

Part 2

International Education Issues

Education at a Crossroads: The Crossroads Phenomenon and Factors Impacting Crossroads Decisions

Johan Beckmann

Johan Beckmann, Emeritus Prof. Dr., University of the Free State, South Africa

Abstract

The phenomenon of a crossroads is commonplace in a large variety of contexts, from e.g. choosing what road to take at a crossroads to what governance system the rulers of a country should employ. Having to make a crossroads decision is reached when a person or a group of people reach a point where a choice has to be made about the future and related matters. Decisions about a national education system at a crossroads require an in-depth knowledge of this multi-faceted phenomenon. This knowledge should be based on a meticulous analysis of established data sets about what led the existing system to the crossroads. The problems and the positive characteristics of the existing system should be painstakingly identified to enable responsible role-players to make the best possible decisions to optimally lead educands to adulthood and benefit society (especially the economy) in general. The persons and institutions that will be used to pursue the chosen vision must be cautiously chosen and need to know decision-making procedures and processes in a testing situation, and also have proven records of successful decisions in difficult circumstances. People capable of developing, implementing, and assessing an implementation plan fitting the choice that has been made are essential elements of a successful system. Where such people are hard to find, training strategies as well as plans to attract suitable people need to be addressed. Examples of wrong and correct crossroads decisions in South Africa and elsewhere about entire education systems or essential constituent system parts can be identified. The aim of crossroad decisions will remain optimizing the likelihood of establishing successful and productive systems.

Keywords: commonplace, competent decision-makers, competent implementers, correct and incorrect choices, future or destination choices, implementation strategies, phenomenon

Introduction

The indefinite article “a” suggests that “a crossroads” is a multifarious concept that could apply to various individual or group contexts. The conference theme, *Education at a Crossroads*, could create the idea that the conference is about a concept with which all education providers are familiar.

The title also suggests that all world education systems are currently at a point where they have to make crossroads decisions. One cannot argue against that assumption and one must realize that this kind of situation, which has not occurred often in the past, is likely to occur at shorter intervals in future due to factors such as technological and artificial intelligence advances, animosity and conflict between nations, rapid changes of government styles in the various countries and some political and social factors such as a shortage of water and food. The idea of human rights linked to the right to education only entered the education decision-making environment after the 1940s-1950s. However, in the future, decision-makers in education will have to be able to give due consideration to human rights like equality, freedom of religion, gender equality, human dignity, the right to public education, and freedom of expression when making decisions at crossroads.

However, the most prominent question begging an answer is why the phenomenon of crossroads decisions would attract so much attention at present. Three answers come to mind: firstly, a crossroads implies the making of essential decisions; secondly, education decision-makers may have to make a crossroads decision at some time; and thirdly, making a choice at a crossroads can have beneficial or catastrophic results for the people it will influence.

More practical questions about crossroads decisions include: are people at an educational crossroads able to give sufficient attention to decision-making processes, do they know what to consider when making choices and, ironically, what will they do if Hemingway’s statement (Reddit, n.d.) that “We have to get used to the idea that at the most important crossroads in our lives there are no [guiding] signs” [insertion by the author] becomes a reality when they have to make incident decisions?

In looking for some guidelines for decision-making behavior at a crossroads, I will explore the origins of the phenomenon. I will also look for essential characteristics of a crossroads decision without which its favorable influence on education could be diminished.

Origin and meaning of the phenomenon

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term was first used in 1686. The dictionary entry explains that the term “crossroads” means:

- a road that crosses a main road or runs cross-country between main roads;
- the place of intersection of two or more roads;
- a small community located at a crossroads; and
- a crucial point where a decision must be made.

In short, as also suggested by other sources, the term refers to something physical (roads) or to a mental activity (when a decision has to be made by individuals or groups).

Decisions at crossroads can be made by individuals or groups. When one explores the literature on the management of decision-making at crossroads by a group, the published research (quoted at relevant places below) does highlight some of the issues that may have to be decided at a crossroads. However, it would seem that the responsibility for making decisions remains with individuals or leaders of groups possessing significant and relevant managerial knowledge and experience.

It would seem that the date 1686 could be contentious, as ancient religions and medieval folklore bear evidence of links between liminal and paranormal concepts and crossroads. “According to the fourth-century historian Philochorus ... offerings also were sent to the crossroads on the sixteenth of the month ...” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

The same source notes that “Crossroads are symbolic of liminality, a state of being ‘neither here nor there’, or ‘betwixt and between’”. Liminality, therefore, refers to a “state where individuals or groups are in a state of ambiguity or disorientation” (Wikipedia, n.d.). The source also refers to the past belief that “... crossroads are places where the natural and supernatural worlds intersect”. All of these suggest a state of uncertainty about a decision.

Jeremiah 6:16 in the English Standard Version (ESV) (Crossway, 2001) of the Bible reads as follows and adds to an understanding of the concept “Crossroads”:

Thus says the LORD: Stand by the roads and look; and ask for the eternal paths, where the good, old way is; then walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk in it!

Jeremiah’s formulation of what people are expected to do at a crossroads (written between 627 and 580 BC (Got questions, n.d.) is not a dictionary formulation of the meaning of the word “Crossroads”, but it is a neat encapsulation of the concept of being at the crossroads. I used this expression of the essential features of “Crossroads” in formulating principles of the concept and guidelines for implementing it in making crossroads decisions.

Practical implementation of principles and key elements

I will refer to the South African school education system and exclude the higher and further education sector in the discussion below. This system is certainly at an important crossroads in education, 30 years after the switch to a democratic government system in South Africa, has not brought about significant progress in education.

The literature conveys principles and guidelines about decision-making at the crossroads. A representative example of the principles of and guidelines for decision-making at crossroads is provided by the Teachers Institute (2024):

<i>Steps</i>	<i>Action</i>
1	Identifying the problem or opportunity
2	Gathering relevant information
3	Developing alternatives
4	Evaluating alternatives
5	Making the decision
6	Implementing the decision
7	Evaluating the implementation of the decision

Christian (2023) wrote an analysis containing useful information titled “8 powerful questions to ask yourself when you arrive at a crossroads in life”. All the examples and guidelines can undoubtedly be interwoven with the nine steps listed in the paragraphs below, which were derived from Jeremiah 6:16.

1) A decision maker needs to be able to recognize that a moment has been reached when a decision needs to be made. Time must be made available for the decision-making process, and moving ahead impetuously must be ruled out as an option. It must be remembered that the results of a decision made at a crossroads in education can benefit individuals, groups, and the country as a whole or can have a destructive effect on people and structures.

2) Stopping to reflect on what has led to the crossroads situation. Stopping as a part of crossroads decision-making implies that an individual or a decision-making group within an education system must create opportunities to scrutinize the reasons why the system they manage has reached a point where a crossroads decision has to be made. The decision could be to continue on the road on which they are travelling, making a radical and sweeping direction change, or even returning to earlier models of conceptualizing and presenting education. In South Africa, one can identify a multiplicity of reasons necessitating a crossroads stop because of a variety of ailments/challenges that cannot be allowed to continue. In general, the South African education system shows signs that the state is struggling largely unsuccessfully to change the system after apartheid to a system that all parties concerned could embrace. Examples of the challenges that a decision could address are contained in the discussions below:

- a) To most analysts, the limited access to quality schools, the necessary resources, and well-trained (competent and experienced) teachers and other educational officials would seem to be the most important reason for the lack of quality education (Beckmann, 2018 and 2021).
- b) In its background report for 2025 based on data of the South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE) and the fifth Report of the Consortium for the Monitoring of Education Quality in Southern and Eastern Africa (SEACMEQ V), the 2030 Reading Panel (2025) addresses reading literacy and related problems in education and mentions that:
 - i. An alarming 80% of South African grade 3 learners cannot read any language with comprehension.
 - ii. Only 20% of grade 3 learners achieve appropriate home language reading skills.
 - iii. It seems unlikely that the government’s aim of full reading literacy in grade 4 in 2030 is attainable.
- c) A report by UNICEF South Africa (2022) examined the performance of South Africa’s education system and concluded:
 - i. After three decades of democracy, there is still an indisputable difference in performance between schools serving overwhelmingly poor, overwhelmingly black communities and those serving economically better-off black and white families. This difference could foreseeably lead to political and social dangers.
 - ii. Many schools lack decent and well-maintained infrastructure to guarantee learners’ safety. Children’s inalienable fundamental rights to dignity, health, and safety are likely to be affected by incidents caused by poor infrastructure. An example of such incidents occurred in February 2019 when a bridge

connecting two structures at the Vaaldriehoek Hoërskool (Vaal Triangle High School) in Gauteng Province collapsed and killed 4 learners and injured 29 others (Heyns, 2019).

- iii. Learners are starving because schools do not offer regular nutritious meals in terms of government school feeding programs (contributing to stunted growth with all its lifelong negative effects on children's health).
 - iv. There is a downward trend in the education budgets of provinces.
 - v. In 2003, grade 8 learners from South Africa scored the lowest in the Trends in the International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), in which 45 countries participated. In 2011 and 2019, South Africa was the second last.
 - vi. South Africa's grade 6 learners scored lowest in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2006 [and 2016 (PIRLS, 2016) – insertion by the author].
- d) The new government inherited human resources that were not really qualified and competent to remove all traces of an undesirable system. In addition, the laws and policies that were introduced after 1994 were often the results of compromises reached through negotiations and were difficult to interpret and apply (ChatGPT, 2025). The laws and policies were often designed in pursuit of political ideals and were not based on proven facts.
 - e) The sheer extent of the backlogs caused by apartheid requires a much greater investment in education than the present budgetary allocations (Jansen & Taylor, 2003).
 - f) The high dropout rate and low retention rates in South Africa (ChatGPT, 2025) are uniquely challenging. Fewer than 50% of grade 1 enrolments finish their education by completing grade 12. That is an almost unbelievably alarming dropout rate of more than 50% (Van der Walt, 2023).

The above list is not comprehensive, but it provides sufficient evidence that South Africa has reached a crossroads decision-making moment.

3) Standing on the crossroads implies scouting the place at which the system finds itself. "Scouting" suggests looking for a specific place or opportunity (e.g., where a solution might be found regarding infrastructure provision, among others). Searching the environment of the crossroads suggests taking action to find promising solutions.

4) Consulting and interacting with people who have appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience is the next step. Asking them to narrate and analyze the successes and failures of their past attempts to deal with crossroad situations could be helpful to those having to decide. This garnering of ideas about possible solutions could include studying published research and reports.

5) Group-based work to develop possibilities to address the failures of the system needs to follow the gathering of ideas. There must be sufficient consensus (as opposed to unanimous decisions, which are very seldom reached) on what the best possible proposals are for the particular crossroads decision(s). Then, a decision must be made on the best way in which the matter can be taken forward and implemented.

6) Once a decision has been made about which direction to take at the crossroads (a different direction, an amended continuation of the present course, and even turning back), strategies for implementing the decision should be designed and communicated to all relevant stakeholders. All parties tasked with implementing the decision(s) must be prepared for their roles, and other stakeholders (such as parents or guardians and

learners) should receive the correct information about the decision that has been made timeously.

7) Role-players should devote their energy to the implementation of the decision. The implementation plan or strategy could / should include the financing, management, human resources preparation, as well as the provision of the necessary infrastructure.

8) All role-players implementing the decision(s) need to stop looking for other alternatives and do their best to make the decision bear the results needed. There should be strategies to win the people differing from the decision over to the vision of the plan and to get them to decide to pursue the successful attainment of the aim to the best of their ability.

9) At intervals decided in the development of the implementation plan, the success of the implementation of the decision must be monitored as the people who provide the learners with education remain accountable for the results of their efforts. It is important that the evaluation is done by impartial parties and takes place on a number of occasions so that glitches in the implementation of the decision can be addressed and corrected.

In conclusion, it can be said that all decisions made in education (especially those that will affect large groups) should use the steps discussed above as guidelines for going about the process of making decisions. Decisions likely to have a significant impact on education should not be made without following a decision-making plan and strategy (which may be informed by the steps discussed above).

On a negative note, it should be remembered that some educators or other role-players involved in education are likely never to follow any plans. They often ignore everything and do nothing to implement the chosen strategies. The last phrase in the extract from Jeremiah says very appropriately: *But they said, We will not walk in it.* There must be strategies to win them over.

Examples of wrong decisions taken at crossroads

In the South African education system, one could cite several wrong decisions taken at various crossroads. The best-known mistake is probably the decree issued before 1976 that all black high school South African learners should be taught some of their subjects through the medium of Afrikaans or English. This decision contributed to the widely known Soweto uprisings in 1976 and the deaths of hundreds of people. Another mistake made in South Africa occurred in 1910 when the British Parliament adopted the South Africa Act of 1909 to guide the new government to reign South Africa in the place of the British rulers of South Africa after the South African War (1899–1902) during which the British military crushed the two Boer republics that existed before that namely the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The Act of 1909 was the supreme law in South Africa, but it made no provision for the education of black, brown, and Indian learners, leading to growing antagonism towards the new government. After 1994, the newly elected government included 11 official languages in the Constitution of 1996, but these languages were not treated equally regarding education.

Meiring (2022) provides information about past decisions (in the 19th century) in Canada and the USA, where the newcomers (war victors) met the original inhabitants of the countries. Both countries decided to create schools where the indigenous learners would be educated as “civilized” young English people, using English as their only language and parting with the ways of living (culture) in their home communities. This was a worldwide approach adopted by victors which threatened and sometimes led to the

demise of indigenous languages and indigenous cultures, also harming the relationships between children and parents. Worst of all, it caused learners to lose self-respect.

Conclusion

The theme chosen for this conference is a timely one. The tumultuous changes in circumstances in South Africa and the world, and the pace at which they occur, necessitate the making of new decisions regarding education in the different countries. Logically, more people should be equipped and prepared for participating in crossroads decision-making in education through initial and in-service training, without which changes will be extraordinarily difficult to execute. However, a great deal of research still has to be done regarding decision-making at crossroads situations in education, without which the clients of the education system are going to face an impoverished future.

References

- 2030 Reading Panel (2025). *Background Report 2025*. Johannesburg: 2030 Reading Panel.
- Beckmann, J. (2018). Competent educators in every class: The law and the provision of educators. *Journal for Juridical Sciences (Special issue: Education Law)*, 43(2), 1-31.
- Beckmann, J. (2021). Die noodsaak van bevoegde onderwysers in elke Suid-Afrikaanse skoolklaskamer (The necessity of competent teachers in each South African school classroom). *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe (Journal of Humanities)*, 61(3), 753-771.
- ChatGPT (2025). Reasons why South Africa's education system is underperforming. [Information sought by the author] (Accessed February 2025).
- Christian, E. (2023). 8 Powerful Questions to Ask Yourself when You Arrive at a Crossroads in Life. <https://restless.co.uk/health/healthy-mind/powerful-questions-to-ask-yourself-when-you-arrive-at-a-crossroads-in-life/> (Accessed March 2025).
- Crossway (2001). *English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers.
- Got questions (n.d.). <https://www.gotquestions.org/Book-of-Jeremiah.htm> (Accessed March 2025).
- Heyns, T. (2019). Cheverné en Vanessa eindelijk tuis (Cheverné and Vanessa finally home). <https://maroelamedia.co.za/nuus/sa-nuus/cherverne-en-vanessa-eindelijk-tuis> (Accessed January 2023).
- Jansen, J. & Taylor, N. (2003). *Educational Change in South Africa 1994-2003: Case Studies in Large-Scale Education Reform*. Country Studies. Education Reform and Management Publication Series, Vol. II, No. 1.
- Meiring, P. (2022). *In daardie tyd was daar reuse (During that time there were giants)*. Wellington, South Africa: CLF Publishers.
- Merriam-Webster (n.d.). Crossroad. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crossroad> (Accessed March 2025).
- PIRLS (2016). *IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study – PIRLS 2016*. Lynch School of Education, Boston College: IEA.
- Reddit (n.d.). Where this quote by Hemingway come from? https://www.reddit.com/r/quotes/comments/90xbue/where_this_quote_by_hemingway_come_from/ (Accessed March 2025).

- Teachers Institute (2024). The Essential Steps of Decision-making in Education Management. https://teachers.institute/organisational-behaviour/essential-steps-decision-making-education-management/#google_vignette (Accessed March 2025).
- UNICEF South Africa (2022). *Quality in Basic Education Outcomes and Basic Education Budget Frameworks*. Pretoria: UNICEF.
- Van der Walt, J. (2023). Onderwys-skroef los (Education Has a Screw loose). *Netwerk24*. <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/stemme/menings/onderwys-skroef-los-20230111> (Accessed January 2025).
- Wikipedia (n.d.). Crossroads. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossroads> (Accessed March 2025).