

South African education is appalling but there are answers

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Early childhood develop is crucial in ensuring school readiness.

*I have yet to meet a teacher who was not excited at the prospect of having their learners do well. We have the resources, so why not initiate an plan with teachers relieved of their duties for one year to improve their education, writes **Anita Worrall**.*

President Cyril Ramaphosa listed education as a priority in his recent policy speech. But in my and many of my associates' opinion there is much more to be said and to be done in education than he indicated.

Notwithstanding one of the highest education budgets by population in the world there is unanimity that South African education is in an appalling state, something which puts the country at risk to competing to survive in the new millennium. Yet, and this is the main point I wish to make, positive responses are available.

That a large number of grade threes and sixes cannot read today is simply not acceptable. Obviously, one can't blame the children neither, to be frank, can we blame the teachers. But we can, the shapers of our education system for not informing themselves of the latest trends in effective instruction – indeed informing themselves of trends that are shaping education in many parts of the world.

To illustrate the point, teaching, reading and writing require that they be taught in an explicit and systematic manner. Evidence is strong that the majority of children learn to read better in a structured literacy approach. This is an approach which accepts the basis of reading is language,

and that each of the essential components of language need to be explicitly and systematically taught. So children need to be taught what is referred to as phonemic awareness. Becoming aware of individual speech sounds (phonemes) that make up words is critical to learning to read and spell.

The basis for phonemic awareness is laid in the pre-grades, which is why all our children should have Grade R experience. This is where they learn to play with sounds, to rhyme, to count syllables and to separate sounds in simple words. Preparation for this is often seen in the simple game of "I spy with my little eye something beginning with C".

This is the 21st century of teaching and there are many centres in South Africa where systematic and structured teaching of literacy is happening but it is a flash in the pan. We need to follow Britain's example where the recently-established Education Endowment Fund (EEF) offers information to teachers on many different aspects of education. Even classroom management is provided in this way. The EEF has given a much-needed boost to British education. We need to establish a similar body in South Africa because the fact is that we have the trained people to get it off the ground and run it!

Obviously related to teaching people to read, spell, and do maths is the need to teach pupils strategies for learning. As Prof Manala, Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Johannesburg, recently wrote in City Press: "South Africa needs savvy activists in the 21st-century because 21st-century learning requires innovation, open-mindedness, critical thinking, and knowledge of how to collaborate with others."

Therefore teaching children thinking strategies is essential, in fact as essential as teaching strategies to read, spell, write and do math. Here, again, we encouragingly have laid a basis and made a start.

In 2012 several of us in the educational field got together and created a non-governmental, non-profit organisation called Thinking Schools South Africa (TSSA). It is modelled on a UK organisation launched by Exeter University. We set as our goal transforming 200 schools to 21st century learning. We reckoned that in this way we would have at least 150,000 "smarter" 21st century learners by 2020, and we have achieved that! TSSA has grown to the point where we have transformed more than 200 schools across wealth, rural/urban and language divisions. And the world has taken note of this: as far as cognitive education is concerned, South African is on the map. Next year in June South Africa will host the biannual world event of The International Thinking Conference (ICOT)), obviously a must-attend for those looking at expanding 21st-century thinking in our country.

I have yet to meet a teacher who was not excited at the prospect of having his or her learners do well. We have the resources, so why not initiate an inclusive plan for education with teachers relieved of their duties for one year to improve their education? There already are centres of excellence that could accommodate them. The fact is we need to think out of the box. Our colleges, training centres and education departments need to refresh their thinking in terms of 21st century models.

The main point I want to make is that there is no need to despair. We have the knowledge to transform our education. As an illustration of what can be achieved, Finland has progressed within a

period of 50 years into a global, cutting-age education system. Its education is based on training teachers to be educational scientists, to have Master's degrees in education and to be paid and be respected as much as lawyers and doctors.

They have moved away from subject teaching to teaching comprehensive learning skills. The emphasis is more on developing the learner's problem-solving and thinking skills rather than simply transferring information. It may not be realistic to view Finland as an inspiration. But there are many other countries from whom we can learn.

- Dr Anita Worrall is a well-known child psychologist who is also director of the Pro Ed House School and Centre in Rondebosch, Cape Town, which she founded more than 20 years ago. She is an internationally acknowledged authority on bilingualism and cognitive development, and the founder and chairperson of the Thinking School movement of South Africa and a regular contributor to international conferences.