

# **IS AN EXTENSIVE EDUCATIONAL REFORM NEEDED FOR SOUTH AFRICA? LESSONS FROM CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL REFORMS**

**By**

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According to Holborn, education is a prerequisite, for the country's development and a better Africa in 2050. <sup>1</sup> A better educated and more highly skilled workforce is the most pressing long-term priority for the economy. The relationship between economic growth and education has been one of the central threads of economic analysis. Both Adam Smith in the 18th century and Alfred Marshall in the 19th century, two important figures for the economics profession, addressed the question of how individual investments in "education" influence the wealth of nations. Even Maes says, education is the best way to boost your sluggish economy and curb unemployment.<sup>2</sup> Economics and education expert George Psacharopoulos points out that there is a connection between additional investment in primary and secondary education and private wage returns. He states that a full 17, 2% of the economic growth rate in Africa is explained by education.<sup>i</sup> Although investment in primary and secondary education is a near-certain positive investment in economic and human development

South Africa is an example of a country that has spent abundantly on education. Currently about 5% of its GDP goes to education, which, according to Moneyweb, puts it broadly in line with countries such as the US, Holland and Austria.<sup>ii</sup> Spending on education in South Africa has resulted in increased access to schooling for a large number of learners in the country. Despite this financial investment in one of the most basic rights stipulated in the Constitution, the quality of education provided by state schools in the country is floundering. What then, are the challenges facing the country when it comes to providing

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quality education for its people? How will South Africa maintain its global status as an emerging market economy with its counterparts in the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping?

Burgher argues that South Africa's central problem -amongst others- is the state of its education. Even though 99% of South African children attend a school of some sorts, it is not really a true reflection of the quality of education which is currently being received. South Africa is currently one of the bottom 25 performers on the continent educationally. Moreover, it placed at a mere rank of 137 out of 150 countries in Mathematics and Science.<sup>iii</sup>

A recent survey by Newsweek showed that South Africa's education system had ranked a dismal 97<sup>th</sup> out of 100. It is an anomaly that though the country invests larger sums of money into the department than other richer countries do, poorer African countries still tend to boast better results than South Africa, even with the meagre budget contributions to education. In essence the deterioration of the quality of education is one of the new South Africa's principal failures.<sup>iv</sup> The Development Plan also highlights governance challenges as it states that the schooling system lacks capacity in terms of teachers and principals; alluding to a lack of qualified teachers and to principals lacking in leadership skills. Another contributing factor is the manner in which civil servants in the education departments are appointed. It is stated that nepotism and the appointment of unsuitable candidates further weakens government capacity.

In the final analysis, alongside the presence of qualified and experienced teachers in the public schooling system, other factors such as access to textbook and learning materials as well as classroom performance, among others, should contribute to the improvement of educational outcomes.<sup>v</sup> Given that South Africa has all the necessary resources at its disposal; access of teachers, funding, etc, how best can South Africa clean up the deterioration of quality education in the country? China is presented as a comparative case study for analysis in promoting effective educational reforms in the country. China makes a good case study as like South Africa it had a deteriorating educational system due to the Cultural revolution. However, despite its once dismal educational status, in the 1980's

China has managed to implement effective educational reforms which have contributed to the country's industrial growth.

Traditionally, education occupies a high position in the Chinese value system. However, during the cultural revolution from 1967 to 1976, intellectuals were purged as counter revolutionaries. Students dropped out of school and were sent to the countryside for hard work.<sup>vi</sup> The Cultural Revolution took another toll on higher education, which was devastated more than any other sector of the country. The enrollment of postsecondary students can be used as example to illustrate the impacts. The number dropped from 674,400 to 47,800.<sup>vii</sup> This has had a major impact on education in the 21st century. The decline in educational quality was profound. It was also not difficult to find schools at provinces like Shanxi where failure rates in exams were maintained at the unbelievable record of zero. Pupils did not do any piles of homework, nor did they spend much time preparing for examinations. All the work was assigned in the class, and finished in the classroom.

In other regions like Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in South China, thousands of young people engaged more in military training programs. In the 1950s, military training was highly professional and mainly for recruitment purposes. However, in 1985, the government issued policies to revamp this system, announcing that military training in the schools would be gradually transformed to serve educational purposes. It was also in 1985 when the government published its first policy, defining the objectives of education to train professionals, and develop science and technology. The government also decided to loosen government control of schools, acknowledging their independence, and allowing education reforms to adapt to social and economic changes.<sup>viii</sup>

With the implementation of the reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970s, the Chinese leaders represented by Deng Xiaoping began to realize the importance of education in achieving the national goal of the four modernizations. The Four Modernizations were designed to make China a great economic power by the early 21st century. These reforms essentially stressed economic self-reliance. The Four Modernizations were goals first set forth by Zhou Enlai in 1963, to strengthen the fields of agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology in China.<sup>ix</sup> The Four Modernizations were adopted as a

means of rejuvenating China's economy in 1978 following the death of Mao Zedong, and were among the defining features of Deng Xiaoping's tenure as head of the party.

The 14th Central Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 1992 announced that “to develop education is the first priority to the realization of the four modernizations.”<sup>xviii</sup> The 15th CCP Congress in 1997 reemphasized the strategy of reinvigorating the country with science and education and the strategy of sustainable development should be the two most important means for China to build a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics.<sup>xi</sup> Then 16th Convention of the CPC: stated “education is the basis for developing science and technology and preparing talents, playing a leading and comprehensive role in modernization. It must be placed in a strategic position and given priority in development. Education must adhere to serving the construction of socialist modernization and the people, combine with productive labor and social practice, and prepare socialist builders and successors who have developed morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically.”<sup>xii</sup>

The afore-mentioned Congress statements laid the foundation for educational reforms in China. Due to the limited space in this paper, this article will focus on the reforms at the level of higher education. In order to accelerate the development of education, the Ministry of Education developed, in 1998, *The Plan for Revitalizing Education in the 21st Century*.<sup>xiii</sup> One of the specific goals was to popularize senior high school education in urban and advanced areas, and to enlarge the scale of higher education. It was planned that the gross enrolment rate in institutions of higher learning should have reached 15% by the year 2010.<sup>xiv</sup> In 2002, the goal was reached, eight years ahead of the schedule. In 2004, the rate rose to 19%.<sup>xv</sup> Given that the goal was achieved 8 years ahead of the schedule it is necessary to question, how was it possible to speed up the construction of infrastructure within such a short period?

The first strategy was based on public-private partnership. A lot of the institutions were originally situated at the inner cities. In order to develop schools in the rural areas to allow for more student intake, the national government ensured that it got the support of local governments in the rural communities. The municipalities in turn would give incentives to universities that would come and implement campuses in their communities. To establish a

win-win partnership, relationships with the non-government sectors were also developed, particularly companies which would construct a required facility. Through the joint collaborations, the projects were usually completed within a year's time.

Secondly, there was a quota system of the amount of students taken at each institution in order to guarantee the quality of higher education. This process effectively held the pace of growth. The third measure was the teaching assessment system. In 2000, the Ministry appointed a specialist group to work out a program for evaluating the capacity of education in a high school and the actual level of teaching.<sup>xvi</sup> This assessment covered all infrastructural aspects of high school education, including infrastructure, facilities, teaching staff, administration, teacher performance, student discipline, student abilities, etc. Fourthly, more importance was attached to training in practical skills.. To enhance students' practical abilities, high schools had to strive to provide better experimental facilities on one hand and to establish bases for practice in enterprises, factories and schools, etc.

Fifthly, one of the key reasons why the Chinese governance system of education worked is due to its curriculum reforms. This reform was not just been about updating and repackaging educational content, but aimed at helping students find out who they are, where they want to go in life, and how they will get there, in a rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain world. Sixthly, China is investing heavily on how to ensure that its education becomes the most competitive on the global platform. Their belief is that a highly skilled and educated mass can only be achieved by developing schools of excellence at all levels. One way they are establishing this practice is by sending some of their people to various countries for data collection and training. The other level is to ensure that their educational teachers and professionals undergo competitive training. Finally, party politics are not integrated with the daily business of running schools. Contrast that with the implementation of an educational reform in South Africa, where leaders worry about get through the next elections, or political affiliates like SADTU that may be opposed to any demands placed on their constituents. To date, Chinese youth (15-24 years) have a 99% literacy rate. Moreover, priority in education policy has been shifted from equity to efficiency that is measured, almost exclusively, in financial terms.<sup>xvii</sup>

The China model demonstrates strong evidence of links between country governance systems and development performance. Studies have shown that public investments in primary and higher education are more likely to lead to higher education attainment if governance improvements are effected. Cross country comparisons and unbundling of governance components such as rule of law, voice and accountability, corruption control and state capture have indicated that a greater force of external accountability can lead to improved governance.<sup>xviii</sup> In order for education reforms to work in South Africa, the process cannot be politicized, and there will be a need to apply government efficiency. The simple dictionary definition of efficiency is the ability to be “productive of desired effects, especially without waste.”<sup>xix</sup>

Doing the business of government “in the light of day” – under the lens of performance assessment or program evaluation – can provide evidence of whether the public’s dollars have been spent wisely and without waste, that is, efficiently. As Ryan suggests, “efficiency is about how we should allocate our resources to achieve our goals, not what our goals should be. Efficiency is really a process for making the best possible use of available resources to achieve public ends.”<sup>xx</sup>

Efficiency would mean professional and rigorous training of teachers and principals, including local and national department which is long overdue. Currently the lack of capacity which permeates all the levels of government partly due to the phenomenon of “cadre deployment” in which party representatives of the ANC are deployed to government positions, often without the requisite skills to effectively execute the responsibilities associated with those positions is detrimental to our education structures. Efficiency would mean “not dumbing down” literacy pass marks, and curriculum reform that would place young South Africans at a globally competitive level particularly with the emerging markets. The 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum requires graduates to have a multifaceted set of skills. Efficiency would mean speeding up the process of building schools and setting up the necessary infrastructure to ensure that the student teacher ratio is balanced.

Efficiency would also mean assessments of the schools by qualified school inspectors to trouble shoot issues such as teacher absenteeism, poor performance, ill disciplined students etc. Finally efficiency would mean government, business, and community partnerships. In this case the performance of some South African parents needs to be examined. It is unexplainable how a country where students fought for the right to education is now represented by individuals who prevented children from attending school for 3 months. The culture of entitlement that is promoted by the BEEE lifestyles has somehow erased the need for an education. Finally, given the global pace of development laced with information communication technology (ICT) South Africa not only does not have much time to fix its educational mess, but needs to try to acquire the Chinese standards of meeting the target deadlines for educational reforms in 4 instead of 20 years.

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