

people's education: the irony and the tragedy

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A delegation from the Lamontville Education Crisis Committee negotiates with the Deputy Director of the Department of Education and Training to reopen their school, which was closed by the Department last year. Their attempt failed.

After two years of turmoil in black education, the beginning of the 1987 school year was far more than the start of another term. The return to class of an estimated 1.8 million black pupils was an important political event, attracting intense interest and widely differing interpretations.

The government made sure that its own version dominated the news. No one could ask the leaders of the National Education Crisis Committee for their comment, as they were in detention.

The Minister of Education and Training, Dr Gerrit Viljoen, seized the opportunity to give the government credit for resolving the crisis, while proclaiming the defeat of 'radical organisations calling for boycotts'.

The implication of this (and other Department of Education and Training statements) was clear: the tough security action had succeeded in immobilising 'radical organisations' so that the ordinary student could go to school unintimidated. While the DET would still have to be wary lest some

students attempted to use the schools for 'revolutionary ends', the education crisis was, to all intents and purposes, over.

This interpretation has an easy appeal for observers who find the developments in black education over the past months contradictory, if not inexplicable.

During this time, apart from detaining the NECC leaders and hundreds of student leaders, the government drastically tightened the Emergency regulations, introduced stringent controls on the movement and activities of pupils, and effectively banned 'people's education' from schools.

Far from meeting any of the demands set as pre-conditions for a return to school at the two historic conferences hosted by the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee and its successor, the NECC, the government actually tightened its grip, introducing the most stringent security measures in South Africa's education history.

Many observers predicted an escalation of the crisis that had already paralysed black

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education in some areas. But, by mid-January, pupils were reportedly streaming back to schools and negotiations were apparently well advanced to re-open some 60 Eastern Cape schools closed by the DET during 1986.

The government believes its role was pivotal in the switch of direction, and to some extent that is true. The militant youth who believed that they could bring down the government 'before the next school term' by refusing to subject themselves to 'Bantu education', had gravely misjudged their strength and that of their adversary. No seasoned observer ever doubted that the boycotting pupils' political objectives were unattainable and that they would sacrifice far more than they could hope to gain through a prolonged boycott. No one doubted either that the government had the determination and the power to make the cost too high for the community to bear. And no one understood this more than the leaders and supporters of the NECC.

The government has never missed an opportunity to portray them as radicals propagating boycotts. Precisely the opposite is true. The whole *raison d'être* behind the formation of the NECC was to find a concerted, community-based means of ending the boycotts and replacing them with directed, organised action for fundamental transformation in education.

The NECC spent much of the year in delicate negotiations around the issue. Their greatest achievement was to make it politically acceptable to oppose the continuing boycott publicly, so that by the end of the year every major resistance organisation, including all important student groupings, was calling for a return to school, despite the government's continuing provocative action.

These organisations deserve the credit for the return to school, such as it was. (There is some scepticism about the validity of the official figures, and reports are heard of growing tension in Soweto and the Eastern Cape.) What the government portrays as the NECC's defeat was indeed its victory.

But the NECC and its supporters also realise that the return to school does not mean the end of the education crisis. They know that we are no closer to a meaningful resolution now than we were at the height of the boycott. Indeed, we probably moved even further away from that goal during 1986.

It could have been very different. Looking back on the developments of the past year, it is clear that there were several opportunities for a genuine breakthrough in addressing some of the causes of education-based resistance.

This article attempts to assess recent

developments in black education and to show that 1986 was not merely another instalment in its gradual disintegration.

During last year, for the first time, the education 'struggle' attempted to move beyond protest and boycotts towards pioneering a mass-based alternative.

It was captured in the slogan 'People's Education for People's Power'. Nor was this another revolutionary rallying call in the place of 'Liberation before Education'.

It represented perhaps the most significant shift in resistance strategy this decade, an unlikely turn from 'the politics of refusal' towards community involvement in transforming the education system. As such, it also provided the government with a unique opportunity for a creative response that might have broken the existing deadlock. Tragically, the opportunity was missed.

If this sounds a little far-fetched, consider the circumstances.

The slogan calling for people's education first surfaced publicly at the historic conference hosted by the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand on 28-29 December 1985. Students, parents, teachers and representatives from ideologically divergent popular organisations throughout the country came together during a week when people usually declare a moratorium on formal politics. But this was no time for a Christmas break. Parents and educationists realised that they had to tackle the education crisis head-on during the dying days of 1985 if they were to prevent 1986 from being 'The Year of No Schooling'.

This was the slogan mooted by many radical student activists in the vanguard of the struggle for 'Liberation before Education'. Ironically, the township youth, who had the most direct experience of the state's military might, were most optimistic about imminent victory. They dismissed the show of strength as 'merely the last kick of a dying animal'. They could not abandon the struggle 'now when we have got the government on its knees'.

Most parents were helpless before the wave of revolutionary adrenalin that surged through their children. Those who attempted to introduce a cautionary note were scornfully dismissed as conniving in their own oppression. The youth blamed 'Bantu education' for their parents' perceived docility — and they were determined to have none of it.

Then, in a brief message delivered from the stage of the Wits Great Hall, the politics of immediacy suddenly lost much of its potency.

It was a message from the ANC.

It came in the form of a report-back from a Christmas Day meeting between the SPCC and an ANC delegation in Harare. The SPCC

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had sought the meeting to prepare the ground for the crucial Wits conference. They realised that no alternative strategy could win significant support if the township youth believed the ANC favoured an indefinite boycott.

In its message, the ANC took great care not to direct the decisions of the conference. But it stated clearly that 'Liberation before Education' was not an ANC slogan. While saluting the youth for their role in resistance, the implication of the ANC's message was clear: education should be incorporated rather than sacrificed in the struggle.

That simple message was enough to defuse the indefinite boycott strategy even before the debate began, and the conference ended with a unanimous call to students to return to school in January 1986.

Clearly, care had to be taken not to make this decision appear as a defeat for the student activist strategy. After all, the State of Emergency was still in force, their 'comrades' were still in jail, soldiers were still in the schools, Bantu education was still intact and the Congress of South African Students was still banned. Far from bringing the government to its knees, the students were now being asked to go back to school without achieving a single important demand.

Their support was achieved by convincing them that a return to school was merely a tactical shift to advance their struggle. The conference issued an ultimatum to the government, giving it three months to meet student demands. If this failed, the National Education Crisis Committee, born at the Wits conference, undertook to convene a second gathering to determine further action.

Predictably, when the NECC re-convened a conference in Durban in March, delegates agreed that their demands 'had not adequately been met'. But they nevertheless re-issued the call to return to school. Indeed, they went further. They called on students 'to re-occupy' schools that had been closed and 'to demand the right to education'.

Despite strong under-currents of discontent, most students again agreed to return to school. Their co-operation was partially based on organisational necessity. The prolonged boycotts of 1985 had severely hampered student mobilisation, dispersing their constituency and leaving a relatively small number of committed activists engaged in 'the struggle'.

They also realised that they could not afford to alienate their parents and many fellow students further. 'It was a mistake to believe we could wage the struggle on our own,' explained a student leader. 'We had to adapt our tactics to be sure that our parents would be with us'.

Not that the students interpreted the decision to return to school as an agreement

to submit to the traditional rules of the classroom. Many who had not been inside a school for months demanded promotion under the slogan 'pass one, pass all', rejecting conventional tests of competence as divisive and elitist.

And the agreement to return to school also depended on a crucial condition: that the NECC make active and rapid progress towards giving content to people's education in the schools. The task was delegated to a five-man NECC commission that was given three months to turn a political slogan into a clearly defined concept. More specifically, they were to provide enough course content for two afternoon sessions a week of people's education.

In retrospect it seems as if by mid-year a pivotal change of strategy had been negotiated and a precarious new balance of forces achieved. The NECC had succeeded in its greatest challenge by holding back demands for an indefinite boycott. But the return-to-school consensus was also under severe strain. The NECC had to deliver the goods.

All they had been asked to do, as a start, was to find the human and material resources to produce alternative course content for two afternoon sessions each week. Although this was a massive task, it was modest indeed when measured against the students' original and seemingly unshakable demand for the transfer of state power.

But the significance stretched far beyond that. In essence, the NECC, with the backing of the ANC and the most important internal resistance movements, was opting for transformation from within the present education system rather than the revolutionary goal of making education ungovernable.

It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of this strategic shift in the present political climate. Up until this point the education crisis seemed entirely intractable. The politics of refusal and non-collaboration with state-created institutions was extending rapidly from the political terrain into education. The result could be far more devastating than a mere election boycott.

It was probably because the situation had reached disaster proportions that the potential germ of a solution emerged from the community itself. Almost overnight, education achieved a renewed capacity for transformation — not because of anything the government had done but because of the strength and direction of credible community leadership, including the crucial intervention of the ANC.

At a time when the gulf between the government and the resistance movements seemed to have become entirely unbridgable, an area of

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meaningful consensus emerged that had been inconceivable a few months previously.

Both the government and its most important political antagonists (including the ANC) agreed on the major parameters: not only should education continue, but it should proceed within the institutional base of the schools. Nor was the NECC demanding the impossible. In the short term, its priorities clearly were to negotiate conditions that would prevent further educational disruption.

Remarkably, the NECC also received a mandate to negotiate at a time when leaders still willing to talk to the government ran the risk of rejection by their own constituency, as Archbishop Tutu has learned.

At this pivotal moment the government's response proved crucial. The questions were first whether it would realise what was at stake, and next whether it would be able to respond constructively and in such a way that the NECC was able to deliver enough to retain its increasingly sceptical student support.

There were no serious political costs involved. Indeed, the NECC's demands could not have been more amenable framed in terms of the government's own declared policy. Firstly, the government is publicly committed to negotiate with any non-violent organisation. Secondly, it pursues an 'own affairs' education policy, quite compatible with the NECC's move towards increasing community control of the schools and the content of education.

Moreover, the NECC had amply proved the legitimacy of its educational leadership. The government could not even use the argument that it was committed to negotiate with 'moderate leaders'. They too, in the form of the African Teachers' Association of South Africa (ATASA) and the Cape Teachers' Professional Association (CTPA), had thrown their weight behind the NECC, to form a coalition rarely seen in black politics. Nor had this been achieved without considerable student anger at what they termed 'collaborators' being included in their struggle. In short, it was a golden opportunity for the government to begin serious negotiations around major student grievances. Instead it re-declared a State of Emergency, detained as many NECC leaders as it could find (including the cautious and conciliatory chairman of ATASA, Mr H H Dlamlenze) and immobilised the rest by forcing them into hiding. It was now impossible for the NECC to meet its educational mandate or to pursue the grass-roots consultation so essential to keeping the students on board and holding the coalition together.

In one tragic stroke, the precarious

equilibrium — that could so easily have proved a turning point — was destroyed. High school attendance in the Eastern Cape and Soweto began to drain away. Where students did attend classes, little formal learning took place. Teachers spoke about the continuing 'breakdown of learning habits' and the 'collapse of the education environment'. Activists pursued their own alternative programmes, teaching their comrades their homemade versions of the history of the liberation struggle and the evils of capitalism.

Subsequent efforts to resume the constructive strategy which had seemed so promising proved a failure. When they were released, NECC leaders again pursued their attempts to set up a meeting with the Department of Education and Training. They were careful not to set any unmeetable 'preconditions' but merely stated the obvious: that the continued detention of NECC officials and student leaders posed a serious obstacle to negotiations. The NECC pointed out that the participation of regional representatives, particularly from the Eastern Cape, was vital to the success of talks. Eventually, according to the NECC, they sent one of their Johannesburg officials, Mrs Joyce Mabudafasi, to the Eastern Cape in an attempt to secure a mandate to negotiate despite the continued detention of the local NECC representative, Mr Ihron Rensburg. After two days in Port Elizabeth, she too was detained.

The NECC also tried to explain to the authorities that the Emergency's prohibition on political meetings in the townships made it impossible to discuss negotiable issues on a wide scale within their communities. Without such participation, the NECC knew there was no hope of making any agreement stick, particularly where it counted most — in the schools.

The DET stalled at every turn. Firstly, it said it was powerless to influence detentions or Emergency provisions, referring responsibility to the state's security agencies. (The NECC does not dismiss this as an empty excuse. Those who have had contact with the DET say the department's opinions and actions are clearly subordinate to security interests.)

But the DET's reply to the NECC went further. It bluntly dismissed the argument that continuing community consultation was necessary for successful negotiation. In any case, said the DET, the NECC was not a 'legally recognised representative body' and had no *locus standi* to negotiate.

The official campaign to discredit the NECC continued. Leaflets appeared in Soweto accusing the NECC of deciding that 'children must go back to schools not to learn but to be taught stone-throwing, arson,

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necklacing and boycotting.' No one can prove that the government was responsible for the leaflets, but it would be interesting to know who else had the resources to distribute them by helicopter.

Is it possible to explain the failure of the authorities to use the crucial opportunity created by the efforts of the NECC to resolve the education crisis, and their systematic efforts instead to discredit the NECC?

'One thing is clear to me,' comments educationist Frans Auerbach, director of the teachers' programme at Soweto's Funda Centre. 'The government has absolutely no idea of the dimensions of the crisis, and still less of the political dynamics within the township. Otherwise it would have seen the emergence of the NECC as the most positive development in recent education history and the only hope of negotiating a resolution to the on-going crisis.'

Gerrit Viljoen has provided some clue to the government's thinking. He has conceded that people's education 'certainly has merits insofar as it represents a striving towards greater community participation.' But it would not be tolerated if it had 'revolutionary aims'.

His statement hinges on his definition of 'revolutionary aims', and he has recently provided his perception of this. In a newspaper interview he said people's education was clearly not an innocent correction of perspective, because the history of the ANC was considered a priority for a History syllabus! It seems almost inconceivable that the Minister can seriously expect the history of the ANC to be excluded from a relevant History syllabus in black schools.

But this does not clarify the substantive objectives of people's education. Whatever its central role in resolving the education deadlock at the beginning of 1986, is it not a revolutionary notion that will obviously be an anathema to the government?

'Of course the township communities overwhelmingly reject apartheid and want education to prepare the youth for participation in a transformed democratic society,' says Joe Muller, a senior lecturer in education at the University of the Witwatersrand, who is involved in education research and planning with the NECC.

'Obviously, a democratic objective is a revolutionary threat to apartheid. But in most other contexts preparation for democratic participation is a precondition for political stability - the antithesis of revolution'.

But the government is clearly worried about more than just the democratic impulse behind people's education. They, and many other whites, are becoming increasingly perturbed at its strong socialist content.

Ken Hartshorne, a retired state education planner, has addressed this issue in an excellent review of the problems and prospects of people's education, prepared for a recent seminar on the subject. He regards the socialist content of educational demands as the major difference between 1976 and the current phase of resistance.

This development, says Hartshorne, was both inevitable and necessary. 'It is a debate that every country has had to face, and continues to face. In South Africa it is very much a debate whose time has come.'

This is particularly so given the widespread perception of 'collaboration between the state and capitalist interests' and the scepticism of black youth that capitalism can redress economic inequality.

'Economic as well as political reconstruction is now on the agenda, and any consideration of the future of education has to take this into serious account.'

Elaborating on his paper in an interview, Hartshorne said that the government's fundamental mistake was to believe that support for socialism would disappear in the face of sufficient repression. 'The opposite is true.'

'The government faces a simple choice. It can either stand back and allow serious educationists the space to provide educationally sound content for people's education. Or it can continue to nullify their efforts, thereby ensuring that what emerges in the township streets really is revolutionary propaganda. It will be another self-fulfilling prophecy.'

The NECC's concern to avoid mere propaganda masquerading as people's education is reflected in the appointment of two subject committees charged with compiling alternative curricula in History and English. The committees draw together some of the country's leading academic specialists in these fields. In addition, educationists from various universities are planning research on appropriate education policy with the NECC.

These are sober and responsible deliberations, but the government perceives them as revolutionary because they assume that the education crisis has exposed the illegitimacy of the official structures and that it is beyond the power of the authorities to redress this situation.

The government disputes that the present education system is so widely unacceptable that it is leading to educational collapse. The Deputy Minister, Sam de Beer, frequently quotes statistics to underscore his point.

Of more than 7 000 schools under the DET's control, he says, only between 200 and 250 'suffered unrest' at the height of the crisis.

Auerbach dismisses these statistics as 'misleading'. He points out that 5 399 of the

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DET's 7 395 schools are farm schools in rural areas (with an average of 87 pupils each) under the direct ownership and control of white farmers. In 1985 there was 'unrest' in only 20 of them.

But this cannot be used to prove the inherent stability of black education. The real test must be sought in DET high schools, of which there are only 328. In terms of the department's own statistics, 230 (or 70%) of these schools faced serious disruption. This, says Auerbach, is a more accurate indication of the extent of the education crisis.

Hartshorne, for his part, keeps stressing that 'there is little understanding on the part of the government that where children are attending school, this is not a signal of acceptance of the system but rather an indication of the strength of the community's need for education, even if it is not the kind they wish, and of the lack of viable alternatives.'

He says that despite the return to classes the DET will steadily continue to lose control of the schools, and predicts its effective collapse within five years. 'Then the authorities will have to negotiate on a new kind of local management for schools based on parent-teacher-pupil bodies and a new curriculum.'

'The position will be much worse if the NECC is not there to negotiate with, either because it doesn't survive the State of Emergency or loses the support of the community.'

The only question, says Hartshorne, is whether black education will have to disintegrate before it brings the DET down with it or whether the authorities will recognise the inevitable and negotiate now about the management of schools and the content of the curriculum.

The question seems rhetorical. The answer is clear. The government is sticking to its ten-year plan to upgrade black education, with particular emphasis on improving teacher qualifications, the pupil-teacher ratio and school facilities. The plan will continue to be based on the goal of 'separate-but-equal'.

While providing some welcome improvements in teaching conditions, there seems little chance that the ten-year plan will have any impact at all on the long-term education crisis. Indeed, during the many interviews conducted for this article, it became increasingly clear that no government initiative — not even real reform such as creating a single education department — would significantly defuse the growth of resistance in black schools. The government simply does not have enough legitimacy or credibility to do anything that will win the support of the student community.

That doesn't mean the situation in education is entirely hopeless. Although it

missed its crucial opportunity in 1986, the DET still has the option of responding positively to the initiatives that come from the community itself, at present under the leadership of the NECC.

These demands have changed over the past months, and now focus primarily on the introduction of people's education in the schools. The committee of historians charged with pioneering an alternative approach for the History syllabus has completed an academically sound and educationally creative 'work package' for the start of the new term. This offers the government yet another opportunity to make way for the beginning of a creative process of transformation in Bantu education.

It seems almost certain to be another lost opportunity. The most recent Government Gazette issued under the State of Emergency prohibits the NECC from discussing the presentation of people's education courses at any government school or hostel. Nor may any people's education syllabuses be determined at such gatherings.

It is easy to predict that the education struggles of 1987 will hinge around this issue. Students are not going back to school because they think that Bantu education was all right after all, but to try to forge an alternative.

Eric Molobi, an NECC executive member based in Johannesburg, says that if the DET continues to prohibit people's education in the schools, the people will take their education out of the schools.

This would clearly be a reluctant second-best option with enormous costs. Opting out of the official system means forfeiting the qualifications and certificates necessary for further education or employment. It will inevitably re-open the rift between students and their parents, who still believe that education is the only passport out of poverty. And it will deeply divide the student community, as anger mounts against those who escape the township to attend private schools and colleges in white areas. For those who remain behind, educational standards will drop even further in the absence of even rudimentary facilities.

Perhaps the government anticipates these developments, hoping that their cost will be too high for the community to bear, leaving students no option but to go to school on the DET's terms. Given the present student mood, this seems unlikely to last. If students abandon their attempts to change Bantu education from within, the political premise on which resistance strategy has been built for the past three decades will become part of their political experience: transformation within the present system is not possible. □