

## **The school “sorting paradigm” as a counter culture to “talent development” for improvement of school performance**

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### **Abstract**

The underperformance of schools in many instances results in the education authorities (circuits, districts and even units from head office) sorting some schools according to their levels of performance. Schools that continue to perform below set out provincial and national targets are more often classified as “dysfunctional schools”, a concept that carries strong connotations. This article refers to this as the “school sorting paradigm” and the approach that is used by the department to deal with such schools has a stigmatising effect on the concerned schools. This article advocates that instead of sorting schools according to functional and/or dysfunctional, the department should engage in activities that, among other things, develop the available talent in the schools; assist the schools in creating a culture of teaching and learning and cultivating a culture of strong instructional leadership in the schools.

**Keywords:** sorting paradigm, talent development, instructional leadership

### **Introduction**

We begin this discourse noting that every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life. The expectations of all concerned with schooling, from parents, teachers, department of education, the school community and the learners is that all learners should succeed in school and in life. Outcomes-based education, when it was first introduced in South Africa, was said to be built on the premise that “all learners can and have the potential to learn.” This premise can further be expanded to express the view that “all teachers can and have the potential to turn their schools into centres of excellence and success.” The current level of poor performance of learners in schools countrywide is worrying, in light of the two premises which are explored above.

In spite of the views and assertions that can be drawn from the two premises above, learners continue to underperform and teachers are walking the labyrinth to find ways to improve their own performance for the benefit of the learners. The walk through the labyrinth is made long and difficult by the sorting of schools according to their different levels of performance. While this sorting may, in the eyes of the executing authorities, be well intended, the effects thereof seem to be far reaching. Educators and the concerned schools alike, feel alienated, more especially if the support that they receive from the department does not address their challenges directly. With this cloud of school sorting hanging over the

schools and educators, school performance is detrimentally affected. For us, the notion of “sorting” is policy flaw. Perhaps, it is worth mentioning that the notion of “sorting” is a capitalist linguistic construct and qualifies to be a tool for social reproduction. Our central thesis is that the sorting perspective must be replaced by a talent development model. Among others, this model avows that all children are capable of succeeding in a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support. The support that the learners need for their success must come from adequately prepared teachers, who from time to time, receive school-based teacher development interventions to sharpen their content knowledge.

With this background in mind, we problematize the sorting of schools into functional and dysfunctional schools and the school quintiling system as policy and theory flaws. Notwithstanding the fact that the school sorting paradigm remains a *capitalist/dominant* class issue in the South African schools, we depart from the Marxian and Bourdieusian stance that the sorting paradigm perpetuates social inequalities. In the context of this article, the concepts of “sorting paradigm”, “quintiling system” and *capitalism* are intimately connected. This article is divided into five sections. We first critique the school sorting paradigm as a capitalist construct. Secondly, we present talent development as a vehicle for the improvement of school performance. Thirdly, we focus on building a culture of teaching and learning for the improvement of school performance. Fourthly, we present the challenges and prospects of building a culture of teaching and learning to support talent development for the improvement of school performance. Finally, we propose a shift towards talent development for the improvement of school performance.

### ***The sorting paradigm as a capitalist construct***

We commence by accepting that the concept of school sorting paradigm is conceptualized in different ways by different scholars. In addition, this concept is philosophically burdened with a heritage of contradicting usages and of inconclusive and interminable discussions. However, we will mainly draw from Robert Slavin, an American psychologist who studied educational and academic issues. As Slavin (1996:1) puts it, “the sorting paradigm refers to the sorting of children into different categories, which include high, middle and low ability groups, gifted and special education groups”. This paradigm depends, in large part, on a belief that children have relatively unchangeable intellectual capabilities and therefore schools should provide instruction to each child’s innate talents. Furthermore, this paradigm is an antithesis of the belief that all children can and have the ability to learn and this belief is referred to as “talent development.” Talent development communicates the idea that all children have talents capable of being developed to meet high standards. The foregoing above outlined the basic origins of the concept “sorting paradigm” and how it contradicts “talent development.”

Notwithstanding the complexities of the school sorting paradigm, for us, it is both a policy and a political imperative – it goes against the grain of the liberation struggle and a classical Marxist position. Intuitively, whether viewed as democratisation or domination, the school sorting paradigm perpetuates social inequalities. In spite of the good strides of excellence in post-apartheid education transformation, it is noteworthy to mention that the sorting paradigm is materialization and a testimony of cultural hegemony – a term that originated with Marxist theorist and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci. While Marx was primarily concerned with the nature of the capitalist mode of production, Marxism as ideology, in this discourse, qualifies to be used as method of socio-economic analysis and worldview based on a materialist interpretation of historical development, a dialectical view

of social transformation, and an analysis of class-relations and conflict within the post apartheid society.

From a Marxist perspective, the school sorting paradigm propagates a capitalistic culture. More important, the school sorting paradigm as power relations construct (social-class power) reflects a specific form of *class* domination. Hence, power is always class power, the power of one class, (or a coalition of classes), of the ruling class over the other, the dominated classes of society (Marx, 1975a, 1976, 1987). Furthermore, this power, which stabilises on the basis of dominant social structures, is reproduced within class antagonism, within the struggle of the classes. The specific unity of society is, therefore, inseparable from the unity of the specific class power, which is insured within the class struggle (Marx, 1975b, 1973). Flowing from this, this article looks at the school sorting paradigm as materialization and a testimony of cultural hegemony in relation to the sorting of schools based on their performance. It further challenges the school sorting paradigm and the different mechanisms used to sort schools into different categories such as, for example; the Dinaledi schools programme. In this context, we hold the view that the sorting of schools has a negative effect on quality and equity with regard to the provision of resources to schools. The general trend is that the schools that do not belong to a particular identified group, such as the Dinaledi schools, become neglected with regard to resourcing and other forms of support.

Another example of the manifestation of the school sorting paradigm is the school quintiling system where schools are allocated funds by the department according to their different levels of poverty. This system is highly flawed. In many instances, schools in the same area, with the same poverty levels are put in different quintiles. This causes problems when parents of learners in *school A* have to pay school fees while the same parents have children in *school B* which is classified as a no-fee school. Slavin (1996:1) argues that schools must be organised not just to advance all children from their starting point, but also to place a high floor under the achievement of all, including those who are placed at risk by societal, institutional, family, or personal factors. This article therefore argues for an emphasis on schools as centres of talent development and exposing some of the weaknesses of the school sorting paradigm and how these weaknesses may lead to a total collapse of education in some schools.

Given that the school sorting paradigm is evidently an organised structure, fluid, complex and multi-dimensional, we ensue from an elucidation that at a philosophical level, the school sorting paradigm can be internalised/ incorporated, objectified or institutionalized. For us, the school sorting paradigm is connected with Bourdieu's theoretical ideas on class and is an object of political and ideological struggles. In addition, as a social relations construct, it could be used to produce or reproduce inequality – it plays an inhibiting role. Our view is that the school sorting paradigm fits perfectly through Bourdieu's lens of social reproduction, and it shares attributes and features with Marx's work on exploitation and domination (Marx, 1973, 1975a, 1976, 1975b, 1987). In line with this view, the school sorting paradigm is a social construct which is largely in the hands of the *dominant* class – it is the asset of the bourgeoisie/capitalist. To end this section, the school sorting paradigm is underpinned by bourgeoisie/capitalist attributes – it perpetuates a capitalist hegemony. It is consistent with the attributes of exploitative character of a clean capitalism. Thus, the school sorting paradigm as a purposive act of the dominated is appropriated for the purposes of production.

### ***Talent development as a vehicle for the improvement of school performance***

As indicated above, the school sorting paradigm is an antithesis of talent development and the intention of this article is to shed light on how the latter can be used to improve school performance. One of the central ills of the sorting paradigm is that in its application in the particular schools, it ignores a number of important variables that influence school performance. Van der Westhuizen, Masoge, Swanepoel and Coetsee (2005) argue that among the many variables that influence the academic achievement of learners, educators are arguably the most important variable, with the power to mediate all other variables. Based on this view, the talents of the educators need to be developed to enable them to improve their own performance and the general performance of their schools. More often than not, educators are stigmatised on the basis of the poor performance of their schools, with little or no intervention to deal with their skills.

It is therefore important at this point to explore the concept of talent development within the context of this article. Gagne (2004: 125) defines talent development as a process in which natural abilities are changed or transformed into skills that show competence or expertise in a given occupation. It is a process that enables individuals to acquire necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be applied to their job situation. Talent development is therefore an integrated concept that transforms the natural abilities of educators (in this context) into skills through training, career development, career management, organizational development and training and development. This concept is sympathetic to the fact that educators may have difficulties in understanding and mastering certain concepts and content in their subjects (learning areas) as a result of the level of training which they received before they became educators (Wits Education Policy Unit, 2005:17). Furthermore, talent development is also sympathetic to the environment in which teaching and learning takes place, i.e. the school.

This means that the stigmatising effects of the sorting paradigm affect not only the educators but the school as well (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2001:43). In order for talent development to take full effect in dealing with the stigmatising effects of the sorting paradigm, both the educators and the school need to be developed. Noel and Dehenny (1991:17) contend that educators attending training and development courses still have to contend with an unchanged school environment; while the trainees may have changed, the environment remains debilitating. Our position is that in order to sustain the newly developed talents of the educators, the principal and the school management team need to work hard on creating conditions that will accommodate the implementation of the new talents. This implies that the talent development initiatives are not a “secret garden” of the department of education only but for all who have a genuine interest in matters of school improvement, including the school management teams.

### ***(Re) building a culture of teaching and learning for the improvement of school performance***

The school sorting paradigm, due to its stigmatising effect on the underperforming schools and subsequently on the educators, becomes a counter-culture to talent development. This article recognises talent development as a force that opposes the stigmatising effects of the sorting paradigm and sets out to explore possible mechanisms to counter these effects. One of the major mechanisms that can be used to counter the effects of the sorting paradigm is (re)building a culture of teaching and learning. This article argues that the effect of the sorting paradigm may lead to the erosion of the culture of teaching and learning and to

compensate for this, the SMT needs to work vigorously on rebuilding this culture as a starting point towards the improvement of school performance.

The concept “culture” generally refers to a set of common values, attitudes, beliefs and norms, some of which are explicit and some of which are not. Brown (2004:2) indicates that an organization’s success can be attributed to its culture. Kruger (2003:206) indicates that the central role that a principal plays in all the programmes of a school and the impact that he/she has on the tone and ethos which are conducive to teaching and learning is crucial in the process of building a sound culture of teaching and learning. Peters and Waterman (1982) on the other hand, found that excellent companies possessed distinctive cultures that served to motivate employees by giving meaning to their work. They further observed that poor performing organizations had either no detectable culture or a dysfunctional culture. The views expressed by Peters and Waterman (1982) further emphasize the idea that there must be a link between an organization’s culture, its values and the way the organization is organized and managed if the organization has to improve. This means that school improvement requires a particular culture in the school and that there must be structures in place in the school to exercise leadership in the development and maintenance of the culture.

Culture as a construct can be created and uncreated in any organization. A school as an open system is more often infiltrated by conflicting cultures, each of which affects the basic functionality of the school in different ways. The sorting paradigm is one example of a conflicting culture which, as we indicated earlier, stigmatises the educators and the school. In other words, the importation of the school sorting paradigm into schools by the department of education brings a stagnating effect on the culture of teaching and learning. A productive culture needs to be (re) built in the schools and according to Brown (2004:3), such a culture will ensure that the teachers and schools which are caught up in the complex and compromised environment brought by the sorting paradigm develop a set of values, beliefs, stories and means of operating that will transcend all other influences and tensions and focus everyone more on the central tasks of teaching and learning.

### ***Challenges and prospects of building a culture of teaching and learning to support talent development for improvement of school performance***

The school sorting paradigm cannot be seen as a lasting solution to the problem of underperformance of schools. The department of education, however, faced with the extremely acute poor learner performance, tends to put up systems that seek to address the problem temporarily, systems such as the school sorting paradigm rather than focusing on long term interventions. In a nutshell, the school sorting paradigm is a short - term remedy that also has stigmatising effects on the schools.

In schools where a culture of teaching and learning prevails, the following features will define what the teachers do and how they do it: the strong instructional culture of the school will foster great teaching, which will in turn ensure that the school leaders help the teachers to reach their full potential in the classroom. In schools where a culture exists that ensures that the talents of the teaching staff are developed, the top retention rate of the best performing teachers becomes higher, i.e teachers will not think of relocating to other schools. A strong instructional culture ensures that learners learn more and therefore there will be remarkable improvement in their performance.

According to the Greenhouse Schools project (2012), school cultures do not develop by accident. Developing strong school cultures needs visionary leaders who will be able to identify the appropriate talent for the school and take all necessary steps to develop and retain

the talent. In a quest to sustain the instructional culture of the school, the leader must be able to diagnose areas of improvement in the instructional culture, create and consistently implement an action plan based on the successes of others, and monitor progress throughout the year. When the instructional culture of a school is nurtured, many more cultures emerge from it. If monitoring the school's progress becomes a culture in the school, then the performance of the learners will improve.

### ***Towards talent development for the improvement of school performance***

The development of the instructional skills of the teaching force in any school and the entire department of education must top the intervention agenda of the department. This implies that talent development must be an integral product of the practice of instructional leadership at all levels of the schooling system. We claim that circuit managers, like principals of schools should start to assume an instructional leadership role if they want to see improvement in the performance of their schools. The starting point should, however, be at the policy making level of the department. If the value and impact of instructional leadership can be advocated by a specialised unit from the policy making level of the department, even the myth that some school leaders still have about instructional leadership being the role of HODs can be solved.

This article advocates the view that in schools where strong instructional leadership is practised and supported by the department, the leadership and management capacity of the principal is improved, thereby developing the potential of all teachers in the classroom. This is talent development in practice. School leaders who value and practice instructional leadership give their teachers more valuable professional development opportunities which are a characteristic of talent development.

## **Conclusion**

The intervention approach of the department as it is (by sorting schools according to their learner performance) does not address the problem of school underperformance directly. Teachers are put under pressure to perform at a particular level without giving them long lasting skills to improve their practice. This article tried to provide alternatives to the school sorting paradigm which is viewed as a counter-culture to talent development. This article proposed that school leaders need to provide strong instructional leadership to ensure that learner performance improves. It also proposed that for instructional leadership to be effective, it has to be advocated at the policy making level of the department. A specialised instructional leadership unit needs to be established with the purpose of ensuring that the practice of this leadership is done uniformly in all schools and monitored and evaluated from time to time. It has also emerged from this article that unless the talent of teachers is nurtured through the provision of professional development opportunities at school level, learner performance will not improve. The provision of strong instructional leadership, professional development activities and rebuilding the culture of teaching and learning will avert the stigmatising effects of the school sorting paradigm.

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