

# From crisis to catastrophe in the classroom

*Reviewing developments in black education over the past year, Janet Heard argues that 'crisis' could shortly become 'catastrophe' unless democratic organisations intervene decisively*

**W**HILE 1990 has been marked by some normalisation in the political arena, the crisis in education has deepened. Pressure is mounting for education to be given its due priority - whatever the demands of the negotiating process.

Organisations are warning that unless urgent interventions are made to halt the breakdown in the learning process, which this year has been marked by a complete breakdown in authority at schools and growing confusion among pupils, the reference to 'crisis' will be euphemistic. It will be more appropriate to talk of 'catastrophe'.

The deterioration has occurred despite efforts by the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC) and its sectoral organisations. They have sought to restore a culture of learning into the school community - while at the same time intensifying pressure on the state.

Exam results are one way in which the extent of the crisis can be gauged. Alarm bells rang at the end of last year after the announcement that only 42 percent of matric pupils at DET schools (excluding the bantustans) passed. Hot on the heels of the announcement came reports of widespread irregularities in the marking of exam scripts.

There is general agreement that there is no chance that pupils who are sitting at the moment for the final year exams - which end on November 29 - will improve on or even meet last year's desperately low pass rate.

The realistically gloomy forecast for matric exam results has served to worsen the morale of pupils already battling to motivate themselves under a discredited and inefficient system. And their efforts are not helped by an environment which is not conducive to effective learning.

The DET was pressured into postponing the end of year exams, and has agreed that pupils who obtain at least a 20 percent pass can write supplementary exams early next year.

A key short-term strategy of the NECC is to get as many pupils as possible through the year in order to prevent even worse conditions at schools next year. It has been pushing for a lowering of the minimum pass required to write supplementary exams.

The effects of year after year of 'bantustan education' cannot be concealed when black pupils' exam results are compared with their white counterparts. In the case of whites, all but 2 percent of pupils passed.

However, a crisis is developing in the white education department as well, though it is the exact reverse of that occurring in black schools. White schools have too many resources and declining pupil enrolment. Last year nine white Transvaal schools were forced to close down and there were 177 225 vacancies countrywide.

At DET schools, there was an official shortage of 60 343 primary school places and 99 506 secondary school places, and a pupil-teacher ratio of 54:1, compared to a ratio of 20:1 in white schools. In the bantustans, the conditions are more critical.

**T**he root causes of the continuing education crisis and the steps necessary to begin transforming the system have been stated over and over again and will not be repeated here.

However, this year, there has been a heightened awareness that, in order to alleviate the present chaos which a future government will inherit, pupils should return to schools, organise themselves and understand the important role that education will play in the shaping of a future economic and political policy.

A number of socio-economic crises have weakened the call to attend classes this year. For instance, the violence in Natal is estimated to have displaced about 500 000 pupils. Moreover, the recent power and water cuts in townships affected by service charge boycotts have brought education to a standstill.



A number of other developments added to the general crisis this year. Heightened political expectations comprise one set. Another is an increased sense of urgency among pupils - and in a significant move this year, among teachers too.

The success of the back-to-school campaign at the start of this year encouraged the return of large numbers of pupils who had been forced to discontinue their education. This placed an added burden on overworked and underpaid teachers, and exacerbated overcrowding.

The stubborn failure of the DET, its local bureaucrats and the bantustan education departments to provide additional facilities and a sympathetic ear to pupil and teacher grievances frustrated efforts to bring some semblance of stability to the learning process.

The unbanning of organisations in February enabled structures to begin rebuilding and developing a more open, mass-based style. But many of these structures lack resources, and have battled to build strong and accountable leaderships.

Problems which have arisen centre on a lack of consultation between leadership and members, a lack of discipline among the youth, and a lack of communication between local and national structures.

Moreover, weak organisation and deteriorating social conditions in the townships have resulted in an alarming increase in gangsterism, rape, gambling, intimidation and absenteeism.

The year has seen some change in direction and tactics within some organisations. If continued, these may yield positive results in the long term.

When the NECC was still banned at the end of 1989, it changed its name from 'crisis' committee to 'co-ordinating' committee. This signified, among others, an intention to draw up alternatives to the present system. One such project has involved setting up a committee to investigate a future education policy for South Africa.

*Student power: an education crisis meeting in Alexandra township at the beginning of what has been a turbulent year for students, teachers and parents alike*

The NECC has also decided that it will not disband and merge with the ANC. Instead, it will remain an independent non-party political organisation. This, it believes, will better equip it to continue articulating the interests of the widest possible range of people concerned about education.

The year also saw attempts by the NECC and affiliates to hold talks with government department officials. At the same time, defiant actions - one of the most dramatic being the hunger strike by Soweto parents during a sit-in at the DET offices in Johannesburg - continued.

The DET undertook to supply much-needed textbooks, and Education and Development Aid Minister Stoffel van der Merwe talked of forming an 'education compact' involving all interest groups including parents, pupils and teachers.

These undertakings have, in the view of many, proved to be either 'half-truths' or empty promises. For its part, the DET merely sought to shift responsibility for its failure to create conditions conducive

to learning on to popular organisations, pupils and teachers. It was they, DET alleged, who were responsible for the deepening crisis in education.

**A** relatively new development this year has been the assertion of sectional interests within black education. One of the more significant was the month-long Transvaal teachers' strike, which posed a strong challenge to the system. It marked a growth in militancy in teacher organisation, which had previously been reluctant to directly engage its employer, the state.

As such, it was one factor stimulating the establishment of the giant South African Democratic Teachers' Union in October.

However, the strike was regional and sporadic, and it came at the height of the back-to school campaign. The NECC, representing teachers, pupils and anxious parents, initially backed the chalks-down. But conflict arose when the strike showed no signs of coming to an end and ultimately brought education to a stand-

still for a month.

The lengthy duration of the strike owed much to the intransigence of the state and a lack of unity and strong leadership among teachers.

Nick Taylor of Wits University's Education Policy Unit argues that while sectional actions by groupings in education will probably prove to have been detrimental to matric results this year, these conflicting interests could yet yield positive long-term results.

His view is that only once all groupings have articulated their interests and strengthened their organisational structures will it be possible to sit down to negotiate a future for education.

There has been criticism of the ANC for failing to tackle the education crisis head-on this year. The ANC has been wrapped up this year with adapting to legality inside South Africa, with building structures and with broader issues. But there have recently been signs that it has begun to address the crisis in education. Its appointment of an education advisory committee around Sached director John Samuel, who is due to become ANC head of education in the new year, should equip it to play a more active role.

The NECC is mounting a number of short-term interventions to prevent the complete collapse of learning during the transition process, and one of its primary goals is to re-establish a learning ethos in pupils.

NECC information officer Mel Holland summed up the difficulty of the task ahead. She explained the NECC was not trying to give the present system credibility by encouraging learning, but was trying to make learning a credible activity.

One of the ways to achieve this was to build legitimate and accountable structures such as PTAs and SRCs.

As 1990 closes, it is clear that education is verging on collapse and catastrophe. If efforts begun this year are intensified - such as the back-to-school campaign, the development of teacher and pupil organisations, the re-establishment of a culture of learning, the building of credible structures and the debate over a future education policy - there is a glimmer of hope that the crisis will not create absolutely impossible administrative and political problems for any future democratic government.

But this will require a concentrated national effort by all democratic organisations. •

## Learning how to cook the books

SINCE the beginning of 1988 three reports have been released detailing widespread irregularities, dishonesty, nepotism and corruption within the Department of Education and Training. All three reports have come from the Van Den Heever commission, under Justice Leonora van den Heever.

The commission first investigated the DET's requisition of a R4,8-million computer video system through Learning Technologies. One of the main figures was Willem Fourie, son of then-DET director general Braam Fourie, and programme manager for Learning Technologies.

The commission heard that the DET had, without calling for tenders, paid millions of rands to the company. The commission found that Fourie senior was guilty of irregular conduct. In 1989 the report was tabled in parliament: acting director-general Dirk Meiring was axed and 11 officials were suspended. Since Fourie had already retired, he escaped departmental action.

In the second report, the commission outlined printing projects undertaken by DET deputy director-general Jaap Strydom's son, Thinus Strydom, who had a print company called Forma Publications.

In December 1989 the commission reported claims that the DET was defrauded of millions of rands by public servants belonging to a secret section known as Gemkom. Although no figures were given, a witness testified that R10-million could be the value of the contracts obtained by Gemkom. Seven officials were named as helping Thinus Strydom secure contracts for printing.

Following the release of the third report this year, it was announced that criminal charges could be brought against DET officials after the revelation that irregularities and dishonesty were the 'order of the day' in the running of youth camps.

Johannesburg DET regional director Peet Struwig, notorious for his hard-line approach to progressive organisations, was transferred to Pretoria head office immediately after possibly being implicated in the theft of money from private funds.

The commission named six other officials and former officials who could be guilty of misconduct, and found that control of financial matters had been particularly inept.