

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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State must be engaged in schools' battle

AN INVALUABLE and practical insight into the difficulty of changing the mess that apartheid has made of education was presented at the "Schools for the Future" Conference by the secretary for education and

culture in KaNgwane, Peter Buckland.

After listing numerous reforms that had been introduced by his department, Buckland stressed that the education system had not been transformed. On a positive note,

he suggested, however, that if one has learnt, one cannot be said to have failed.

Among the key lessons his department had learnt were:

- Governments do not transform societies, people do. If people are going to change society

they need to organise themselves.

- Transformation requires engagement with the state. Criticism and tearing down may be a start, but ultimately the system must be engaged.

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Bill Staude, regional director of the DET.



Pupils express their views: Rejané Davids, Nolundi Gcilishe, Ruth Faragher, Annegret Rust and Thomas Hill.



John Samuel, head of the ANC education department.

THE MOST urgent challenge in building a new education system in South Africa is to revitalise and foster a "culture of learning" in society.

This was the opening night message from John Samuel, director of the SA Council of Higher Education and recently appointed head of education in the ANC, to pupils, parents and teachers from 50 Cape schools and a range of student/education organisations who attended the conference.

The urgency of the task was clear to the 300 and more delegates who showed an attentive eagerness to listen and exchange ideas at what was essentially a "working conference", aimed at getting the process of negotiating a new education system started at local level.

At the end of the weekend the resounding verdict was that the chance to meet and talk with people from other schools and communities had been invaluable.

During the final report-back session on practical means of developing schools to meet the challenges of the future, virtually all the

SA needs a 'culture of learning'

IN a country with 17 education departments, eight million illiterate adults and a breakdown of meaningful education, the nature of a future school system is critical. SUE VALENTINE reports on the 'Schools for the Future' conference hosted by Idasa in Cape Town in September.

people, we cannot organise all that with only the teachers."

Developing the notion of a "culture of learning", John Samuel said the consequences of apartheid and the erosion of this culture - which

groups committed themselves to "spreading the word" on what they had learned, as well as to cultivating the contacts made. A call on the government to create a unitary education department was also approved.

A warning note amid the optimism came from University of Cape Town educationist Peter Kallaway who, in summing up a workshop session, said that despite all the talk of hopes and fears about open schools, too little attention was being given to guiding principles, concrete actions and future direction.

He said teachers argued against bureaucratic controls and seemed to think that things would improve if they were left to themselves. "Such talk is very romantic," said Kallaway. "We have an education system with nearly 10 million

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Avoiding a new basis for social divisions

IF EDUCATION reforms perpetuate the divisions between education and training or the vocational and the academic there can be no hope for a democratic education system in South Africa, according to British educational sociologist Michael Young.

Making the point that no one has yet been successful in tackling the issue of the low value attached to technical or vocational education, Young said the divisions in education originate not in the curriculum, but in the economic system. The education curriculum simply perpetuated the divisions.

He said the assumptions which informed the British education system were unavoidably part of South Africa's heritage because of the colonial relationship. If South Africans did not understand what that legacy entailed, it would continue to haunt their future.

The divisions pointed to a political issue which assumes a difference between those educated "to know" and those educated "to do". "This is the very antithesis of democracy," said Young.

Other countries had tried various strategies to grapple with the problem:

- Low status vocations can be upgraded – a solution typical in America. However, in Britain (and arguably in South Africa too), the issue is not so much about the content of the work than about its

connotations.

- In France academic education is diversified to provide multiple routes into higher education. This has gigantic financial implications, but it also means that new forms of stratification emerge and with them, a new hierarchy.

- If one accepts the inevitability of divisions, it is possible to try and strengthen both routes, as implemented in Germany. This depends on a culture which accords high status to the world of work.

- The most radical alternative — but the one most needed, according to Young is to begin to envisage a unified system of curricula and qualifications. This would create a more flexible system in which people could move freely between the world of work and that of full-time study.

"The world of work must be a practical and theoretical part of all education . . . We must envisage a new model of what education is about about how people transform the world, not about truth and employability."

If education reforms in South Africa repeat the mistakes of Britain, then even though racist laws may be abolished, a new basis for social divisions will be created.

State must engage in schools' battle

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- To engage meaningfully with the state people must be empowered with the necessary facts and figures to challenge and counter the information that the state may produce.

- A broader definition of "the people" is needed to transform education meaningfully. If "the people" are defined simply by their opposition to the state, they will be disempowered when the state openly identifies with the struggle and presents itself as progressive. A "people's" government must still be monitored and the differences and tensions between the government and civic society must be understood. "If the struggle ends, the terror begins," he added.

- Transformation of education requires resources. Buckland offered figures on the per capita spending in South Africa: in white schools it is R1 002, in DET schools it is R320, in KaNgwane it is R36. Unless there is significant redirection of resources to rural and marginal areas, transformation will fail, he said.

- A bureaucracy is necessary. "Bureaucracy is the worst possible way of managing an education system, except for all the others!" Unless a sensitive and democratically accountable management system is created all plans and policy documents will be meaningless.

- Expertise is essential in order to progress beyond slogans. When governments finally agree to the people's call for an end to something and ask for alternatives, constructive suggestions must exist.

- Transformation requires time. Buckland said "top down" reform sometimes had to be implemented because transformation would take too long. He cautioned however, that "every time we make that compromise, we subtly undermine the transformative capac-

A learning culture needed

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had intensified over the last 15 years – had created a "bitter and deeply alienated youth". The social consequences of the erosion of a learning culture could not be calculated statistically, but it was a reality which needed to be addressed.

The exclusion of parents and teachers from education was both a consequence and a cause of the erosion of a culture of learning.

In 1987 the school enrolment figure in South Africa was 8,5 million. It is estimated that this will have reached 14,5 million by the year 2020. The past, present and future had to be addressed simultaneously, said Samuel.

To rebuild a culture of learning it was necessary to infuse a sense of urgency into political organisations, trade unions, churches, women's organisations and youth and student organisations. Learning and education must be placed firmly on their agendas.

Samuel concluded that "a climate of learning" needed to be encouraged and developed to establish a new society. "Education and learning are social activities and if the appropriate climate is not created after years of destruction and devastation, then we will not be able to rebuild and recreate a new society."

In a panel discussion on educational priorities, representatives of the NECC, the Department of Education and Training, the Democratic Party and the African National Congress put their views.

Yusef Sayed, an educationist from the University of the Western Cape and an executive member of the NECC, said education



Education sociologist Michael Young.

policy had to meet the needs of parents, students and teachers.

The basic ingredients of people's education included a more relevant education system and syllabi that overcame the legacies of racism, sexism and manual/mental work. Education was the state's responsibility and a fundamental right of all people. The NECC was opposed to any moves towards privatisation of education.

The education spokesperson of the DP, Ken Andrew, said the content and syllabus in any education system should meet the basic needs of literacy and numeracy, as well as being relevant to South Africa, Africa and the technological age. Schools should

offer as diverse and flexible a curriculum as possible.

Andrew said it was impossible to finance education spending at current "white" levels. In white schools there was empty space to the value of R2 billion which could be well used if schools were open to all.

The Cape regional director of the DET, Mr Bill Staude, comparing himself to Daniel in the lion's den as he faced the conference, said there was only one priority in education – the survival of the individual, and of the individual in society.

Education should equip people to be technologically knowledgeable and competent so that they could sell their skills and be capable of generating finance rather than simply being wage-earners.

On the question of administration, Staude said the community school should be the basic unit of education. The battle over schools in the black community was ulti-

mately about the ownership of education. "Ownership must rest with the community where the school is located," he said.

There was no other way of running a national education system but with a bureaucracy, said Staude. There had to be some centralised quality control of education and finance had to be centrally administered.

ANC spokesperson Phumzile Ngcuka was in agreement with Mr Staude on the issue of school administration, emphasising that the community must control education.

"At the end of the day, the community will play a very important role in the rebuilding a learning culture," she said. In a single education department the problems of education would no longer be compartmentalised between different "white" or "black" departments.

Unfortunately Ngcuka, like so many other ANC "spokespeople" on public platforms, had to issue a disclaimer about her views as opposed to the movement's because the ANC still has no clear position on a future education policy. She stressed that the ANC did not claim a monopoly share in the debate on a future education system and welcomed all contributions.

THE plenary session on student perspectives proved an indictment on at least one third of conference delegates who, for whatever reasons, decided not to stay to listen to what the pupils had to say.

Seven representatives from the Junior City Council, Pupils Unite for Peace and Awareness (Pupa) and Cosas responded to questions about the current and a possible future school system.

Regarding positive and negative aspects of the education system, the Pupa and Junior City Council representatives identified problems such as apathy, the difficulty experienced with raising political issues at school and opposition to creating SRCs.

The Cosas representatives were somewhat less equivocal. "Nothing can be positive in a corrupt, sexist education system that teaches people to be superior to others," said Rejané Davids.

The differences in visions for the future were less severe, although the Junior City Council representative, Thomas Hill, said that while most JCC members wanted open schools under one education department, some councillors were nervous about the idea. They felt academic standards should be raised to the level in white schools.

Pupa said white pupils needed to interact with black schools at all levels, not just through twinning schools. Pupils and teachers, not only parents, should have a say in whether schools were opened to all.

For Cosas, with its long tradition of protest and struggle, the rights of students in the future were something which "would be fought for".

On the topic of non-racial schooling, Neil McGurk of Sacred Heart College in Johannesburg, said talking about the experience of being at a non-racial school was meaningless – it was an experience which had to be lived through.

"There is nothing superior about the white cultural experience, a growing sense of liberation has come from the communication of black cultural experiences to us as whites,"



Neil McGurk and Peter Buckland.

he said.

"South Africa is a black country, this is a reality whites will have to learn to live with. The vast majority of schools in South Africa are black schools and the opportunity of attending a mixed race school will be a fairly luxurious one for most students."

McGurk said the open school models posed by the Minister of Education and Culture were "typical examples of the pathologies of white culture". They showed a "street-wise wisdom of how to keep white privilege and to keep black children out while not being seen to do so."

The gulf between the white and black experience in schools was illustrated sharply by two contrasting examples offered in answer to a question about the achievements of SRCs.

A Cosas student extolled the virtues of the

pupils and teachers to have a say in the running of their schools was taken up by several of the discussion groups. "We've always left out the students. We have to start putting the 's' into our PTAs," commented one white delegate.

Numerous suggestions emerged at the end of the conference as the working groups reported back on their discussions. In summarising the process, UCT educationist Jo Muller said the issue of democratic participation and control was essential at both the local and national level.

At a local level, the community should be able to exercise "control"; at national level it should participate in debates.

The long, difficult process of transforming the education system – "unscrambling the omelette" – had almost been left too late and it needed urgent action.



Delegates at the Schools for the Future conference.

"revolutionary struggle" and lauded those students who had sacrificed their lives to be educated in the language of their choice and to establish SRCs in their schools. A white teacher, attempting to offer "a more concrete example" of an SRC achievement, spoke of how their students' council had won the right for pupils over the age of 18 to be seen in public bars – something to which the law of the land entitled them, but which the school had previously forbidden!

However, as the conference progressed, understanding grew and the right of parents,

constituencies that are often voiceless, such as rural or unemployed people, also had to be included. Above all, said Muller, communication was the most important task facing everyone. Building links was where all strategies should start. "We cannot take the moral high ground," he said, "we haven't got the answers, but we must begin to open up contact."

If nothing else, the conference started that process.

Sue Valentine is Media Co-ordinator with Idasa.

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