



# Changing Demographics and Teacher Quality

– Johan Muller (Emeritus Professor of Curriculum, University of Cape Town)

South African educational authorities have, mostly but not always justifiably, been blamed for the poor state of schooling outcomes. Not everything is a simple consequence of poor policy or inadequate implementation. This briefing note takes a look at one such factor which arises in the broader demographic environment of the country.

**While we now know how to teach reading, we do not know how to retrain existing teachers to an acceptable level:** It is common cause that a) the single greatest factor inhibiting improving reading proficiencies is the parlous state of teacher knowledge regarding how to do it successfully, despite the fact that the underlying dynamics of how to do it are by now well established in the research literature; b) that the majority of teacher training institutions, at least the ones training the overwhelming bulk of our teachers, are still not teaching prospective teachers how to teach reading, as Nick Taylor's research has shown; and c) that while small scale interventions are often effective, we do not yet have a model for how to re-train the over 200 000 existing primary school teachers to an acceptable level of competence.

**Improving teacher quality by closing unviable 'tiny' schools:** Back to demographics: all modernising societies see a shift in people from outlying areas, usually rural, towards larger centres where opportunities are expected to be better. South Africa is no exception. An important segment of this movement is the school-going sub-population. This has led in turn to a densification of some school communities and growth of school sizes and a reciprocal dramatic decline in enrolment of others, where school sizes are shrinking. With this demographic shift comes inefficiencies, but also opportunities when considering the task of achieving 100% reading proficiency for all learners by age 10. For example, over 900 schools in the Eastern Cape have less than 100 learners. At least half of these are reported to have no or unsuitable sanitation<sup>45</sup>. The inefficiency is principally that many shrinking schools dwindle to pupil numbers such that the small number of teachers teach multiple grades, they lose experienced staff by virtue of the same centrifugal movement and become expensive to maintain as viable educational institutions. Attempts by local authorities to close these inefficient state investments have met with resistance from a range of interest groups.

**Use cost-savings from closing 'tiny' schools to fund transport and selective early retirement:** An opportunity lies in a national effort to address the large number of small schools in the country. Such an effort will free up considerable resources for implementing a nation-wide systemic strategy. This will involve at least some of the following: a) persuading parents that their children are entitled to schooling by right, but not necessarily in a school nearby, on the grounds that they will in all likelihood receive a higher quality of schooling in better resourced schooling environments; b) arranging efficient transport for the children to school – such transport is already a reality in most provinces; c) transfer teachers to larger schools which are invariably closer to their homes and will reduce transport costs; d) offering attractive early retirement packages to teachers particularly those in the Foundation Phase and not

proficient at teaching reading.

**Economies of scale will make new investments in teacher re-training possible:** The greatest challenge will lie in devising a strategy that has systemic effects so as to approach the proficiency target set, but that is not a central focus of this note. The gains of closing small schools lie in a) cutting down on investment inefficiencies and freeing up resources for either more teachers in classes or for teacher re-training initiatives; b) reducing the teacher numbers for re-training; c) concentrating teachers in schools which will have better resources, better economies of scale, and a better trained teaching corps as well as stronger learners through internal selection dynamics. The learning gains will in all likelihood improve and be further enhanced when teachers are inducted into reading strategies.

**'Stacking' reforms to make the most of incoming teacher demographic changes:** In addition to demographic changes related to urbanisation, new research suggests that as many as half of all teachers will retire in the next 10 years. This unprecedented demographic change will also present opportunities to ensure that new incoming teachers are selected on merit and trained adequately. 'Stacking' these reforms – i.e. implementing them as a package of reforms rather than individually – will make them both more politically palatable, and also more effective since they would be harnessed towards the same goal: reading for meaning.

In short, demographic shifts offer opportunities for South African schooling to get more on the front foot to approach the national push required to achieve the reading proficiency target.