

# Why focusing on matric results isn't the solution to SA's education woes

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When interventions made to raise the levels of mathematics skills and knowledge among South African learners fail to bear fruit, it's understandable that many are quick to feel that we are in a state of crisis...



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However, though it may be understandable, it isn't necessarily a fair or correct assessment of the complex situation.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say that the very premise that the state of South African maths education is in crisis because interventions are "failing to bear fruit" is flawed.

Come every January, whether the matric pass rate rises or falls, the entire nation launches into a few weeks of opining on the state of South African education. We are right to view the state of education as a matter of national concern. Having said that, we do a disservice to the education system by making pronouncements based on only one metric.

Perhaps this view of the state of maths education in South Africa was most clearly displayed in last year's widely reported, and quickly discredited, World Economic Forum report. The report's findings that our mathematics and science education quality was the worst in the world was discredited on the basis that the rankings were subjective, unscientific, unreliable, and lacked any form of technical credibility. However, with the report's data being gleaned from interviews with business leaders it does show how deep misconceptions about our education system are among an economically significant part of our country - business leaders.

The concern expressed at the drop in the matric maths pass rate is fair, but that is in no way the full story. As people concerned for the future development of South Africa, to meaningfully add to this debate we need to have the full view of what is happening.

## The snowball effect

International studies have repeatedly shown that problems with mathematics at the final stages of a school career have their roots in primary education. This means that it's not that maths suddenly becomes exponentially more difficult come matric, but rather that gaps in maths skills and knowledge from lower grades snowball leading to devastating results in the final years.

Current interventions by the Basic Education Department do seem to be working.

The Annual National Assessment (ANA) results provide a picture of levels of performance in literacy and numeracy at the key transitional stages of Grades three, six and nine. There are indeed criticisms of the ANAs, but they do provide us with a regular snapshot of whether initiatives that have been put in place are showing promise. Not only can you see the lay of the land, but weak spots can also be identified through the ANA results. Educators use this feedback to build on their strengths and to develop intervention strategies to address their areas of weakness.

As Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga pointed out when the 2014 ANA results were published late last year, 12 out of 81 districts achieved average percentage scores of 50% and above in Grade 6 mathematics - clearly the improvement plans put in place as a consequence of the 2013 ANA results have paid off.

And 2014's ANA results showed some heartening results. Grade 1 maths came in at 68.4% - up from 59.6% in 2013 - and Grade 2 learners averaged 61.8%, an increase from 58.9% the previous year.

## "A lost cause"

These kinds of facts are often overlooked in the outrage over matric results. As someone intensely passionate about education in South Africa, this concerns me for two main reasons.

Firstly, it does a disservice to the hard work our educators and officials are doing within the education system. Not only is this unfair, it can often be demoralising, which the education system cannot afford.

However, the second reason this lack of information concerns me is how these misconceptions are shaping the opinions of business leaders. While figures for 2014 are not yet available, according to independent research group Trialogue, companies spent R7.8-billion on Corporate Social Investment (CSI) projects in 2013 with the lion's share going into education initiatives. Additionally, it found that between 2008 and 2013 there was an increase in the country's overall CSI spend on education, from 31% to 43%. Should business leaders' perceptions remain that education is a lost cause in South Africa, it is likely that the needed spend in CSI projects in education will drop. Why spend more money on something that has little success?

With respect, it is my contention that often CSI initiatives in education are based on noble intentions without a solid understanding of what is needed to make a significant change. There are too many glamour CSI projects, especially in the apparent quick fix of digital learning because of all the promise it holds, that at best do nothing more than enhance a company's image, and at worst, do nothing for the school system because of their short-term focus.

It's for this reason that, in association with the Department of Basic Education, we as Via Afrika have launched a venture that will see us applying our expertise in this field to help corporates looking to assist in developing the education sector by replicating our own CSI initiative - the Via Afrika Digital Centres. Launched last year, the Via Afrika Digital Education Centre initiative provided a school in rural Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Free State with refurbished container libraries fitted with 15 first-class Android tablets packed with educational apps, WiFi. A key component to ensure that the initiative worked was regular and ongoing training for the educators on tablet devices and how to successfully implement elearning at the schools.

The results, easily measured through the learners increasing grade averages across all subjects, were so heartening that

deciding to replicate the model elsewhere was a clear choice.

There has been much excitement about digital technologies in education and how they are revolutionising the classroom. I firmly believe digital learning holds the promise to assist in alleviating issues in South African education. The corporate world has clearly shown a commitment to working hand-in-hand to develop South African education.

Going forward, what is needed now is to ensure that corporate interventions are the kinds of interventions that will bear the best fruits for our learners.

## ABOUT CHRISTINA WATSON

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