The failures and challenges of our schooling

We continue to be plagued by stubborn realities that prevent the achievement of constitutionally and legally enshrined educational imperatives and goals. We need to honestly and openly 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 most 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.

It is clear that we must remake our schools if we are to transform education and ensure that it contributes to individual and social development. Serious attention has to be given to various issues and systemic and long-term initiatives are required.

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'.

One serious challenge is that in 2005 10% of our 7 000 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 a number of 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 and management on the part of the national Department of Education, provincial ministries, district offices and especially school heads. Effective leadership and management is a key distinguishing feature between the 10% of historically black schools that produced 20% of the students who in 2005 could attend university and the other 80% that produced only 20%.

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. '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.

If, these are the key conditions for effective education and schooling, to what extent are they in place, and in what percentage of South Africa's schools? If they are not in place, why not?

The apartheid legacy in education and schooling is pervasive and pernicious. Yet, we cannot forever hold apartheid alone culpable. If we are not to permanently be its victims we have to take initiative and also not avoid certain hard questions. These questions include:

- Whether, as leaders, managers and educators, we fully understand the importance of knowledge and education, and the serious intellectual, moral, political and organisational responsibilities associated with educating our people
- Whether we fully grasp what is at stake and the implications of our choices, decisions, actions and non-actions for our society and current and future generations
- Whether we have the values, policies and strategies to progressively realize our education goals? Are these goals substantive or largely symbolic - nice words and goods intentions but with little commitment to effective interventions and practices!
- Whether we have at national, provincial and district levels an effective and efficient a public service that possesses the educational expertise, and leadership, management and administrative capabilities to support schools.

Unless we address our problems we will continue to 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.

'Although education cannot transform the world, the world cannot be transformed without education'.

Dr. Saleem Badat is Vice Chancellor of Rhodes University. This is the first part of an edited recent address to the Annual Conference of the Headmasters of the Traditional State Boy's Schools of South Africa at Queens College, Queenstown.

We need rich ideas of education and development

We inherited 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'. It also committed us to the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of non-sexism and non-racialism and the human rights and freedoms that the *Bill of Rights* proclaims.

The 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* entrusted the state to 'advance and protect' citizens so that they 'have the opportunity to develop their capabilities and potential'. It also directed the state to 'redress of educational inequalities among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages' and the principle of 'equity' so that all citizens have 'the same quality of learning opportunities'.

A year later, the *National Education Policy Act* of 1996 stated its goal of 'the democratic transformation of the national system of education into one which serves the needs and interests of all of the people of South Africa and upholds their fundamental rights'.

The *South African Schools Act* asserted that a new schooling system will 'redress past injustices in schooling provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners,…advance the democratic transformation of society,…(and) contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society'.

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.

Today, however, there is a strong tendency to approach education and investments in education largely in terms of the promotion of economic growth. Frequent stories on the supposed lack of responsiveness of educational institutions to economic needs, the alleged mismatch between graduates and the needs of companies, and the demand for a greater focus on 'skills' reflects this tendency. This reduces education to preparing students for the economy and to be productive workers.

Education must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic growth, since such growth can contribute to greater social equality and development. However, reducing education to its value for economic growth dangerously strips education of its wider social value and functions.

Education has great value as an engagement between dedicated teachers and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific heritage (in the form of books, art,

pictures, music, artefacts), and around our understandings, views and beliefs about our natural and social worlds. Education is undertaken as part of what it means to be human.

Education is also connected, as Martha Nussbaum argues, to democratic citizenship and to the cultivation of humanity. Nussbaum writes that 'three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity'.
'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions'. Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement'.

The 'cultivation of humanity' also requires students to see themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern' – which requires knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality'.

It is, however, more than 'factual knowledge' that is required. Also needed is 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have'.

If we seek to be true to our Constitution, laws and policies, and also advance educational and social transformation and development, we have to reject the idea that education's only or even main role is to develop 'skills' and promote economic growth. We must protect and promote a much richer viewer of education that allows it to play its citizenship and humanising roles.

There is a similar challenge related to our ideas of 'development'. There is what we can call 'thin' and 'thick' concepts of development.

"Thin" concepts are mainly economistic, and reduce development to economic growth and better economic performance, as measured by various indicators. Reducing development to economic growth gives rise to policies and actions that focus primarily on promoting growth and reducing obstacles to growth.

'Thick' concepts of development value economic growth but are also concerned with wider economic issues as well as social, cultural and political issues. The concern is with policies and actions that bring about structural economic change and widen ownership; eliminate or reduce income inequality, unemployment and poverty; promote greater social equality, and create equity and redress for socially disadvantaged groups;

The concern also extends to expanding human, economic and social rights; deepening political and citizenship participation, building democracy and a vibrant civil society, and enriching intellectual and cultural life.

The economics Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, is a strong advocate of a 'thick' concept of development. He writes that 'development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that

people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as growth of gross national product, or technological advance'.

Again, as with the need for rich and 'thick' view of education, we have to choose a 'thick' concept of development if we wish to achieve both educational and social transformation and development.

Without a 'thick' concept of development, we will not eliminate the economic and social legacies of apartheid, redress inequalities in wealth and ownership and transform economic and social relations. It will be also be very difficult to meet the basic needs of people and democratise the state and society.

Only rich and thick concepts of education and development can bring about development in South Africa that is economic *and also* intellectual, cultural, social and political.

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