

COUNTERPOINT

Quality education the only hope



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THE collapse of the South African birth rate in the nineties has been mentioned from time to time in this column as the point where the country broke through the greatest barrier to modernisation and economic growth.

The end of the baby boom came about 1991 and the first visible consequence I could find was the decline in primary school enrolments from about 1998 onwards. Pressure on the education system began to ease.

This thesis has now received powerful academic support in a paper written by Professor Charles Simkins of Wits and published by the Centre for Development and Enterprise headed by Ann Bernstein. I can think of no two other South Africans whose work I would take more seriously, but they added an ominous footnote to my optimistic theories.

Simkins points out that the fall in fertility among whites in the 50s, among Indians in the 60s, among

coloured people in the 70s, and among Africans in the 90s caused population growth to slow to less than 1,5% a year in the late nineties.

By the turn of the millennium South Africa was poised, he says, for a demographic transition of the sort that "has preceded rapid growth phases in all developed countries". We stood, if you like, at the door to the club of rich nations.

Among other things, we had reached the point where the education system could begin to deliver quality rather than quantity. By 2010 virtually every pupil (Simkins says "learners" but I refuse to participate in that degradation of the language) would receive 12 years of schooling.

Even so, the total school population would fall. No longer would we have to run faster simply to accommodate the ever-growing numbers. We could pursue quality.

Now comes the footnote. AIDS, which in the coming year is expected to claim 300 000 lives, will begin to wipe out many skilled young people in whose education society has

invested vast amounts of money and effort.

Between 1960 and 1996, South Africa's "embedded human capital", measured in completed school years, rose from 48-million to 230-million. In the next few years, much of this human capital will be lost to AIDS.

Simkins cites research which suggests we need to step up teacher training from 20 000 a year to 30 000 just to stay even. The loss of teachers to AIDS might reach 7% (or more than 20 000 a year) by 2010. So the benefits of our democratic transition may vanish.

I am sceptical about most doomsday economic scenarios generated by the AIDS epidemic. I assume that in 10 years' time medical science will have found cheaper ways of lengthening the lives of AIDS patients and that in the meantime, deaths will occur overwhelmingly among people (of all races) who have less than a matric education.

For the rest of this decade, at least, the lost workers will be quite readily replaceable from the millions of unemployed, and society will adjust in a myriad of ways to labour shortages. For example, a million domestic workers constitute a reserve pool of labour that can be

drawn into industry; the death of Madam and Eve society is perhaps in sight.

However, Simkins has put his finger precisely on the key requirement for survival: our ramshackle education system must also make the transition from the Third World to the First World, from quantity to quality, and quickly.

Kader Asmal has been making heavy weather of it. Absent teachers, drunken teachers, teachers who can't teach, teachers who won't teach, bureaucrats embroiled in petty fights for turf, all conspire to rob us of our future.

Eight years after liberation, the schools turn out fewer university candidates (78 800 in 1995 to 67 700 in 2001) than the apartheid system did. African first language pupils continue to do much more poorly than those whose first language is English or Afrikaans.

Whether the fault lies with the education department or with the self-destructive system of labour laws that protects incompetents, it is Asmal's job to remedy matters.

Of course, it might help if President Thabo Mbeki could tear himself away from his beloved Nepad for long enough to give his embattled education minister a hand. In three years' time it may be too late.