

*Finding Solutions for Addressing Poor Performance in the Botswana Education Systems  
and Lessons Learnt From COVID-19*

Veronica Margaret Makwinja, Botswana Accountancy College, Botswana  
Olivia Ndzimuunopa Nthoi, Botho University, Botswana

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**Abstract**

As the world evolves towards complex technological advances in Botswana poor academic performance in schools has over the years remained of paramount concern. To date not only do students in public schools perform poorly in their end of year examinations, but throughout the entire teaching and learning process in general. The situation was exacerbated by the outbreak of COVID-19. The Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development carried out a study entitled, “Public Expenditure Review (PER) of the Basic Education Sector in Botswana,” that identified several challenges the country faces in its education system, such as, overcrowded classrooms, poor performance in the national examinations, education decisions made from different ministries, especially for primary education, poor in international educational assessments (World Bank Groups, 2019). The report further asserts that within secondary schools around the country, it is not uncommon to find a class of over 40 while in primary schools the ratio of student to the teacher is a bit lower. This paper is an attempt to assist the Botswana government implement solutions to the challenges faced by the education system, including those experienced during the COVID-19 outbreak, that continuously perpetuates poor performance in schools, leading to poor standard and quality of education. The researcher will analyse secondary data that has been collected over years to recommend solutions to the problems experienced by the country.

Keywords: Poor Performance, Overcrowding, Quality Education

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## Introduction

It has become apparent over the years that Technology provides students with easy-to-access information, accelerated learning, and fun opportunities to practice what they learn. It enables students to explore new subjects while deepening their understanding of difficult concepts, particularly in STEM. Through the use of technology inside and outside the classroom, students can gain 21st-century technical skills necessary for their desired future occupations (Brown & Nthoi, 2022). Today as the world levitates towards complex technological advances in the case of Botswana over the last few years poor academic performance within the primary and secondary school education system of this country remains dwindling despite these above mentioned global technological advances. To date not only do students in public schools perform poorly in their end of year examinations, but throughout the entire teaching and learning process and duration in general. This current situation has also been exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19. Following a study involving various countries in Africa such including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, South Africa, and Zambia emanated in a report by Human Rights Watch. This Report established the effects of the pandemic on children's education including those children who prior to this pandemic were at risk of being excluded from a quality education (Nanima, 2021). Several studies have been carried out as an attempt to unravel the causes of failure, but there is no evidence whether the recommendations suggested for improvement have been successfully implemented successfully (Chukwuere, 2017; Makwinja, 2017; Marumo, Pansiri, 2016). The relevance of associated interventions remain questionable as the status quo prevails. Year after year scathing reports of high rates of failure are shared in various forums in Botswana. The Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development also carried out a study titled, "Public Expenditure Review (PER) of the Basic Education Sector in Botswana." This report identified several challenges the country faces in its education system, such as, overcrowded classrooms, uneven teacher- student ratios, poor performance in the national examinations, education decisions made in silos from different ministries, especially for primary education, poor performance in international educational assessments (World Bank Groups, 2019).

The report further asserts that within secondary schools around the country, it is not uncommon to find a class of over 40 while in primary schools the ratio of student to the teacher should be lower at around 1:15 (World bank, 2019). Hattie (2005) advocates for the reduction in class size for better pedagogy strategies relevant for an individual rather than a group. This in this way allows for individualized instruction, higher-quality instruction, and greater ease in engaging students with academic activities. In relation to access to technology, the mentioned shortage of classrooms and educators are overwhelmed. There is a clear need to reduce the number of students per class, but lack of infrastructure remains an obstacle and unavailability of funds is usually a barrier to this. The large number of students stems from the fact that as the country continues to develop the youth have become the highest population of the country at present in this regard. Using secondary data, this paper is an attempt to bring about effective solutions that the Botswana government and others within the education sector can impactfully implement to address the current challenges faced by the education system in the country. Public schools continuously perpetuate poor performance, which has been associated with poor standard and quality of education; this in turn affecting the quality of students produced and in turn the quality of industry ready graduates at tertiary level.

In addition, while this paper is an attempt to assist the Botswana government implement solutions to the challenges faced by the education system, it also delves into challenges experienced during the COVID-19 outbreak, that continuously perpetuate poor performance in schools, leading to poor standard and quality of education.

The researchers analysed secondary data that has been collected over the last 10 years in order to recommend solutions. Studies have been carried out by various academics and concerned civil organisations to address this poor academic performance from basic to tertiary education. One can observe that these studies have emphasised more on problems than solutions and there is need for a paradigm change to find solutions to the challenges. Reports written noted several stumbling blocks that inhibit children from attaining the international set standards of performance. At the peak of the millennium and with a high population of the youths, it is urgent that Botswana finds lasting solutions to the failure rate in schools. Africa has gained much traction in recognising the rights of the child with an emphasis on his or her holistic environments over the years and this on its own warrants the purpose of this paper (Nanima, 2021).

## **Implementing recommendations**

### ***Educational policies***

All the educational policies alluded to the need to improve the state of the learning and teaching environment in Botswana. The 1977 Education for Kagisano advocated for the transition of the Botswana society on its national principle of social harmony. This was followed by the Commission on Education of 1993 that was reviewed into a working paper of 1994 known as the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) which aimed to transit the society from an agro-based economy to an industrial society (Republic of Botswana 1977; 1994). Although this was a welcome development for growth, development and diversification of the economy, to some extent it derailed Botswana from growing their agricultural sector which the government is struggling to resuscitate to date. Most farming land was neglected and laid fallow, and Botswana continued to depend on her neighbours especially South Africa for food supplies.

The Botswana government is well known for its high profile, well-articulated educational policies that are usually overtaken by events due to poor implementation procedures. “Education policy implementation is a complex, evolving process that involves many stakeholders and can result in failure if not well targeted (Viennet, & Pont, 2017: p.6)”. The education system relied more on consultations from foreign consultants who would bring other innovative ideas that overshadow and derail the intentions of the national policies that were based on the context of the society. However, Botswana could be heralded for maintaining the principles of the Education for Kagisano (unity) that led the country’s diverse society peaceful co-existence. Botswana is well endowed with a rich variety of cultures and languages (Republic of Botswana, (1996). Botswana live together in harmony despite their differences in ethnicity and varied languages. Every Botswana has a right to settle in any place of their choice regardless of their origin, hence the reason why there are no civil wars.

For a country to develop, all its citizens must participate in the socio-political and economic spectrum of the country. Women must be given equal opportunities as men in politics, high profile positions and to compete fairly in projects of large amounts of money. This would lead to self-reliance and freedom of all to exploit their potential. The graduates who have

been unemployed for years would enjoy the resources that government claims to share through various financial organisations.

### *Visions*

The Vision 2036 of Botswana prides itself with its vision of “towards prosperity for all” promised a future for an educated and informed nation, advocating long life learning for all Botswana, a vision that has been an enigma to date. There are still children and other groups of people who fail to access education. This vision was mirrored through the Botswana Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP 2015-2020) which marked a significant milestone to diversify and become a knowledge-based economy, through a planned and careful development of human capital (ETSSP 2015-2020). The ETSSP sought to refocus the education and training towards fulfilment of social and economic aspirations identified in our Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE), the National Development Plan 12, Vision 2036 and as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

For all to prosper and be educated schools should be well equipped to cater for those living with disabilities, those with varied learning challenges, the marginalised, out of school street children etc. According to cited issues relating to various barriers such as programmes designed for sighted individuals and accessibility issues, Mukhopadhyay & Moswela, (2020) and Rubin (2002) The government should devise a system of following up those missing children from the system to ensure inclusivity. Some children as those living with disabilities and those from independent religious sects. Some of these children from marginalised groups move around assisting their families to make a living and this hinders their access to education. Mokibelo (2016) asserts that the language barrier within minority groups present inequalities in learning. Although the government advocates teaching at lower levels through the mother tongue, a lot still needs to be done. It is important to start strategising about developing other ethnic languages and to formalise their teaching in schools, the provision of mobile schools for the roaming children, or a plan for attendance of varying school times during certain hours to cater for these individual is seen as an opportunity for the purpose of this paper.

In this way, a knowledge-based economy cannot be attained if some members of the society do not have access to education. Education is also a basic human right and a foundation for a more sustainable and inclusive society ( Damon, Glewwe, Wisniewski & Sun, 2016; Nanima, 2021). The government must provide technology in all schools and ensure that the knowledge attained is utilised to change the lives of the children and does not warrant knowledge to maneuver computers. Instead, children must use the skills for survival. Teachers in Botswana continue to use the chalk boards for teaching. There has been limited usage of technology in primary and secondary schools. Tertiary institutions have adapted to the use of technology particularly private institutions (Brown & Nthoi, 2022). Even though the government set up computer labs in schools, most of them were not utilised until the advent of the COVID-19 scourge. Lately the government has attempted to provided all secondary schools with computers, a welcome move to improve performance. However, there is need to equip primary school children with relevant activities that will assist in the use of technology to enhance their skills.

## **Developmental goals**

At the time of this paper the country had translated and contextualised the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and matched them to the Vision 16 pillars, which reflected the Millennium goals. Goals 1 to 5 fall under the category of human development; a sign that people are more important and must be given priority to ensure their continuous existence and sustainability. The country mapped out 7 goals of which 5 were derived from the Vision 2036 Pillar 2 on human and social development. The 6<sup>th</sup> goal was to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all mapped to vision 2036 Pillar 3 of sustainable environment; Goal 7 is to for access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all derived from pillar 1 on sustainable economic development. A review of the goals set advocates eradication of poverty which is a stumbling block to Botswana's economic development.

Like all other aspirations to improve education, Goal 4 purports inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, a derivative of the Vision 2036 Pillar 2 is a repetition of the attempts the country had embarked on to provide quality education. In 2022, there are children still learning under trees, walk long distances from home to schools, do not have adequate resources such as classrooms, books, technology or teachers refusing to work in far rural places. The question is how the country intends to solve the problems faced in the education system to ensure quality education. To acquire the outcomes of all schools must be provided with adequate learning space, well equipped libraries and any other resources needed in schools.

## **Improve learning environment**

There remains a number of children in schools the country has always had shortage of infrastructure despite the highest budget being allocated to education. Botswana commissioned education policies in 1977, 1993/94, Vision 2016, ETSSP 2015-20; Vision 2036 and many other working papers as an attempt to improve the learning and teaching environment. However, many schools still do not have adequate classrooms and sit outside to learn despite the large budget dedicated to education yearly. School infrastructure is provided solely by the government and the education budget must be shared equally between schools, spent accordingly to improve schools.

Through their Corporate social investment initiatives, there are private and foreign organisations that gain economically from communities of operation and they give back to these communities through various means that include to share costs and to contribute towards infrastructure development. For example schools in areas where there are mining industries must have state of the art schools.

In most cases classrooms are over capacitated with more than 40 students per class. The teacher is unable to attend to each child's need. The teaching is one-size-fit-all and several students do not meet the outcomes or international standards of performance due to lack of diversified teaching methods. There are no teacher aide to remediate those who find concepts difficult to understand.

There is need to provide more classrooms, reduce the number of students per class and introduce remedial teachers to assist those with learning difficulties. There are individuals within society who could be engaged by schools to mentor the school going children, tutor

and ensure that the children complete their homework. Batswana are known for collaboration that it is some of the issues identified in their culture through proverbs such as, “*se tshwarwa ke ntsha pedi ga se thata*”, literally meaning that when people collaborate a lot can be achieved. Other proverbs deal with the upbringing of child such the upbringing of a child is the responsibility of whole community. Parents could alternate in hosting a certain number of students in their homes to ensuring that children complete their homework.

### **Ensure equity in education**

Botswana subscribes to the world declaration on Education for All (EFA) of 1990 that education as a vehicle for national development and is a basic human right, essential for both social and individual development. One big problem is those children missing from the education system but are not accounted for. It is not clear or there is limited information on who is learning and who is not. There are children from the marginalised groups such as the poor, street children, the indigenous people; Basarwa, Bangologa, Bambukushu, Bazezuru who either miss school due to ignorance or other social challenges, religion, or culture.

The government need to make a conscious decision to account, monitor and establish the number of children out of school. Alternative programmes should be put in place to accommodate these children; either to incorporate them into the school system or provide opportunities for learning certain skills and competencies. The school going children must be prepared with more than basic reading and writing skills.

Financial reliance on the government by all institutions of learning is a ticking time bomb especially at tertiary levels. The University of Botswana was founded on the concept of self-reliance. Every member of society had to contribute towards the construction of the institutions. The spirit of self-reliance must continue for the sustenance of tertiary education. These institutions should identify alternatives to make money through research and innovations, partnerships and investment in property or other means.

### **Reduce poverty, unemployment, illiteracy**

#### ***Poverty***

Most of the Botswana are poor and this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic where some families lived on food baskets provided by the government. People living in poverty cannot afford to send their children to school or children are forced to work as maids, farm hands, baby-sitters to support their family. Children may go to school in civil clothes without school uniform. This trend is common in both rural and urban areas. Some children walk bare-footed and for long distance to get to schools since there are no school buses provided in Botswana. Others start work from an early age. Despite the desire to go to school, children drop out of school early because they cannot afford to go to school hungry and travel long distance to school. Poverty disables families to access materials and children cannot even get a chance to read books or navigate computer, leading to low literacy rates.

The Botswana government must continue to feed the children during school hours and provide school uniforms for poor children through the social welfare department, but more still needs to be done. There should be programmes that alleviate people from poverty that are easily accessible to every Mtswana. There are various programmes that have been introduced in farming etc, but people complain about not being able to access them. Poverty

is not a Botswana issue but most developing countries. According to the World Food Programme in 2009, 66 million school children are live under the poverty line and have no access to proper nutrition. Botswana needs to improve the nutrition of food fed to the children to encourage attendance, reduce dropout and improve performance.

### ***Creation of employment opportunities***

As indicated above, unemployment is rife in Botswana with thousands of graduates unemployed due to dependence of government as a sole employer. Instead of the investors setting up shopping centres, they should to set up industries and factories to create job opportunities. Tertiary institutions must team risk taking techniques to allow graduates take risks to work in other countries through skills export. The country produces the best teachers, nurses etc. The country relies solely on diamond export which cannot provide adequate jobs for the small population of around 2.4 million. There are older generation still working and a system could be devised to enable them to retire with comfortable retirement packages to open opportunities for the younger generation in the government departments.

Tertiary institutions must collaborate with industry, bench mark from other countries and implement lessons learnt to avoid mismatch of skills and competencies taught to the graduates. It is essential for the country to develop its people through provision of dual learning and employment opportunities, especially for undergraduate graduate students.

### **Innovative teaching and learning methods**

Currently in Botswana across the education system, teaching is still traditional. Children listen to the teacher/lecturer and take down notes. A little bit of critical thinking is infused in tertiary institutions but more needs to be done. Due to this teaching techniques, there is limited engagement of the students and less ownership of learning. Teachers/ lecturers must off innovative teaching methods that are more engaging, encourage group work and use the available tools and resources from the internet. There is a need for teachers to be trained to master knowledge, skills and competencies that could assist student to meet the international set standards of performance. Contemporary learning does not require test scores but critical and analytical thinking through competence-based methods. Teachers most work together as a community, a concept common in Botswana, to access immediate help where they have challenges. In most cases, teachers are promoted to lead in school without any training and face challenges of collaboration, delegation, planning and control. Measures should be in place to train leaders before they resume positions of responsibility.

### **Students/Children living with disabilities**

People living with disabilities (PLWDs) in Botswana have struggled overtime for recognition and support in socio-political and economic spectra. This brawl emanates from the traditional beliefs when people living with disabilities were kept out of sight, mind and the public. Several families with children living with disabilities would not want anyone to know about the existence of such a family member. In some cases, those with mental disabilities were tied up to reduce their mobility. Coupled with indigenous beliefs such as believing that such children were either a curse, bewitched or existed for bad luck, there were no appropriate institutions to absorb the children or support families with children living with disabilities.

Students in all levels of education attend institutions from primary to tertiary in institutions that fail to provide adequate infrastructure to cater for their various disabilities. Although the country has implemented several educational policies including other innovations have always encouraged inclusion in the education system through equal access and quality education supports the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 29).

The Botswana government inclusive regulations do not cater for PLWD in schools and it is essential to provide all the required equipment and resources to enable these children access education.

### **Lesson learnt from COVID-19**

The outbreak of COVID-19 caught the Botswana education system unaware. The government had to find alternative ways of teaching children and introduced. It was one of the first emergencies that Botswana had ever experienced in a long time. According to Marinoni, an't Land, Jensen, 2020: Murphy 2020) this emergency forced institutions around the world to switch to distance education and transiting rapidly from face-to-face classes to online learning systems. Botswana universities and other higher institutions of learning were forced to fully engage and use a variety emerging online communication platform technologies. The outbreak of COVID-19 called for swift decisions to augment the learning and educational by accelerating the distribution of educational system's technological infrastructure to expand the teachers' pedagogical expertise and the students' learning repertoire (Chiu, Lin and Lonka, 2021).

Although change is inevitable, it was difficult for the students to transit form the norm to a foreign way of learning. The tradition in Botswana HEIs is such that students attend classes based on their time-tabling and have sufficient time to interact with their peers and lecturers at a time convenient. The introduction of online learning created fear and anxiety of the unknown. The aggregated stress and anxiety during the pandemic may easily demotivate and disengage student learning (Pekrun, Lichtenfeld, Marsh, Murayama, and Goetz, 2017), and improper internet connection and gadgets to access the distance learning were also caused frustration (Gustiani,2020).

As previously mentioned, primary and secondary school children were not accustomed to study online or use computers to learn and did not pay much attention to technology. Like other countries, Botswana had to rapidly pivot to remote learning strategies (Winthrop Ershadi, Angrist, Bortsie & Matsheng, 2020). This was foreign to everyone, and parents were expected to participate in the learning process of their children.

For a long time, parents had abdicated the responsibility for their children's learning to the teachers and few had access to the internet and computers. Children had to use cell phone to learn. There was no longer the privilege of sitting in little rows listening to the teacher face to face. The children had to learn through the long-distance mode. This was a serious challenge indeed. This exposed the large gap between the rich and the poor and the inequality among the Batswana.

COVID-19 has taught the Botswana education system to appreciate new trends in teaching; that there is no need for large spaces to learn and that children can learn without the physical supervision of the teachers/lecturers. Educators began to acknowledge the welfare of



teachers/students/children. Online counselling facilities were provided to ensure that all cope with the effects of the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

The Botswana education system is guided by the 3Rs in all the spectrum of teaching and learning. This process of traditional pedagogical strategies have inhibited change in the education system. There is doubt whether all the educational policies commissioned and identified problems were ever implemented. There is also a need undertake an empirical study to tackle the effect of COVID-19 on children emphasised in this study. This will improve approaches by various stakeholders in improving the current system.

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