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Willem du Plessis

## SOME VIEWS ON CURRENT CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Since the political transformation in 1994 great expectations have emerged regarding education in South Africa. What do we want from education? Three important stake-holders dominate as meaningful partners in education.

- The parents
- The private sector/ economic sector/ world of work
- The state

What does each of them expect?

### **Expectations by the parents**

The parents, who bear the primary responsibility for raising their children, want their children to be given the best possible education which would secure them an advantage in adult life.

### **Expectations by the economic sector**

The education system should deliver well qualified entrants to the labour market to grow the national economy. A large population of 45 million, of whom only five percent contribute through income tax, has to live from the national economic output.

International economic competition is very tough. The country is struggling over the past six years with a growing negative trade balance. In 2007 the deficit was R145 billion. (In current terms about 12 billion Euro), about 9% of Gross Domestic Product. The unemployment rate continues to stay at about 30%. Educated unemployed pose a threat to social stability.

Education should prepare pupils/learners with the applicable competence, knowledge and skills required in the world of work.

### **Expectations by the state**

The State/ Government wants the schools to deliver people who are well qualified to enrich the national societal life, who will be good citizens, and who will contribute to make South Africa a great and respected nation which will maintain a leadership role in Africa.

### **How does Government wish to realize its goals?**

A completely overhauled and inclusive school education system has been introduced for all nine provinces, all schools, and all learners from all demographic groups.

Formal school education comprises different school phases from Grade R (a one year reception phase to prepare 5 year olds for school), primary phase, secondary phase, and further education and training phase. Schooling is compulsory till age 15. At this stage learners can choose to follow either an academic school stream for three more years or a further education and training course.

Changed content/ curriculum:

A new approach to teaching and learning, named outcomes-based education and training, based on the model of Dr William Spady, the "father of outcomes-based education" (OBE), was phased in from the primary phases of education till the senior phase. Meant to be fully operational in 2005, it was named Curriculum 2005.

Education would in future focus on developing thinking skills, instead of merely memorization, and on mathematics, science and technology as far as the content was concerned.

Less emphasis is to be put on examinations, and more on continuous assessment and project work.

Education should be in accordance with Government's long term educational and political objectives. Democratic values are emphasized and the dignity of each individual should be respected.

## CHALLENGES TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The progress towards the achievement of a better education dispensation has been marred by a number of unfortunate challenges, most of which are caused by circumstances beyond the realm of education. Some negative social and economic factors have caused serious disruptive effects on education. As education is always an activity that takes place within society and is largely dependent upon the smooth running of essential social events in sound social structures, the best educational intentions can be derailed by social failures. I shall confine myself to eight such challenges.

1. Poor/ unsatisfactory results
2. Limited resources
3. Criminality
4. Lack of discipline
5. Shortage of (suitable) teachers
6. Inability to provide in the economic needs of industry and commerce
7. Incompetent management
8. Aids epidemic and general health condition

### 1. Poor results

The high failure rate in the school leaving examinations is a major concern. Only 65.2% of matriculants (doing the final school leaving examinations) passed in 2007, which represents a declining figure year on year. Less than 7% passed Mathematics Higher Grade, although Mathematics and Science have been identified as main focal points of education for the past two decades. From this small number of 7% (25 415 Maths passes) universities have to educate students for professions like chartered accountants, engineers, medical doctors, actuaries, physical, chemistry and other scientists, as well as teachers of mathematics and science.

A further concern is that many learners pass their grades but cannot read, write and spell properly. They cannot comprehend correctly, and add wrong meaning to words and phrases, especially in the second languages. For scientific studies, which have to be undertaken in English or Afrikaans, a sound concept of language expressions is essential.

In international comparative tests South African learners have on average fared very badly. From 40 comparable countries in which learners' reading ability was assessed, South African learners came last.

The Joint Education Trust found in 2006 that 80% of our schools are dysfunctional in respect of mathematics and science at matric level. Among special efforts to improve learners' abilities in

these critical areas, it has just been announced (April 2008) by the Minister of Education Naledi Pandor that schools must in future spend 30 minutes per day for learners in grades 1 to 6 on reading for pleasure and one hour per day on extensive writing skills, and at least one hour per day on mathematics.

Loss of teaching time through unnecessary activities, as well as absenteeism of teachers and learners, occurs frequently in many schools. Teacher commitment and professionalism have a huge impact on the effectiveness of schools. It is a common practice to blame teachers for this appalling state of affairs. This is an easy way of escaping reality. Society as a whole should become involved in the pursuit of a culture of excellence as far as work ethic and sound ethical values are concerned.

A substantial amount of money is being made available by Government to upgrade teachers' knowledge and skills, both through in-service training and improving academic qualifications. Furthermore, excellence in teaching is being recognized and deserving schools and individual teachers are rewarded for proven excellence.

## 2. Limited resources

Of all state departments education receives the largest share of the budget. This year R121,1 billion (*circa 10 miljard Euro*) has been allocated to the Education Department, plus R1,4 billion for higher education; this out of total state expenditure of R611,09bn. It is not sufficient. A relatively small economy (about 1% of world economic output) has to carry a large population of 45 million, including 12 million pupils.

The largest share of the education budget is spent on teachers' salaries. The new education dispensation followed a conservative teacher-pupil ratio since 1994 in order to provide equal education opportunities to all children. Schools were allocated teachers on a basis of 40 pupils per teacher and 35 pupils per teacher in primary schools and secondary (high) schools respectively. As more money becomes available, this figure is progressively being relaxed.

Schools are also funded by means of subsidies on a sliding scale for general school expenditure, mainly for maintenance (for remuneration of school ground staff, caretakers, painting, cleaning, water, electricity, telephone, duplicating, etc.). For the purpose of subsidization schools are ranked into five categories, based on the socio-economic area in which the school is situated. The poorest are ranked in quintile 1 and the least poor in quintile 5. In 2007 Government allocated R3 billion to 13 901 no school fee paying schools in quintiles 1 and 2 that catered for about 5 million learners. Schools in more affluent societies get much less and have to raise most of the money they require themselves.

Each school's Governing Body has the right to raise money for school expenses, firstly school fees from parents, but also from sponsorships, mainly from businesses, trade and industry. Schools may employ additional teachers and remunerate them from their own school funds. Thus we have a "private system" operating within the public school system. Official numbers are not known, but it is estimated that more than 30 000 teachers are working at state schools while being paid by School Governing Bodies.

Since education is a primary concern of the state, the monetary means of the state has been stretched to the utmost. The danger is that the economy could be tapped to such an extent that

economic growth will be hampered. Only when the economy is expanding, can it create new jobs which are so dearly needed to absorb the many new entrants to the job market each year.

### 3. Criminality

South Africa is suffering from an extremely high rate of crime, and the schools and their learners are often suffering as victims. All types of law transgression are of everyday concern. Police reports reflect a number of 54 926 reported cases of rape in 2007, many of the victims young school going girls (16 068 in April to December 2007). Petty theft, like stealing from a handbag to murder for the sake of stealing a cell phone occurs regularly. Of the 18 847 people reported by the police as murdered in 2007, many were murdered for no real reason. This number includes 1 410 children. This is evident of a criminal society in which policemen are often made the targets of attacks and murders.

Gangs flourish in poor communities and focus on school children for criminal offences and to canvas them to become members. Robbery and theft flourish in schools. For their protection some learners come to school armed with knives and fire-arms, and use them. Rape and drug usage are great problems that learners and school authorities have to cope with.

A report by the SA Human Rights Commission (March 2008) claims that at many schools violence is the rule rather than the exception. Schools are labeled the most general places of crime. Crime has become part of the identity of many children, with learners fearing to go to school, according to the Commission. Schools are mirrors of the societies in which they operate.

Educational authorities are aware of the serious detrimental effect of crime on schooling. In an effort to safeguard learners at school premises, teachers are commonly employed to do playground duty during intervals. School buildings and school grounds are in many cases protected with security fences and security guard control, when the schools could afford such measures. Schools are also expected to go as far as searching learners for dangerous objects like knives when they report for school activities. To combat crime at schools, the provincial education department of the Western Cape is currently equipping some schools with circuit television surveillance to monitor school grounds and the interior of school buildings. The alarm system is linked to armed reaction units. It is planned to implement this new venture at sixty schools this year in order to test its effectiveness. The criminal social environment in which many schools operate, has a serious dampening effect, making it difficult for many schools to function as places of teaching and learning.

### 4. Lack of discipline

The introduction of a charter of human rights and children's rights in the Constitution (1995) has contributed greatly to secure a more humane society in South Africa. It has unfortunately given protection to those who abuse their freedom. Corporal punishment is prohibited, which limits the ways in which boys may be punished. The ability of teachers to maintain discipline with regard to school work and general behaviour at school and in class rooms has become more difficult. They are exposed to disobedience, mockery, cursing/ swearing, and even physical and psychological violence. This has been identified by many teachers as a cause for teachers leaving the profession. The ways in which schools and teachers may deal with learners who behave are limited and present a fairly grey area. In many cases teachers feel that the education authorities do not support them in conflicts with guilty learners and their parents.

The issue of discipline must first be addressed before violence and improved quality of school work can be dealt with. In an effort to accomplish this, the co-operation between teachers, the school governing body and the parents is useful, when applied skillfully. In many cases schools draw up a code of conduct which has to be agreed on by the learners and their parents.

### **5. Shortage of suitable teachers**

Specifically in the learning areas Mathematics and Science a great shortage of teachers has been chronic. Suitably qualified teachers (with dignity and ambition) for Mathematics, Science and Accounting are often attracted to the private sector with better salaries, better chances of promotion and better work conditions. Consequently, these critical subjects are often taught by poorly qualified, even unqualified, teachers with a serious lack of basic subject knowledge. The teaching profession is not a popular choice with school leavers, although Government has made substantial bursaries available to students of education. Efforts to attract students from traditionally black schools have been largely unsuccessful in spite of lowering the entrance qualification for such students. Students are rather enticed by careers in business and social sciences. Apart from blaming low salaries, they dislike the masses of routine administration work and school disciplinary problems.

South Africa is losing teachers since the early 1990's because of the affirmative action policy which strives towards and sets targets for the work sector/labour market to reflect the (racial) demography of the country. White teachers who as a group previously dominated the senior management positions in education, feel themselves being discriminated against. Very limited possibilities of promotion posts and practically no possibilities of promotion beyond school principal exist for them.

South Africa loses teachers to business and commerce as well as to foreign countries. Many young well-qualified teachers leave the country to teach in countries like Great Britain and the Far East, like Korea, Japan and China where they teach, apart from their main fields of study, subjects like English, which are in demand in those countries. Ironically, foreign teachers have been imported from other African countries to fill vacant positions in some South African schools. In the foreseeable future the problem of finding enough teachers to fill vacant posts will be aggravated.

The state has been trying to stem the loss of teachers by raising starting salaries considerably. Over the last two years starting salaries have been raised by more than 30%. According to the SA Democratic Teachers' Union 6 000 students qualify annually at universities as teachers, while 23 000 are annually lost to the teaching profession. This number includes teachers who retire, who resign and those who die while in service. Government has launched a concerted effort to attract more suitable young people to the profession, but its efforts are limited by a lack of funds to alleviate the burden of large classes and the accompanying abundance of administrative work.

### **6. Inability to provide in economic needs**

The prosperity of the nation depends upon the economic output of trade and industry. South Africa is mainly a producer of commodities. Mining and raw material products are still the main export products. Recently, the motor car manufacturing industry has become the producer of the largest manufactured export product.

The buoyancy of the economy relies on the education system to provide the much needed workers with an appropriate education and training, including knowledge, skills and competence. It is regularly being said that the schools do not prepare learners suitably for the world of work because they are not taught the skills which are required in the work place.

Critical examples are technical careers where sophisticated skills are involved, but also the professions of engineering and accounting. An example of this crisis is the profession of chartered accounting. According to the SA Institute of Chartered Accountants it had 26 915 members in 2007 of whom a quarter were working in foreign countries. Only 1 400 final year accounting students were studying at all the universities. The four biggest accounting firms need all of these together. Economic prosperity is heavily dependent on qualified accountants. Companies (and the State) have to maintain high standards of financial and economic accountability, in order to comply with international standards of financial reporting and Generally Accepted Accounting Practice.

A potential source of social discontent is the large number of school leavers who have completed the full twelve years of schooling but who cannot find work in the formal economy. This happens frequently because they have not been taught school subjects which would equip them with knowledge and skills which would serve the needs of the world of work. On the other hand the struggling economy finds it difficult to expand sufficiently to create enough work opportunities, notably in the lower skills market. In the first quarter of 2008 the net growth in jobs in the formal sector was only 8 000. (According to the SA Statistical Services 8 417 645 people were working in the formal sector at the end of March.)

## **7. Inefficient management**

When the newly democratically elected government assumed power in 1995, it embarked on the gigantic task of phasing in a new approach to education, including the sharing of power among school authorities, changes in content organization, methods of knowledge development, school management, etc. To a large extent certain characteristics of the old system under apartheid rule, were blamed for inefficiencies and these had to be done away with. According to Jonathan Jansen, a critic of the old system, compliance had been ensured through a complex of instruments including a system of school-wide and individual teacher inspection, a rigid syllabus outlining official content, objectives and methods of teaching, and a hierarchy of internal controls (such as the principal) and external controls (such as routine visits by departmental officials).

A problem faced by the new authorities has been to strike a balance between centralized control of education and decentralized education, giving more authority and responsibility to school principals and local school governing bodies. For the sake of national unity, national policy in respect of matters like funding, legislation, curriculum and teachers have been maintained as the prerogative of central government. Within the framework of national policy, each of the nine provincial departments of education and the local district offices has to execute its tasks. However, greater participation by all role-players is encouraged. The voice of teachers, especially through the recognized teacher unions, has become more prominent in recent years. Teacher unions are recognized as important role-players in education.

One of the main points of criticism of the new dispensation focuses on an inability to manage the transformation of education. The reluctance to maintaining standards where there are good standards, improving the skills of teachers where it is necessary, and training teachers in the

needs and principles of the outcomes-based approach have been regularly criticized by stakeholders of education.

A matter of serious concern is what is being called “the failure of the introduction of a new curriculum, Curriculum 2005”, according to Dr William Spady, the “father of outcomes-based education” (March 2008), the American educationist on whose theory the South African Curriculum 2005 had been based. Prof. Jonathan Jansen, one of the most prominent educationists in the country, warned in 1999 that unfortunately, Curriculum 2005 and the changes it initiated, were largely unquestioned, because they were presented as the antithesis of apartheid education. The efficacy of OBE was never tested in the South African context; it was adopted as a blueprint from developed countries and given political legitimacy, on the assumption that it would counter the evils of apartheid education. The way in which the new curriculum had been introduced, from the design phase to the introduction into schools, the communication of the change to the parents, and the re-training of teachers to manage the changed curriculum, is today widely questioned.

The new Schools Act has been making considerable demands on school principals, for which they had not specifically been trained before, allocating to them responsibilities as responsible and professional managers. In his/her execution of the functions of administration, mediation and leadership, he/she has to co-operate closely with the teachers and School Governing Body. Principals have more often been promoted because they were good teachers. Very often principals are inexperienced and lacking leadership qualities. Much more and better training in preparation for the challenges of school leadership is obviously necessary.

Symptoms of poor leadership by many school principals are the following: general appearance of buildings and teachers, disposition and attire of the children, organization of teachers, bad management of time and resources, mismanagement of money and power, lack of leadership to staff members, and uncontrolled absenteeism and toleration thereof.

Although School Governing Bodies (SGB's) function at the lowest end of educational governance, they are autonomous bodies in the sense that their members are elected by, and representative of the parents, learners and educators (teachers), have executive functions, their own revenue and are recognized as legal entities. Thus, they are aimed to ensure school community involvement and participation, facilitating “school ownership” by the communities.

Many communities seem not to be ready to assume ownership of their schools. Mal-functional SGB's are the consequence, making the task of the principal and the staff more difficult. There seems to be a serious need for the training of members of SGB's, especially in socio-economic disadvantaged communities. Special efforts have been launched by the national education department and its provincial departments to undertake in-service training of principals. Furthermore, Government envisages the re-institution of inspectors of education before the end of the year. This implies that the schools stand to benefit from an enlarged body of educational advisers and curriculum specialists. Better support for the development of school management, training support for teachers and curriculum support will be provided on a permanent basis.

Contentious issues that evoke a lot of emotional discourse, are religious education, music education, physical education and language medium of education. Should the mother tongue/home language be applied as medium of education, or a world language of communication,

viz. English, which is the commonly used vernacular of the business world in the country and its neighbours? The issue of converting traditional single medium schools, mainly Afrikaans (the home language of the majority white and coloured citizens), into double medium schools has also caused much discontent among parents and communities affected. There are 11 official languages in South Africa, and although Government seems to be in favour of mother tongue education, it will need a lot of wisdom to do justice to all.

The perception that Government neglects centres of excellence has led to criticism, e.g. in respect of children with special needs, and technical education. Both these categories of education are capital intensive, and could make heavy demands on the available financial resources, if not managed wisely with discretion. It is heartening that the Minister of Education has recently expressed her personal interest in and her intention to revitalize, modernize and extend the existing technical schools. Technical schools have since 1994 been largely neglected.

## **8. Aids and general health condition**

South Africa is currently one of the countries with the largest number of Aids sufferers in the world, 5,5 million. Aids has spread throughout the population as a result of ignorance, of an indifferent and licentious sexual life-style as well as thousands of incidences of rape that occur every year.

The Aids sufferer lives virtually under a death sentence. From the time of infection with MIV till death lasts normally nine years, if not treated sufficiently and consistently.

Life expectancy is believed to fall to below 40 years, from 68 previously. In the province KwaZulu-Natal the average age at which teachers die, is allegedly 34 years, at the phase of their lives when they should be productive and mature teachers. The Education Labour Relations Council tested a sample of 21 358 teachers, with alarming results. Of the tested sample 13% tested positive; the greatest incidence of HIV positive was in the age group 25 to 34 years (21%). The Council estimated that within the next number of years thousands of teachers could die from Aids.

In 2005 a total of 10% of all teachers were hospitalized, on account of various ailments. Common illnesses, other than Aids, are tuberculosis and diseases ascribed to malnutrition. When combining with Aids, any of these diseases could be fatal.

Children of all ages may contract MIV/Aids. In many families children, who are in good health, suffer because they have to assist their parents or other relatives who have Aids. In some households children as young as 12 years have to assume responsibility as head of the family because the parents passed away. The impact of Aids on children is strongly emotional, but also financial and physical. Fortunately, much sympathy exists in society for the plight of the Aids sufferers. In many cases support is rendered by community organizations, churches and even schools to alleviate the suffering of the people affected and their families.

All provincial school departments and institutions for the training of teachers take part in programmes of encouraging awareness of Aids, informing learners and students of the serious impact of the disease and its consequences for the individual and the community. In this way, the educational authorities hope to minimize the contraction of Aids and its effects on the personal lives of individuals as well as in society in general.

## What does education in SA need from foreign counterparts?

Nations in developed countries should try to *understand* the position of developing societies in Africa where formal education has a relatively short history. Much can be learnt from the developed countries, like Germany and other countries from Europe. This does not imply that systems that had been developed in the course of centuries should be duplicated in Africa *per se*. Adjustments are needed in Africa. Lots of *sympathetic co-operation*, based on the wisdom of European educationists and particularly managers of education could be of great help in establishing sound education practices in Africa. Formal education in South Africa was brought to the country by Europeans, notably the Dutch, Germans and British. The structure and curriculum as has been practiced in South Africa developed from its European origins. Whilst its European roots should remain, they could at best be used to develop an adjusted system, suitable for South African requirements.

Training support to *develop skills and competence* with students and learners could be extremely beneficial, particularly in the education and training in the field of technical skills. This could be done in co-operation with existing South African universities, colleges and training centres.

Personal *contact and sharing* of knowledge, especially at the academic level among researchers and managers of education departments and departmental officials has already borne fruit with the body of academics and education departments. There is much room for the sharing of expertise in the form of mutually undertaken *projects*, which could benefit education in South Africa. Such projects could be identified in conjunction with South African counterparts. The European partners should be actively involved in such projects by way of monitoring progress and keeping control of financial management, should they become financially involved.

*Exchange programmes* among schools and universities, which involve university staff and students, schools, individual teachers and learners is taking place on a limited scale. The academic isolation of South Africa during decades of apartheid, proved severely painful and harmful to education. Partnership co-operation between South African universities and their research counterparts in Europe is essential to combat isolative thinking and falling into isolation practices which could once again cause our education to fall behind.

The improvement of education and schools as institutions of excellence is proving to take much longer, requiring much more effort, than has been assumed so far. The public schools have lost much credibility among large sections of the population. The private/ independent schools have grown substantially in numbers of institutions, number of learners and status in the public eye. The challenge still exists to make transformation of education succeed in order to become the excellent system it is ideally meant to be.

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