfunctional schools.
- Consequently, racial inequalities could be one of the many factors that have resulted in dysfunctional schooling, especially in schools that were previously classified as Department of Education and Training (DET) schools.
- Dysfunctional schools, known as “failing schools” are usually found in the poorest neighbourhood, where children are mostly black or immigrants who are not proficient in English (Wolk, 1998). What goes on inside these institutions creates a tenacious culture of failure. Wolk (1998) answers that there are no goals, no sense of mission, and little positive leadership in dysfunctional schools. The schools are usually mismanaged, and use their resources inefficiently and unwisely. They are usually larger than average, with larger classes, and educators know little about their learners. Many of the educators are first year novices who are ill-prepared for the challenge confronting them. Educators do not know how to reach children who arrive in class unready to learn and often “wounded”. Parents of these learners in dysfunctional schools are missing partners.
- On any given day, one out of every five dysfunctional school learners may be absent, and, in average, a student in the worst secondary schools may be absent a quarter or more of the school year. When they come to school, they are likely to sleep in class or roam the halls creating disciplinary problems (ibid.).
- According to previous research (Bipath, 2002, p.55), the major characteristic of dysfunctional schools was “low socioeconomic background”. In one of her cross tabulations analysing the socio-

economic status of the learners in school and the functionality of the school the following was proved.

- There are no quick fixes for dysfunctional schools. Indeed, the only sure way to transform dysfunctional schools into functional schools is to build capacity in them – to provide strong leadership, a mission clearly and intensely focussed on children’s learning, highly competent, committed teachers, clear lines of responsibility, adequate financial resources and a culture that fosters collaboration, trust and continuous learning (Wolk, 1998).
- The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Sykes, 1984, p.301) defines dysfunctional as “abnormality or impairment of function”. Dysfunctional schools seem to be associated with poverty, material deprivation and disruption of communities which may have contributed to the breakdown of teaching and learning in these schools. Four categories of problems have been identified in dysfunctional schools: poor physical and social facilities; organisational problems; poor school/community relationships and poor relationships between the education department and the schools (Christie, 1998, p.289).
- As a dysfunctional school is characterised by many different aspects, it was decided that a practical and useful construct would be that a dysfunctional high school in South Africa is a high school that achieved a 40% and lower pass rate in the SCE in the year 2000 (Pretorius, 2000b, p.2). Dysfunctional school problems have been largely external and poverty related. However, some schools with no water, electricity and running water have managed to achieve a functional status relative to the SCE. A dysfunctional school in this research project is thus a school, which has achieved a 40% and lower pass rate in the matriculation examination, known as the Senior Certificate Examination (SCE).

### **3. Green and O’Sullivan (2009), Dysfunctional schools: Why talented educators leave**

- The term dysfunctional school is defined as a school, college, or

university where an educator—professionally qualified, self-motivated, and effective in professional performance—is unable to work to full professional capacity because of one or more conditions present in the organization. The determining quality of a dysfunctional school is that the educator chooses to leave (or desperately wants to leave) because the educator found (or finds) one or more aspects of the organization intolerable.

### *Dysfunction in Schools*

Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran (1998) encouraged us to examine at least two dimensions of effectiveness in schools. They labeled these as instrumental functions and expressive functions. The instrumental functions have to do with student achievement, while the expressive functions relate to teacher and administrator trust and to overall school health. Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran asserted that there are many factors beyond student achievement that denote a high functioning school. Indeed, while the expressive functions are nebulous, they are vital to the instrumental ones. According to Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran, achievement will be related to school climate.

Climate issues in schools have been studied extensively. Climate instruments, such as the *Kettering School Climate Scale* and the *Likert Profile of a School* (Johnson & Johnson, 1992) listed factors, such as trust, high morale, continuous growth, cohesiveness, and opportunity for input as being important to a healthy school climate. Hoy and Tarter (1997) defined climate as the organizational personality of the school, and they recognize that the distinctive feature of a healthy school climate is authenticity. Teachers, administrators and students are all behaving in trusting and trustworthy ways. Ryan and Bolin (1999) listed similar concerns in what they term as the negative ethos of a school. These conditions include the lack of a shared vision, intense competition, little opportunity to serve, lack of traditions, and neglect of school property.

Climate issues have also been linked to school effectiveness by Ellett, Hill, Liu, Loup, and Lakshmanan (1997). They found a positive correlation between teacher effectiveness and their perceptions of the learning environment of their schools. Sweetland and Hoy (2000) were also able to link school climate with school effectiveness in middle schools with teacher empowerment being the important link. Finally, Friedman (1991) correlated high teacher burn-out with several factors all relating to climate in some way. These factors included a heavy emphasis on test scores imposed from the outside, a lack of trust, a confining environment, and isolation. In Friedman's study, low burn-out was associated with teachers who perceived themselves as more autonomous professionals.

#### **4. What is effective teaching in a “dysfunctional” school?** by [Kelly Vaughan](#),

After a talented co-worker left their “dysfunctional” Brooklyn public school to work at a charter school, he told Ariel Sacks:

- I didn't fully realize it before, but all the craziness that was constantly going on around me was clouding my teaching. With all of that gone, I can identify my weak points and improve on them.

Sacks ponders what that “craziness” looks like — computers that don't work and no money to pay a technician, chronic absenteeism among students — and how it forces teachers to plan for unexpected obstacles. [What does it mean to compare teacher effectiveness in such different environments](#), she asks:

- Teachers at schools like mine get used the multitude of x factors. In fact, we stop expecting everything to be “just so” and start going out of our way to plan for all of the unexpected things that might happen. Does this make us less effective? Maybe it does, in a way. It is harder to address problems quickly and effectively, when new problems present themselves simultaneously. But is it fair to call us less effective? Is it actually fair to measure my effectiveness in the same way my former colleague's teaching is now measured, when the

playing field is not level? Is the job of teaching in these very disparate environments even the same?

- If the quality of my teaching is measured by my students' scores on the same test that Joe's students also take, and soon, I am compensated based on this same determination, then tell me—why should I keep on working at a school that can't provide me everything I need to reach my full potential as a teacher?

## **5. SAVING DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS**

The DA's six point rescue plan for 20% schools -Democratic Alliance 16 January 2007 INDEX

STEP 1: A National Task Team for 20% schools

STEP 2: The Buck Stops with the Principal

STEP3: Tracking Educator Appointments

STEP4: A Mentoring Programme

Each of the 20% schools needs to be allocated a mentor. The government needs to make provision for a budget for an hourly rate to be paid to a dedicated mentor for each school, who will spend a few hours a week helping the school to develop better systems of management and administration.

Retired headmasters might be a good source for the skills necessary for this job. Alternatively, currently employed principals from functional schools might be persuaded to devote time to this task.

These mentors would help schools to put administrative systems in place, manage finances, adopt a code of conduct, establish disciplinary systems and school routines, and improve the school environment.

The mentors would, in conjunction with the provincial MEC and the school's principal, compile detailed three-year improvement plans. To ensure that focus is maintained, these mentors and principals should be held accountable, year by year, for achieving the targeted improvements.

STEP5: A good school is a safe school

STEP6: A “good poor schools” analysis

## **6. Hlatyway MA (2008), The principal’s role in implementing the EAZ as an intervention strategy (M.Ed - UJ)**

In post Apartheid South Africa the pressure on schools to develop and to perform well has never been greater. The introduction and the adoption of the EAZ intervention strategy by Kader Asmal in 1999 is, therefore, aimed to promote the purposes and practices of effectiveness in the so-called dysfunctional schools in the implementation of such an intervention strategy can, therefore, not be underestimated. The literature on school effectiveness will show that the role of the principal is one of the core important criteria in promoting and enhancing school effectiveness.

- the culture of teaching and learning has deteriorated in many township schools,
- many principals do not share their school vision and mission with educators, learners, as well as members of the governing body,
- underachievement in some schools is caused by communication breakdown between the school management and the teaching staff,
- schools fail to achieve good results because of decisions taken single-handedly by principals,
- teamwork does not exist in many schools, and
- many schools are not financially viable.

## **7. Policy Space and Intervention: The Education Roadmap in South Africa – Graeme Bloch**

### **Key Issues highlighted**

The Roadmap highlighted key areas that hold back education;

1. Social disadvantage: Parents are often uneducated, relatively powerless

and lack information. Social disadvantage is reproduced across generations.

2. Teachers: Teachers are key to education improvement. A range of issues affect teachers, from poor subject knowledge and teaching practices, to insufficient numbers in training to little performance evaluation.

**3. Dysfunctional schools: Schools mostly do not achieve acceptable outcomes, reinforced by confusion over OBE. Schools are badly managed and supported. The departmental Foundations for Learning Campaign begins to address issues of reading and numeracy at primary and foundation level, where it counts most.**

4. Resources: Despite massive improvements, there are still huge backlogs: lack of libraries, labs and computers, and poverty effects from nutrition to AIDS orphans to gang violence.

5. Responsibility and accountability: far stronger national intervention is needed to overcome inefficiencies as policy drops down to provincial delivery levels. District support systems and management in particular need to be fixed to give impetus to school level improvement.

The Roadmap identifies three levels, for analysis and intervention. Most important is the in-school level, what happens in the classroom between teacher and learner. There are issues of 'support to school' where the principal and departmental district ensure that schools are managed, resourced and function well. Lastly, 'societal' issues mostly impact on the readiness of students to learn. Poverty and backlogs are a real heritage of apartheid. All 3 levels need to be identified and tackled together.

## **8. Teachers, moral agency, and the reconstruction of schooling in South Africa - Aslam Fataar and Andrew Patterson**

The 'dysfunctional' school

The situation is quite different at the dysfunctional school. Usually, but not exclusively found in working-class non-white neighbourhoods, this type of school is characterized by what has been termed 'the lack of a culture of



learning and teaching' (Chisholm and Vally, 1996). The impact on the school of youth and gang subcultures operating in its immediate external environment distracts attention from the school's primary function as a learning institution. The school is confronted with having to deal with student welfare concerns emanating, for example, from disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances or disrupted family structures. Through a combination of historical disadvantage, and the impact of working-class and youth cultures, teachers in dysfunctional schools are caught up in the daily grind of survival.

Students' indifferent or apathetic orientations to school are shaped by their exposure to attractive youth subcultures and the lack of educational support structures, sport and recreational facilities. High current levels of unemployment and negative perceptions of future employment prospects cause students to discount the value of school attendance as a means of securing jobs. They carry these orientations into the classrooms where their lack of motivation results in disruptive behaviour that impacts negatively on learning. The abolition of corporal punishment, instead of creating a human rights friendly learning climate, has added to the breakdown of order and discipline in these schools. Numbers of teachers feel exposed and vulnerable.

The dysfunctional school is characterized by a disorderly, if not chaotic, environment. There are intermittent interruptions in the school's daily programme. Starting and closing times are seldom consistent. The shortened school day becomes more of a norm than an exception. Latecoming by students and teachers is a perennial problem. Bunking by students, who either do not come to school at all, or abscond in the middle of the day, prevents teachers from establishing learning continuity.

The imperative to generate a healthy learning culture is frustrated by the absence of a consistent and stable routine in the student population. In communities with low levels of school experience and adult illiteracy, parents lack confidence to intervene in the school because of their unfamiliarity with

the institution, and out of deference to the academic status of teachers. Teachers are faced with the daunting task of having to innovate and implement system change against this background. There is potential for teachers who conduct their activities in such an environment to be highly pressured (Weekly Mail & Guardian; 12–18/6/98).

To stop here would be to avoid looking beyond the socioeconomic context and behind the surface appearance of chaos in many schools. It is necessary to consider whether dysfunctional schools display consistent patterns of thought or behaviour that represent individual and institutional responses to the new policy demands.

**9. Guest VM (2008), THE IMPACT OF THE EQUIP PROGRAMME ON SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN TWO RURAL SCHOOLS (Med – UKZN)**

Before examining what constitutes effective schools, a distinction should perhaps be made between dysfunctional, functional and effective schools. It is believed one could define dysfunctional schools as those in which there is total chaos and where there exists absolutely no culture of teaching and learning. A functional school, on the other hand, could be defined as one where daily teaching and learning activities do take place, but there is no organisational culture that promotes the delivery of quality education. An effective school could be described as one that achieves its educational outcomes. The factors that constitute school effectiveness in achieving quality educational outcomes mainly concern academic analysts, policy makers and professional decision-makers.

**10. Book review done by Gallie M. - Leithwood K., Harris A. and Strauss T. (2010), Leading school turnaround – How successful leaders transform low-performing schools, Jossey-Bass, CA.**

The book focuses on a very important area within the education management and leadership research discipline, namely the notion of school and education systems failure. In particular, the evaluation of school failure is measured against the high number of student attrition from the entry grade of schooling up to the final grade 12. Most education systems in the world, with the exception of a few, are struggling to retain most of their learners within the system, let alone the low number of pass-rate during the final schooling examination. These education success-rates are low in most countries, and is estimated at about 10% in South Africa. This percentage is based on the throughput rate of less than 50% (in 2010 it was 42%), and the high percentage of students passing with only a 'school leaving' certificate (more than 2/3 of students passing the examination).

Given the current reality of school failure, this book is well crafted by three respected academics and practitioners, who synthesized the leading turnaround sources from three countries, namely Canada, USA and UK. They organized the information in a systematic and systemic way, which will assist readers who are unfamiliar with this domain, to follow the logic of their turnaround strategies. They exposing the reader to the (i) reasons for schools failure, (ii) the three stages of school turnaround, with case studies to these stages, (iii) and what leaders do to ensure this turn around through (a) creating a shared sense of direction in their schools, (b) fostering capacity development among their teachers, (c) redesigning their schools, (d) and improving their school's instructional programme, (iv) the characteristics of turnaround leadership, (v) how schools move from turnaround to "stay around"(sustainability), and (vi) how they reach high performance.

The authors have gone far beyond their previous work of theorizing school turnaround, into the practicalities of turnaround, as well as stating strategic interventions to make it happen. Although they urge the reader not to see their work as a 'recipe', my experience within the domain of school and education system failure gives me a sense that they covered the main issues very well, especially if we compare this work against similar work that has been released the past few years (Murphy and Meyers 2008). In particular, this book goes beyond the 'what' of school turnaround to the 'how'. They

expose the reader to interesting, practical, powerful and insightful strategies and frameworks on how to empower school leaders and teachers in influencing student learning. They organized their arguments in a way that makes the understanding of school turnaround, which is a very complex challenge to most school leaders, very easy to read. The use of data and the voices of practitioners make it a piece of work that will particularly resonate with practitioners at school level.

This book will certainly be a useful tool to most school leaders and policy makers who are interesting in the process of turnaround dysfunctional and underperforming schools. I will however caution school leaders and policy makers within developing countries, with specific reference to South Africa, to look deeper into the domain, since our countries have an added challenge namely, the components embedded in the education systems which were designed to produce failure – I call this notion ‘dysfunctionality by design’. These are practices that were encouraged during the colonial and Apartheid eras. This notion include systemic arrangements and practices that are regarded as ‘normal’ such as the catering for absenteeism through ‘substitute rosters’ in order to make the chaos seems like normality; the perception among education officials that once the policy has been promulgated, that people will change their behaviour in line with the expected requirements of the policy; that the lowering of pass percentages will result in an increase in learner pass-rate; etc. The notion of ‘turnaround’ is therefore such a powerful description of what needs to be done – turn 180% in order to face the ‘solutions’ rather than starring at the ‘problems’ all the time. Therefore, most of the examples and strategies indicated within this book will be difficult for those who are looking to ‘money’ rather than ‘different ways of thinking and doing’ as the solution.

Despite the cautionary note above, I have no hesitation in recommending this book to those who care about all children, especially those school leaders and teachers who service students coming from poverty stricken and disadvantaged communities, in order to see in practical terms, that turning around their schools is possible, and has been done by numerous other colleagues with similar situations like theirs.