

Review (from a policy perspective) of the book *The politics and governance of basic education: A tale of two South African provinces*

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Introduction

This review of the book edited by Levy, Cameron, Hoadley and Naidoo, which is freely available online¹, is put together from a national (and to some extent provincial) policy perspective. So I am interested in the what it tells us about education policy design, particularly in the context of recommendations made in the National Development Plan (NDP). The book is not primarily about policy design. Much of its focus is on advancing a theoretical framework, supported by evidence from South Africa, regarding matters such as school autonomy, bureaucratic functionality, 'New Public Management', mismanagement and corruption. However, the book is also concerned with improving schooling in South Africa, so my policy perspective seems justified.

I've extracted four policy recommendations from the book. These are all recommendations which feature prominently in the NDP. My definition of 'policy' is broad here, encompassing such things as political signals sent through the system. The first recommendation is that better leadership and envisioning is needed in the sector. The second is that mismanagement and corruption need to be combatted in better ways. The third is that the education bureaucracy should be strengthened, in part through better support and accountability policies. The fourth is that accountability to parents and communities at the level of school should be reinforced.

The first two recommendations are rather well supported by the book, I believe, largely because of the wealth of historical narrative provided. The book provides an excellent source for understanding the nature of corruption and mismanagement in our schooling sector. The last two recommendations, however, while clearly present in the book, are put forward in a manner which can be confusing for policymakers. To me, this is largely because the emerging literature on what constitutes performance management in the education sector has not been sufficiently explored in the book.

The four headings that follow reflect the four recommendations.

Better leadership and vision

The NDP, in dealing with governance as a whole in South Africa, is clear that leadership and vision is essential, at the political level and among senior managers in the public service. In Chapter 14 of the NDP, how to ensure that corruption does not undermine good leadership is spelt out. Chapter 13 pays considerable attention to professionalising and de-politicising the public service. The book's description² of how the post-independence political leadership of Kenya placed education at the heart of development and national pride offers a valuable lesson to South African leaders. While quality basic education is put forward as South

¹ Levy, B, Cameron, R., Hoadley, U. & Naidoo, V. (2016). *The politics and governance of basic education: A tale of two South African provinces*. Manchester: Effective States and Inclusive Development. Available from: <http://www.effective-states.org/wp-content/uploads/working_papers/final-pdfs/esid_wp_67_levy_cameron_hoadley_naidoo.pdf> [Accessed November 2018].

² Chapter 10 of the book.

Africa's number one development priority, specifically in our Medium Term Strategic Framework, politicians could arguably be more 'Kenyan' in carrying this prioritisation through into their rhetoric and actions. In particular, being more 'Kenyan' would be about a stronger emphasis on learning and academic achievement. I elaborate on this below.

Combatting mismanagement and corruption

As indicated above, the NDP pays considerable attention to this problem. The book's account of mismanagement and corruption in Eastern Cape adds valuable texture to the what the NDP is referring to. Many would agree that, at least as far as basic education is concerned, Eastern Cape is the country's worst province in terms of mismanagement and corruption, though other provinces would display elements of the same problems. The book does not aim to put forward a set of recommendations to resolve these problems, yet merely taking our knowledge of the problem forward is a step in the right direction. It is useful to remember that a part of the solution lies not in combatting mismanagement and corruption directly, but building a strong state that is not easy to corrupt or mismanage, and is seen as worth protecting by the public. In this regard, the NDP's six 'critical success factors' seem important³.

Improving the support and accountability chains within the bureaucracy

The book provides an accurate description of the Western Cape education bureaucracy as a relatively effective one and argues that other provinces should learn from this province. At the same time, it warns against assuming that Western Cape does as well as it could. The province performed worse than Kenya in the SACMEQ⁴ 2007 assessments, despite spending more per learner. This finding⁵ holds if one compares the results of similarly disadvantaged learners (i.e. when one controls for socio-economic status). Even Western Cape, a good performer in the South African context, should be performing substantially better. This is one of the most important points made in the book. What many South African education researchers would regard as exemplary is in fact not that good.

But what makes the education bureaucracies under-perform in South Africa? What could Western Cape do to improve learning occurring in the classroom? Here I would have expected the book to provide more answers, and a better stocktaking of the kinds of policy recommendations for strengthening education bureaucracies appearing in the NDP (and many other places).

Essentially, the book suggests that the South African government, or the better elements of it, have followed the NPM textbook, have explored what could possibly be done, to improve educational outcomes. However, the argument goes, political infighting, corruption and mismanagement have thwarted good efforts and led to a situation where NPM solutions have not worked. This influences the solutions identified by the book. The NPM advocates should go on fighting for things such as performance management, as they have done in the past. But the prospects for this are seen as limited, given how poorly NPM has fared in the past⁶. Thus, solutions that allow for success even in the absence of an effective bureaucracy must be vigorously pursued. Specifically, local- or school-level action aimed at improving schooling must be encouraged.

I don't agree that South Africa's education bureaucracies have seriously considered, let alone piloted, all the key solutions put forward in 'the textbooks' on building effective

³ p. 59 of NDP.

⁴ Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

⁵ Chapter 6 of the book.

⁶ E.g. p. 224.

accountability and support systems. In fact, in many respects South Africa has always been behind, compared to other middle income countries, when it comes to innovation in these areas. There are many policy solutions which have worked elsewhere and should be attempted here. I therefore think one can afford to be less pessimistic than the book about the ‘NPM solutions’. I use inverted commas here because the term New Public Management is now seldom used, at least outside academia. Yet the policy solutions put forward nowadays by organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO and the OECD clearly evolved from NPM, and can be considered part of the same public governance tradition.

In two respects, I think, the book misunderstands South Africa’s NPM trajectory.

First, the book accepts uncritically the argument that South Africa, in the years following the first democratic elections in 1994, was an exemplary adopter of the best from NPM⁷. I’ve seen this argument made before. I agree that South Africa adopted *some* elements of NPM, but not others. What was left out explains, for me, much of the under-performance in education we see today. South Africa *was* an exemplary adopter of *public finance reform*. Public finance accounting systems were spectacularly improved. Work starting in the 1990s explains why, for instance, South Africa shares the top position in the world with New Zealand in the Open Budget Index (OBI) (115 countries were rated in 2017)⁸!

In other respects, however, South Africa has not at all fared well. Brazil has since 1995 been in a position to gauge trends in learning outcomes in essential learning areas, specifically language and mathematics, using a national monitoring system⁹. Since 2005, Brazil’s system has allowed for the monitoring of trends at the level of the individual school. The country is an important case, because of its exceptional improvements, seen for instance in PISA¹⁰, between around 2000 and 2010. The World Bank has attributed these improvements in part to the existence of a robust assessment system¹¹.

Turning to South Africa, despite two important attempts to build national standardised assessment systems, such systems have never worked well and the country has had to rely on international testing systems alone to gauge trends. This places South Africa at a considerable disadvantage when it comes to education. The monitoring of curriculum issues specific to South Africa becomes difficult. Moreover, it has always been difficult for district and circuit offices to target support to the right primary schools as there is so little comparable information on learning in these schools.

The second misunderstanding, I believe, lies in limiting the discussion of the policy work of the last two decades to the area of human resources management. There is a lot of interesting and valuable discussion in the book of performance management systems aimed at holding teachers and managers accountable to their employment contracts, meaning systems focussing on compliance with professional development, time-on-task, and workplace rules. This is of course important, but is arguably not at the core of what is considered performance management in, for instance, UNESCO’s Global Monitoring Reports¹², or the 2018 World Development Report of the World Bank. These ‘textbooks’ promote strongly a focus on *learning outcomes*. This one cannot really do through systems that hold individual teachers accountable. It is only in a few places in the United States, where learners are taught by only one teacher (this is most common at the lower primary level), and rigorous pre- and post-tests at the start and end of the year are implemented, that one can reliably and fairly hold single

⁷ E.g. pp. 12, 21, 61.

⁸ International Budget Partnership, 2018.

⁹ Carnoy *et al*, 2015.

¹⁰ Programme for International Student Assessment.

¹¹ Bruns *et al*, 2012: 7.

¹² In particular the GMRs of 2013-2014 and 2017-2018.

teachers accountable for learning outcomes. It has taken a while for the understanding to take root that this type of accountability is impossible in most schooling contexts. Hence organisations such as UNESCO have focussed on ‘national assessments’, which may be sample-based or reach every school. Where they reach every school, information from these assessments are used to hold school principals and the school’s teachers as a team accountable.

Had the book paid more attention these important shifts of emphasis in the literature on best practices, I believe it would have arrived at a more informed, and less pessimistic, position on hierarchical solutions. It would also have produced a better critique of the proponents of NPM in South Africa. Why did we fail to internalise best practices around performance management *focussing on learning outcomes* in South Africa? In some ways, it could be said that the book is too quick to let the technocrats in South Africa off the hook. It is of course a fascinating question to ask why, for instance, we did not follow a more ‘Brazilian’ approach? I believe a part of the answer lies in the paradox that South Africa’s relatively low indebtedness in the 1990s, while providing us with considerable policy autonomy, obviously a desirable thing, also left us fairly insulated from advisors from the rest of the world. Many of the innovations in Brazil, a country with a history of massive foreign debts, arose out of Brazilian education planners working with, for instance, foreign economists brought in to make public services more efficient.

There is an outstanding quotation in the book (three pages from the end¹³) which could have guided the book as a whole to a greater extent. The words are those of Benjamin Piper, an education expert who has worked for many years in Kenya:

What one sees in rural Kenya is an expectation for kids to learn and be able to have basic skills ... Exam results are far more readily available in Kenya than other countries in the region. The ‘mean scores’ for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and equivalent KCSE at secondary school are posted in every school and over time so that trends can be seen. Head teachers are held accountable for those results to the extent of being paraded around the community if they did well, or literally banned from school and kicked out of the community if they did badly.

This reflects a rather traditional approach to improving schooling, but also essentially the approach advanced by UNESCO, with one key difference. Examinations, the UNESCO warning goes, can be poor gauges of progress, for a number of reasons, relating to who writes specific subject examinations (selection effects). Hence, better assessment systems designed not to provide qualifications to individual learners, but a sense of school or system performance, are needed¹⁴. In fact, Kenya has a sample-based assessment system for Grade 3 which monitors system performance¹⁵. The Kenya explanation, as provided above, combined with the fact that South Africa is the only country in SADC¹⁶, apart from Angola, not to have some examination or national assessment at the primary level, has profound implications for understanding the history and politics of South Africa’s schooling system. In particular, it is important to understand how politics and ideology get in the way of introducing systems that would provide a clearer sense of academic performance at the primary level. Standardised assessments are generally viewed with suspicion by unions, sometimes for justifiable reasons, as poorly designed assessment systems can do more harm than good. This is not just a South African phenomenon. Education International (EI), the world federation of teacher unions, has been vocal about the technical failings of many assessment systems, but even more so about what it sees as the ‘neoliberal’ agenda behind them. The latter opposition to

¹³ p. 280.

¹⁴ UNESCO, 2014: 90.

¹⁵ National Assessment for Monitoring Learning Achievement. From the UIS database of assessments and examinations (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-learning-outcomes>).

¹⁶ Southern African Development Community.

assessments is arguably weaker in EI's 2015 World Congress resolutions than in those of 2011, so EI's position may be shifting. Seeking solutions in the political sphere is often about reaching compromises regarding support and accountability. Unions tend to emphasise support to teachers, while governments tend to emphasise accountability.

So what might a narrative on assessment efforts in South Africa look like, and how might this influence understandings of the relative benefits of hierarchical and horizontal solutions in education? Bits of this narrative exist in the South African literature, but it has probably not been pulled together into a coherent whole. There were two distinct phases in the assessments trajectory, both of which were largely unsuccessful. First, the Systemic Evaluation programme ran sample-based assessments in 2001 (Grade 3), 2004 (Grade 6) and 2007 (Grade 3 again). Its impact on the policy debates was limited as there were technical comparability problems (for the two Grade 3 assessments), little political buy-in, and the lag between waves of the programme was long. Second, the Annual National Assessments (ANA), launched in 2011, offered the opportunity of gauging progress for every school. Here the programme ended in a spectacular political stand-off, with unions (but also many academics) complaining about insufficient clarity about the purpose of the programme. ANA is mentioned just once in the book, though it was a major source of political tension, and attempted, unsuccessfully in the end, to bring about better hierarchical governance. The failings of ANA are now widely acknowledged, even by government¹⁷. Many of the failings are attributable to insufficient initial technical planning and public consultation. In fact, ANA is probably an excellent example of the 'just do it' mistake the book refers to in discussing NPM interventions¹⁸. Current work on a new national assessment system, in many ways an improved version of the earlier sample-based Systemic Evaluation approach, could have far-reaching implications for education governance in South Africa.

The Western Cape's systemic tests could have been critiqued better in the book, in particular given the book's focus on this province. The results of these tests are discussed in an analysis of performance trends in the province, but their managerial and accountability impacts, intended and actual, are not. Western Cape, of all the provinces, has gone the furthest in implementing the results-oriented accountability systems advocated by UNESCO and others. However, the Western Cape system displays important weaknesses. The comparability of results can be questioned, not because it is inherently impossible to bring about comparability, but because of design issues. In particular, item response theory (IRT) seems not to be fully implemented in the scoring of the tests. For many years, test results were provided to schools without important contextual information, for instance the socio-economic status of learners. Not giving parents access to the results weakens the opportunity for horizontal accountability solutions.

The NDP's call for a system of 'results oriented mutual accountability'¹⁹ in the schooling system is in many respects the NDP's answer to the book's core question on how to balance hierarchical and horizontal approaches in governance. It is also South Africa's response to UNESCO's call for alignment of effective support with effective accountability. Crucially, at the heart of the NDP's envisaged accountability system is information on learning outcomes. What learners learn is what people must ultimately be accountable for.

To conclude, the very limited coverage in the book of the range of interventions education bureaucracies can adopt, plus the assumption that South Africa's technocrats have, in a sense, exhausted the possibilities, produces a view on hierarchical solutions which is far more pessimistic than it needs to be. This leads the book to arrive at the conclusion, unjustified in my view, that solutions must be sought, on the one hand, in the political sphere through the

¹⁷ Department of Basic Education, 2016.

¹⁸ p. 22.

¹⁹ p. 311 of NDP.

combatting of political interference and corruption and, on the other, in work by local actors at the level of the school to bring about improvement. *All* three areas of activism are important: politics, the school community, and the bureaucracy. The evidence and advocacy around opportunities offered by bureaucratic reform need to be fully appreciated, or one ends up with a limited, and overly pessimistic, menu of options.

Facilitating accountability to parents and communities

Chapter 6 of the book presents an interesting finding. Using SACMEQ data, it is concluded that, firstly, Western Cape's levels of parent involvement are surprisingly low and, secondly, that this lack of involvement appears to explain some of the Western Cape's under-performance in the international context. This analysis can probably be taken further, using the same data. In particular, it would be interesting to see conditional correlations between parent involvement and results *within* a province or country. Given that the parent involvement variables in SACMEQ are about contributing funds to the school, there is of course the risk that what may appear as the effect of parental involvement is in fact socio-economic status (SES) and parent education effects not captured in the model's separate SES variable.

Insofar as Western Cape (and other provinces) could explore more horizontal accountability, the key question, the literature would suggest, is how one links this accountability as closely as possible to learning outcomes. By not addressing this question, the book offers only a partial view of how local-level efforts can improve schooling. The book's exploration of community involvement in the selection of school staff is valuable and important, but this is only a part of the work that needs to be done.

The NDP pays considerable attention to improving accountability to parents and communities, while emphasising *the centrality of good information on learning outcomes*. The NDP refers to information packages that will help parents understand how well, given the context, their school performs²⁰. This is essentially about introducing school report cards. These tools have become common in other developing countries²¹, but have barely entered the South African policy discourse on education.

The book is not really about schools in South Africa, but *primary schools*. A useful line of enquiry that can in future help clarify the dynamics around community participation in schools would be to compare primary and secondary schools. The latter have the 'Matric' examination, which permits academically-oriented accountability of the horizontal and hierarchical types not possible at the primary level. The question is whether provinces package examination results and trends for parents in ways which facilitate horizontal accountability. What perversions arise within this accountability as a result of the fact that schools can 'game' examination results by keeping weaker learners from reaching the examination? How workable are current proposals aimed at using the Matric examinations data in better ways so that one controls for selection effects²²?

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²⁰ p. 311 of NDP.

²¹ Cheng and Moses, 2016.

²² <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/5386>

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