



Schooling in South Africa - are we making any progress?

CDE held its seventh debate on 10 April 1997. The speakers were Dr Trevor Coombe, deputy director general of the national Department of Education (Dr Coombe stood in for Minister S M E Bengu who was unable to attend); Irene Menell, chairman of the READ Organisation; and Mojalefa Thulare, principal of Rolihlahla Primary School in Etwatwa, Benoni. Mr Thulare is also the education officer for the East Rand region of SADTU. Michael Gardiner, previously director of the Education Support Project, now lecturer in the Department of English at Vista University (Soweto), chaired the debate.

Schooling is both a national and provincial matter. The national Education Department sets overall policy, but education is also a provincial responsibility, and provinces must coordinate the implementation of the new Curriculum 2005. This is crucial to an understanding of how education in South Africa is intended to work. The national department has undertaken the task of ensuring that conceptual change takes place in the way education is structured, perceived and understood. It also needs to ensure that the implementation and practice of education is transformed. The emerging policy is controversial and challenging.

Curriculum 2005 is enormously ambitious. The new 'learner-centred' curriculum aims to eliminate rote learning and encourage critical, flexible thinking and innovative teaching. The objective is to improve the quality of education, so as to ensure a literate and numerate population able to meet the competitive challenges of a changing world. The very principle of outcomes-based education itself is attacked by some critics who question whether it is the appropriate means to the desired end. There are huge obstacles in the way.

Provincial administrations are in a general state of disorder. There are many reasons for this, but most provinces lack the administrative capacity to run educational affairs effectively.

The success of the new approach depends on skilled, experienced and dedicated teachers. South Africa has far too many poorly qualified teachers; while at the same time large numbers of highly experienced teachers have been lost under the voluntary severance option.

Schools need resources and facilities for creative teaching and a stimulating learning environment - but there are enormous shortages of classrooms and other basic resources in many schools as a result of apartheid policies. Yet central government is allocating no money to make up these backlogs, which will continue, and probably worsen, for the foreseeable future.

How will these challenges be met by policy makers, administrators, schools - the teachers, pupils, and parents - and communities?

Schooling is a broad concern, with many stakeholders. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to address our question to the national Department of Education in the first instance: Are we making any progress? But this question must also be answered from other perspectives.

How are school principals, teachers, parents and pupils responding to the changes? To what degree have schools established adequate routines?

Are suitable learning environments coming into being? How are the necessary changes being accepted? What qualitative shifts are discernible in the schools as they deal with the questions of policy and change?

Progress in education also profoundly concerns the private sector and many NGOs. The private sector has been massively engaged with education and training, and has played a huge role in ensuring that NGOs have been able to function. Their roles are not synonymous, nor are their aims identical, but new kinds of relationships have to be forged in terms of which both can contribute to schooling.

WHAT ARE THE CDE DEBATES?

During 1996 CDE ran a series of debates on topics important to current national policy issues. These will continue in 1997. The intention is to air issues underlying the topic and to raise the challenges that the players and the policy makers must meet. Following each debate, CDE publishes a pamphlet summarising the event. These are distributed widely as CDE's contribution to keeping the debate alive.

What the speakers had to say...

Dr Trevor Coombe opened the debate by saying that he was under no illusion that the national Department of Education knew all about schooling or was the most important player in the schooling business. The real experts on schools are in schools. The national department was painfully aware of being at least two levels removed from schools.

It has been three years since the new government came into business, two and a half years since the establishment of a single, national Department of Education in name, and some two years since a viable management and professional cadre has been in place tolerably representative of the people of South Africa embodying the new goals of government. Whatever change we refer to has taken place in an absurdly short time. Profound change in any education system will take at least one generation to work through. South Africa is only at the beginning of transformation, by any measure.

However, frameworks for further advances have been established. These have been substantial. We have a mandate to transform the inherited school system. This is an unavoidable duty placed on government by the constitution. Before winning the election, the ANC had established a policy framework for education. After the election, it was necessary to renegotiate the details with all stakeholders including the other parties within the GNU. The result was the White Paper published in March 1995 from which all major policy directions have flowed. The organisation, governance and funding of schools was then investigated, debated and negotiated and presented in a second White Paper published in February 1996. This was a remarkable achievement given the short time taken. There is a reasonably high degree of consensus about the way in which the school system of this country should be organised nationally for transformation: in with unity, out with division; in with participation through representative structures and partnerships between school communities and the state, out with unilateral prescription. These principles formed the basis of the SA Schools Act which was passed in November 1996 and signed by the President at the beginning of this year.

The provinces are developing the school governance system. June 16 was set by the Council of Education Ministers as the target for the election of all school governing bodies which will then take possession of the powers vested in them and work in partnership with their provincial colleagues; this date has since been moved to 1 September.

The basic framework for future curriculum development was set during extensive interdepartmental discussions in 1995 and 1996. The SA Qualifications Authority Act embodies new curriculum thinking. The launch of Curriculum 2005 paves the way for precise work on the conceptualisation of new curricula with the emphasis on outcomes-based education.

To provide the motivation for change, and to transcend these structural and conceptual developments, a strong political commitment, supported by the provincial authorities, has been made by the Ministry of Education to restore and embellish a culture of learning and teaching in all our learning institutions. This is a long term project. The immediate goal is that by 1999 the key constituencies in the country's learning institutions will have to accept ownership of the education process, with the discipline and commitment to learning and teaching that this involves.

Mojalefa Thulare said he was speaking from three points of view. First, as a headmaster and as part of the establishment and its inherent tribulations where teachers have been forced to accept the unacceptable frustrations that include problems of discipline which so many students see as an infringe-

ment of human rights. Second, as a teacher for whom genuine insecurities were embodied in his lack of training. Last, as a concerned member of the community for whom any progress seemed to be happening beyond his own environment.

He listed the recurrent problems in schooling as:

- an uncommitted and unpatriotic sector within the bureaucracy that is stalling government's new vision expressed in the White Papers
- the inflexible views of some central stakeholders:
 - pupils who do not appreciate the efforts by a few dedicated educators who are going that extra mile, and who show this through their indiscipline (not returning to school after the mid-morning break, arriving late, bunking)
 - parents who dodge responsibility and take their kids to town instead of confronting lackadaisical behaviour in their schools
 - teachers who hide behind unions and do not perform their duties even though they know the union positions on such issues
 - principals who are partisan in running their schools and are hostile to a democratic participatory management style
 - hostile unpatriotic educationalists within the system whose actions range from cynicism to listless performance of duty, to sabotage. There is a nine-month delay in getting fences replaced and drains unblocked. Exam leakages are a manifestation of such attitudes, so is the non-supply of basic items such as chalk and dusters. 1997 has been a painful year of non-delivery of essentials. Also, there has been no response to complaints about the rotten staffing of the feeding scheme.

Other things that cause disenchantment are:

- parents who allow their kids to be the conveyors of drugs and violence in schools
- perceptions among teachers of favouritism in appointments of those who will 'not raise ungrateful remarks'
- lack of a focused thrust on the content of educational transformation; and teacher training colleges which still concentrate on Christian National Education (CNE)
- slowness by districts to implement Curriculum 2005.

Current problems also seem to stem from the political bias of neo-liberal economic approaches to cut costs. Developing states in the process of transition do not have educational priorities similar to well-developed nations.

Are we making progress? Yes, but it is not inside the classroom; it is outside. Areas of success are:

- the campaign for the culture of learning and teaching. There is a perceivable change in attitude in most teachers and an enthusiasm about the outcomes-based Curriculum 2005.
- demoralisation among teachers has begun to change for the better; teachers want to change their lot
- democratic processes established in schools - the SRCs and the PTAs ensure that learning is not only about curricular topics, but about a range of life skills
- disadvantaged children who are benefiting from the primary school feeding scheme and coming to school better nourished and able to cope
- partnerships between district education officials and NGOs. There is great potential to make unprecedented progress in our national schooling system through these initiatives.

Irene Menell said that to create a benchmark from which we can measure progress, we need to remind

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ourselves of historical realities. Before 1994 South Africa had a track record of 'colour-coded' maldistribution; multiple education departments each with their own complicated and entrenched infrastructure that did not communicate at school level; and years of student and teacher turbulence. This resulted in demotivated, angry and alienated learners and educators. This must be the point of departure when trying to measure what progress has been made.

General perceptions of South Africa's schooling have in the past become the substance of political tension. Whether ill-grounded or well-grounded, the public's perceptions need to be addressed and must form the basis of problem solving.

One negative perception is poor administration at every level coupled to inadequately planned decision making at both national and regional levels. This comes to light in

- the way teacher retraining programmes were carried out. This has been a source of deep anguish both inside and outside the profession. This process has been a great drain, is now irreversible and will land the country with many extra problems
- the non-delivery of text books and materials and a general sloppiness
- anxiety about the over-hasty introduction of outcomes-based education. What additional resources, training, workshoping, mentoring and nurturing are planned?

Other negative perceptions are the continued sub-optimal performance at school level in many parts of the country, the lack of commitment to professional discipline among sections of the teaching community, and a generally low level of morale at school community level (principals, teachers and parents).

However, there is a lot of good news. The most important are the many areas of high motivation and excellence despite all obstacles. Pockets of excellence exist all over the country in the most miraculous way. Extraordinary teachers are out there working with extraordinary pupils and their extraordinary groups of parents. These pockets of excellence need to be recognised and nurtured.

As important is the extent to which recognition has been given to the schooling system as a critical ingredient of positive transformation.

The degree of vigorous debate around the issue at every level of interest is most encouraging. The national Education Department is to be congratulated in the way which it has reversed policy and encouraged a rethink on the way we educate our children.

Also good news is the conceptual distance we have moved away from CNE-driven, teacher-centred, rote learning concepts designed to perpetuate group stereotypes to learner-centred, creative methodology based on individual learning potential. Determinedly led by the national Education Department, progress has been dramatic and speedy. Implementation remains problematic. The international experience on integrated studies and purely outcomes-based education is mixed. Some caution is needed.

Another area for congratulation is the extraordinary way in which the former numerous education departments have been integrated on a geographic basis. There has also been a marked improvement in bricks and mortar delivery.

Finally, the role of the NGOs must be emphasised. Of the estimated 34 000, many have for some time been deeply involved in providing educators with access to methodology and resources that have enabled them to transform their classrooms from the dead, glassy-eyed, boring places that they were, to participative, enthusiastic environments for personal growth both for teachers and learners. It is important to note that often the transformation bears little relationship either to the teacher's formal qualifications or to the physical classroom building.

READ alone has over the past 17 years provided training for tens of thousands of principals, classroom teachers and community educators, and classroom resources which enable teachers to create their own low cost teaching materials. It has built up a cadre of leader teachers who, as volunteers, facilitate development in schools other than their own, and has created working partnerships in over 2 000 educational institutions.

The NGO community has both anticipated the present proposed changes and has played a major role in leading and informing the process. It remains a positive, valuable, irreplaceable resource and should be used to the fullest extent possible.

Points raised during open discussion...

- Of deep concern is the fragmentation of teacher training. On the one hand South Africa has its teacher training colleges, and on the other its universities. The status afforded to each varies considerably; this must adversely affect the nature of our society.
- The demystification of curriculum development is encouraging - practising teachers are now encouraged to give their views. This is critical; it is highly motivational for the country's teachers.
- The erosion of necessary authority is worrying. How is our education system going to cope with a population of young people in transition who have taken to drugs and crime without fear of parental discipline?
- Why is there a reluctance on the part of all players to look into the 'Africanisation' of knowledge?
- What is the Department of Education doing to effect implementation of Curriculum 2005 by educators at the point of delivery - teachers in classrooms? This new approach is meant to be instituted in certain grades next year. How are the teachers' unions dealing with this challenge?
- Will the teaching of thinking skills be included in the current curriculum development? Present schooling does not adequately prepare students for the real world.

Dr Coombe said building educational capacity is the 64 000 dollar question and South Africa will be measured by its success or failure in this area. This is not just a departmental issue, but one for all structures involved in South Africa's schooling. The Department does, though, have the responsibility of

sourcing this development. The expectation of change is almost overwhelming. The process has to be implemented even if we are not as ready as we would wish to be. The starting gun has been fired. The process will be staggered over time; the department hopes that incremental implementation will give the country's educators sufficient capacity to cope with the new curriculum and materials as they are introduced. Curriculum 2005 is a continuous process which will involve all of us for a very long time.

Dr Coombe said the fragmentation of teacher training is a grim reality. The National Commission on Higher Education has suggested that all colleges be absorbed into universities or technikons. The Department in its Green Paper on higher education has rejected this single-shot approach as the colleges are too diverse in too many aspects. The imminent White Paper on higher education will take this matter further and place it before the public for further discussion.

Mr Thulare said teachers were working at grassroots level towards a greater professionalism by supplementing the authorities' programme which is structured in districts. In his area, school principals had formed a working group, as had the heads of school departments, to develop 'train the trainer' programmes. In some areas, expertise was being given by private sector organisations.

Irene Menell said delivery was crucial and this was a particular area where the NGOs could offer their capacity. There is a vast potential for government to enter into partnerships through contracts with

“Of deep concern is the fragmentation of teacher training”



NGOs to release and utilise this expertise. She said she was concerned, though, about government's capacity to make choices as to where such contracts should go. The capacity of NGOs to enhance progress simply by continuing to do what they have been doing over many years is enormous.

Mrs Menell agreed that the subject of 'Africanising' the curriculum made people bristle, possibly because the concept could not be easily quantified. Is it presentation of curriculum, is it the substance? Explicit definitions are needed.

- The preparation of teachers for this new curriculum is indeed a deep concern. I do not see this being achieved by using education officials rather than practising teachers. However this is handled, the teachers themselves must take the initiative. This is their opportunity to grab empowerment. With this will come greater professionalism to the teaching sector. Those who are unbending and unwilling to accept change will be rooted out.
- During the struggle, we were out there working at the grassroots, not sitting through numerous conferences and discussions. Now many activists have fancy portfolios within the education bureaucracy, taking decisions from the top, thinking that the grassroots will accept them. This is extremely demoralising for teachers. Also, NGOs were fundamental in assisting the struggle. They need funding from government. Schools can be used after school hours for NGO programmes. This will build the morale of teachers and of the community at large.
- There has been debate, discussion and some refinement of concept on the 'Africanisation' of the curriculum. A book will soon be published, edited by Professor Siphon Seepe, head of Maths and Science Education at Venda University. It is a report on a conference on the subject held at the university in May last year.
- What plans and strategies are actually in place to improve the quality of teaching? How are disadvantaged communities particularly going to benefit immediately from government's intentions?

- How do we ensure that skills transferred during NGO programmes, which usually span a definite period, are perpetuated and enhanced?

Mrs Menell said one has to distinguish between the subsidisation of an NGO, which diminishes its independence and capacity to be adversarial when necessary, and contract work in terms of delivery. An appropriate way needs to be found for government departments to hire NGOs to facilitate their work and to maximise it. To answer the final point: quick fixes are not a solution. Programmes which involve new concepts that have to be internalised need to be sustained through mentoring, which is labour intensive and expensive. On the alleged conservatism of teachers: this is usually because they lack self confidence. Once their natural abilities are unlocked they are miraculously flexible when teaching resources and materials are presented and explained.

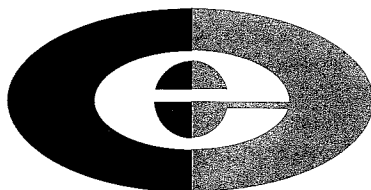
Mr Thulare said that if one started with the premise that knowledge is open to question and that education is an on-going process, then the present matriculation system needs to be revised. The success of the country's education system should not be measured by matric results. Pupils learn at every age and level. For this reason alone, official support of outcomes-based education must benefit all children and teachers. When Curriculum 2005 is phased in at Grade One and Grade Eight levels next year, the teachers of other grades will not be left out. They will learn by osmosis the new way of teaching. Let us give outcomes-based education a chance.

Dr Coombe said the Department's basic approach is that the education business in this country is a partnership. It is owned by its practitioners, its participants and its beneficiaries. Government can only facilitate by providing a framework and by pointing the directions for change. It is in the country's schools that the transformation will take place. The SABC's learning channel will be a national line of communication to reach as many educators as possible about the practice of outcomes-based education and the new responsibilities of representative government.

Concluding remarks by chairman Michael Gardiner

The contributions in this CDE Debate have been particularly striking and rich in texture. The contributions reflect the tension between the implementation of something which is going to take a very long time and which needs time in which to work itself through, and the high degree of urgency in the need to address those issues which occur at the sites of implementation: in the schools and, particularly,

in the lives of teachers. Needs have been vividly itemised. Clearly every organ of state and civil society concerned with education needs to make its contribution to development in education. The tension expressed in this debate is not a matter of irreconcilable opposites - it is the creative tension of a wholly new process of education coming into being.



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