

Schooling: Is There Anything We Can Do?

Last week's *Sunday Times* published, in accordance with various education performance indicators, a list of South Africa's top 100 secondary schools. Disconcertingly, but not surprisingly, only 3 historically black secondary schools featured in the top 100 schools.

Our history bequeathed us an education system powerfully shaped by race, class, gender, institutional, and geographical inequalities.

Recognising this, our *Constitution* declared the right of all 'to a basic education'. Our laws entrusted the state to 'advance and protect' citizens so that they 'have the opportunity to develop their capabilities and potential', to 'redress of educational inequalities among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages' and to promote the principle of 'equity' so that all citizens have 'the same quality of learning opportunities'.

The *Constitution* and laws and policies direct us to realize wide-ranging imperatives and goals in, and through, education and schooling. It is hoped that their achievement will contribute to the transformation and development of education and society.

Realities

Yet, we are plagued by stubborn realities that prevent the achievement of key educational imperatives and goals. We need to honestly acknowledge failings and shortcomings and what accounts for these, and creatively and courageously confront them.

Since 1994 there have been important economic and social gains. Yet South Africa continues to be a highly unequal society in terms of wealth, income, opportunities and living conditions. The Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006.

The income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; the income of the richest 20% has risen from 72.0% to 72.5%. The per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20%. 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year.

There is a powerful link between income and equity of opportunity and achievement in schooling. 60% of African children in South Africa are from families that earn less than R 800 a month; 60% of white children are from families whose income is more than R 6 000 per month. The consequences are evident in school performance and achievement.

Without effective interventions by government to improve the economic and social conditions of the poor and the unemployed, restricted educational opportunities and poor outcomes will be largely borne by these social groups.

Systemic issues

It is clear that serious attention has to also be given to various systemic issues.

First, early childhood education has great educational and social benefits and must be a policy priority. The Nobel Prize winner for economics James Heckman writes that 'it is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children is such a policy'.

Second, while we have almost universal participation in schooling, there are major problems related to drop outs, retention, progression and successful completion. 2 out of 10 students drop-out after Grade 3; 4 out of 10 after grade 9, 6 out of 10 after grade 10 and 7.3 after grade 11. A little more than a quarter of the students that begin grade 1 complete grade 12. 'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning'.

Third, in 2005 10% of our secondary schools – the independent and Model C schools - produced 60% of all students who could attend university. 10% of the historically black schools produced a further 20% of such students. The remaining 80% of secondary schools, largely historically black, produced only 20% of students who could attend university.

The key challenge is to improve the quality of education in schools. Finances for equitable access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities, toilets and the adequate remuneration of educators are all important. However, they are not enough for effective schooling and education. There are also other vital conditions.

One is a culture of effective learning and teaching, and to restore this where it is absent. Key here is courageous and effective educational leadership on the part of the national and provincial education departments, district offices and school heads.

Effective leadership and management is a key distinguishing feature between historically black schools that perform well and those that perform poorly.

A second condition is 'qualified, motivated, and committed teachers', who are 'the single most important determinant of effective learning'. A third is high quality learning material and textbooks.

A fourth condition is an appropriate language policy, which uses languages that learners are most conversant with while also promoting multilingualism.

'Effective assessment is also at the heart of ensuring that learning is effective', as is 'developing robust monitoring and assessment systems to monitor student performance'.

Finally, 'the more schools are held to be accountable the more effective they are', which raises the importance of school governing bodies.

Questions

The apartheid legacy in education and schooling is pervasive and pernicious, but we cannot hold apartheid alone culpable. We have to take initiative and also not avoid hard questions, such as whether:

- As leaders, managers and educators, in state departments, schools and trade unions, we fully understand the vital importance of knowledge and education, and the serious moral and social responsibilities associated with educating our people
- We fully grasp what is at stake and the implications of our choices, decisions, actions and non-actions for our society and for current and future generations
- We have the values, will and commitment and the policies and strategies to realize our education goals
- At national, provincial and district levels we have an effective and efficient public service that possesses the educational knowledge and expertise, and the leadership, management and administrative capabilities to support schools.

Unless we address our problems we will deny millions of South Africans an education that develops their capabilities and affirms and advances their human and social rights. We will also block a key avenue to social transformation and development.

However, as we confront our problems we must be careful not to clutch at glib solutions, such as reducing education to skills development for economic growth, and to preparing students to be productive workers.

Education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable people to contribute to economic growth, since such growth can lead to greater equality and development. However, reducing education to its value for economic growth guts it of its wider social value, which includes:

- Education as an engagement between dedicated teachers and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific heritage, and as a feature of what it means to be human
- Education as preparation for democratic citizenship and the 'cultivation of humanity'
- Education as an integral part of development, understood as a 'process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (Amartya Sen).

If we seek to be true to our Constitution and policies we must protect and promote a rich view of education that allows it to also play its wider social roles. Only such a conception can bring about meaningful development in South Africa.

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