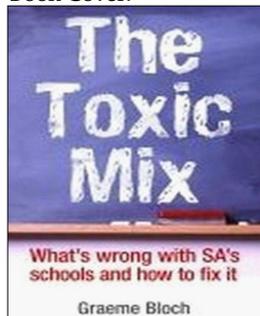


BACK TO BASICS

Book Title:

The Toxic Mix: What's wrong with South Africa's schools and how to fix it

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Graeme Bloch

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Review Title:

Back to basics

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South African schools are underperforming disastrously. Graeme Bloch argues in *The Toxic Mix* that the educational standards of South African children are 'not only amongst the worst in the world, but often among the worst in the southern Africa region and in Africa as a whole'. He demonstrates this with a range of comparative test results and statistics. For example, in 2002, a sample of grade 8 learners came last out of 46 countries surveyed for maths results, while in 2006 South Africa had the lowest score of all participating countries in a study of literacy standards. Local test results are equally depressing; the results of tests conducted by the Department of Education at primary school level over the last eight years show that the overwhelming majority of South African primary school learners are not learning to read, write and do arithmetic at the levels laid out by our own curricula. In addition, over half the learners who start school never reach the end of their school careers, while approximately 45% of students leave universities without graduating.

Bloch points out that these statistics are averages and hide the huge differences within the system. There are sharp divisions between the formerly White suburban schools and the majority of township schools which result in the education system continuing to both reflect and reproduce the inequalities of South African society. Bloch describes a vicious circle where the majority of school learners from the most disadvantaged communities receive the least adequate schooling so that it is extremely difficult to break cycles of poverty and marginalisation. We are in a crisis situation in that it has become increasingly difficult to produce the skills needed for development and to compete in a global economy, and equally importantly, because we are completely failing our own students.

Bloch has written a balanced analysis of what is wrong with the South African education system, and has suggested several positive paths forward. *The Toxic Mix* is a call to action. It looks in detail at the crisis and argues that it will take the combined efforts of all institutions and individuals with an interest in education to turn the situation around. Bloch was involved in a Development Bank of South Africa initiative which produced a framework of ten suggested priorities and key interventions in education through an extensive process of consultation. The resulting ten points of this 'Education Roadmap' address a range of problems at school level, at support-to-school level and at societal level.

Bloch highlights the factors that can make a difference by examining some of the success stories of ordinary schools and initiatives that work. In these examples, key factors are: the importance of the principal's role, teachers who get to school on time and teach, clear organisational structures involving all teachers and an ethic of hard work. He emphasises the importance of creative individuals and an approach that focuses on finding solutions, rather than dwelling on problems. He warns that positive change can result only from a 'huge change in mind-set'. He challenges individuals, government, unions, businesses and donors to participate in initiatives within a sound and agreed upon framework such as the Education Roadmap. Bloch quotes examples of numerous individual projects and interventions, but ultimately the onus rests on government to drive development forward.

As teachers, we found that *The Toxic Mix* spoke to our everyday experience. Our school, the Gadra Matric School, funded by the GADRA Education NGO, offers learners a second chance at grade 12. The overwhelming majority of our learners come from Grahamstown's townships, with a small number travelling to us from further afield.

We have found that for a well motivated learner, a realistic aim is to be able to improve by 10% in a subject in one year. What prevents more dramatic results is the lack of a foundation - of a range of basic concepts and skills that should have become automatic by the time children leave primary school. What cannot be stressed enough is that each level depends on what has gone before and that almost everything, including maths and science, rests on a foundation of adequate literacy. The implication of this is that having a well-trained, effective grade 1 teacher may, in fact, have a greater impact on overall achievement than the much sought after senior school specialised teachers. We would therefore, strongly endorse the second point of the Education Roadmap which suggests that efforts should be focused on early childhood education and on improving the quality of literacy, reading and comprehension, as well as numeracy, in primary schools.

Closely related to this is the key issue of language, which perhaps should have warranted a chapter by itself, rather than a few pages. Bloch says that evidence shows that it helps to learn basic literacy and numeracy in a home language, making a switch to English easier after four or five years of education. The idea is that once concepts and skills are developed in a home language, it is much easier to transfer them to a second language than it is to develop them in an inadequately understood language in the first place. In a multilingual society this is a serious challenge, and in South Africa there is very little mobilisation around mother tongue instruction. It might be possible to compromise on mother tongue instruction in English-rich urban and suburban situations. But we would argue that failing to get good mother tongue education into rural or isolated township schools, where English is largely a foreign language, means that the essential conceptual foundations are simply not being laid at all.

In many ways, *The Toxic Mix* is a shocking book. But Bloch points out that the best solutions are often simple. Sometimes cheap and practical interventions, such as routinely de-worming children in rural areas, can have results that are disproportionate to their cost. Instead of becoming bogged down in despairing inaction, as Bloch says, 'It is not too simple to demand an enthusiasm that says "Let's just do it!"'