

Basic Education System: Not in Ruins, on the Rise

Folk Devils and Moral Panics result in manufactured outrage, designed to scare users of public schooling and deter private sector investment in our basic education sector,” writes Angie Motshekga.

In his recent article (22 Nov 2023) for the Daily Maverick titled “Call it what it is — the SA education system is in complete ruins,” Mark Tomlinson succumbs to a flawed yet common belief: the assumption that present challenges in the basic education sector suggest a more favourable past for South Africa’s education.

This viewpoint is a classic embodiment of sociologist Stanley Cohen’s theory of “Folk Devils and Moral Panics.” This narrative portrays the Department of Basic Education as folk devils intent on ruining the sector. Tomlinson casts himself as a moral crusader, stirring up manufactured outrage to return the system to its glory days.

Reflect on Tomlinson’s “ruins” metaphor, suggesting a once grand entity now deteriorated. Is this apt for South Africa’s basic education? When was it more effective? This question challenges the metaphor and invites a nuanced view of the system’s challenges and progress.

Hankering for the pre-1994 glory days isn’t unique to Tomlinson; it’s a pattern shared by academics such as Dr Mamphela Ramphele and Professor Jonathan Jansen.

Stats SA surveys reveal that education access for 7-15-year-olds has improved significantly and is now nearly universal. Early Childhood Development opportunities have also increased: less than 40% of 5-year-olds attended educational institutions in 2002, compared to almost 90% recently.

Less than 1 in 20 Black South Africans born in the 1940s completed 12 years of education. By 1960, this was about 1 in 10. For those born in the 1980s and finishing school in the late 1990s, it was about 3 in 10. According to household survey data from 2021, the figure is now nearly 6 in 10.

Okay, so way more people today have access to education. But what about the quality of that education, you may ask?

Since joining international learning assessments in 1995, South Africa initially showed low and unequal levels in mathematics and science. However, from 2002 onwards, the country has become one of the fastest improvers in all three assessments it participates in: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ). This progress, alongside expanded schooling access, marks a significant achievement.

A notable caveat in the recent PIRLS results is the decline in Grade 4 children’s reading comprehension between 2016 and 2021, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic’s disruption of schooling. This trend reflects the impact of extended school closures rather than a system “in ruins.”

Improvements in basic education have led to more people qualifying for university and completing higher education. Since 2008, the number of bachelor-level passes in National

Senior Certificate (NSC) exams has tripled, and undergraduate degree completions have doubled since 2009.

Beyond educational outcomes, school infrastructure has seen significant improvements. The 1996 Schools Register of Needs study found less than half of the schools had adequate facilities. However, the 2022 School Monitoring Survey shows substantial advancements: 87% now have proper toilets, 81% have access to running water, and 93% have electricity, indicating marked system improvements.

There is also a wide range of care and support programmes nowadays that have contributed to learners' well-being and mitigated poverty's effects in poor households. These include learner transport, no-fee schools, fee-exemptions for needy children in fee-charging schools, and the National School Nutrition Programme, through which more than 9.6 million children receive a nutritious meal daily.

None of this is to say that everything is perfect or to justify the ongoing inequalities in the system. But we must be able to hold a more nuanced picture of reality that there can be ongoing problems and improvements simultaneously. Simply pointing to the issues and concluding or implying that things have deteriorated is ill-informed, if not intellectual dishonesty.

Tomlinson substantiates his elaborate metaphor of ruins (which is dragged through his entire article) with only two indicators of educational outcomes:

Firstly, he refers to the recent PIRLS study showing a drop in the percentage of children who learn to read with meaning. I have already dealt with this, indicating that this was entirely driven by the school closures and lost teaching time caused by the pandemic. But Tomlinson does not mention the pandemic in his discussion nor acknowledge the improving trend in PIRLS before the pandemic.

Secondly, he quotes a statistic suggesting that only 14% of children qualify for university. Unfortunately, this is an old statistic, and Tomlinson fails to note how this outcome has improved. The number of bachelor passes has roughly tripled since 2008. In the 2022 National Senior Certificate exams, 278,814 candidates achieved a bachelor pass, and a further 193 357 achieved a diploma pass, which amounts to 69.4% of the NSC candidates and about 40% of the total cohort of learners passing through the system.

But what about Tomlinson's recommendations for change? Aside from merely rhetorical calls for change to be radical, visionary and courageous and warnings against "band-aid solutions", his article is very lean on specific practical recommendations. In the end, there are three leading suggestions.

Firstly, Tomlinson calls for an early learning system with a goal of socio-emotional learning. Of course, this is important and is currently top of the government's educational priorities. The recent shift of Early Childhood Development functions from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education has initiated a comprehensive process of improving early learning opportunities, which builds on the improved access achieved in recent years.

The recently launched Thrive by Five Index measures a range of physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development outcomes, showing the government's intent to focus on precisely these areas. A new ECD service model is being developed to provide flexible, age-appropriate

programmes, streamline registration for subsidies, enhance the ECD workforce through training programmes, and integrate children's healthcare, partnering with the Department of Health.

Tomlinson recommends a "Tech injection" in education. However, research shows that ed-tech isn't a panacea. Technology for coaching teachers or providing laptops hasn't yielded positive results. Additionally, ed-tech might negatively impact learning, as some evaluations have already shown.

Tomlinson's third suggestion is to help children reconnect with nature and consider how climate change will disrupt food systems. This is admirable, and the government is working to strengthen aspects of education for sustainability across the curriculum, but does this kind of highly aspirational thinking fit Tomlinson's own diagnosis of the problems being foundational literacy and numeracy to allow more people to complete school and qualify for university?

Clearly, calling for a "system overhaul" is easier than offering practical recommendations. Education system change is lengthy and complex, but South Africa's basic education system is on the rise. We encourage all stakeholders, like Tomlinson, to engage with government documents such as the Medium Term Strategic Framework and the Action Plan to 2030: Towards the Realisation of Schooling, 2030, providing detailed plans and analyses of challenges. Engaging with these documents is more constructive than relying on foils and non-sequiturs.

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