Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
International Journal of Educational Development 27 (2007) 182–193
International Journal of EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

The "A" factor: Coming to terms with the question of legacy in South African education

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Abstract

This paper attempts to offer an alternative framework for assessing education delivery in South Africa. Its purpose is to develop an analytic approach for understanding education delivery in South Africa in the last 11 years and to use this framework to pose a set of strategic questions about how policy might be framed to deal with delivery. The paper begins with a quick review of the country's achievements and challenges in education and shows that a failure to produce a high quality education system remains the country's primary challenge. The broad approach that is taken is to suggest that dominant approaches for understanding this lack of performance underplay the specificity of the country's context and specifically so its apartheid legacy. This legacy, it is argued, continues to be determinative in shaping, and accounting for the character of current social behaviour in the country, including the performance of children in schools.

Keywords: South Africa; Learner attainment; Educational policy; Race; Class

1. Introduction

The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 brought to an end to one of the great struggles of the second part of the 20th century. With the coming of democracy also came a sense of hope for its people and for the world. Central to the story of the new South Africa was, and remains, the promise of an end to division, separation and inequality and the beginning of a new order of social harmony and development and prosperity. Ten years into this bright new world, the portents are, however, less than auspicious. South Africans are having to come to terms with the reality, as the Americans did in the post-bellum era, that its almost 350-year long history cannot be remade in a mere decade, and much less can its social formations, inscribed as they are in the fracturing language of race and class, be re-composed by 10 years of democracy. And so, both South Africa and the world have to look anew at the "promise" it holds.

As part of this new reflection, several key stock-taking exercises (see Calland and Graham, 2005; Daniel et al., 2003; Buhlungu et al., 2005; Brown, 2005) have been undertaken within the country in recent years. Interestingly, aside from the state's own 10-year review (see Republic of South Africa, 2004), all the reviews show that progress in strategic areas of social development has either been minimal or that stasis has occurred. Most critically, while the economy has grown markedly in this period it has shed rather than generated new jobs, housing targets have not been met and perceptions have come to proliferate of a deterioration in the quality

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doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.07.006

of health services (see Hess, Cape Times, 13 December, 2005, p. 10). Feelings on the ground have confirmed the findings of formal evaluations. People have taken to the streets in townships and small towns across the country to express their unhappiness about standards of social delivery. An unconfirmed assessment made in a public forum recently by a member of cabinet suggested that over 6000 popular protests had taken place in 2005 alone. These protests have brought to the surface a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the failure of government to deliver on its promises with respect to housing, the provision of basic utilities such as water, health services, sanitation and electricity. While the protests have often been spontaneous, and in this sense recall the early grassroot eruptions that took place in the apartheid 1980s, they have, as often, been undergirded and supported by significant civil society movements such as the Treatment Action Committee, the Landless People's Movement, electricity action committees and so on, consisting of experienced activists with long histories of anti-apartheid struggle.

Interestingly, the range of issues around which the current wave of dissatisfaction is being mobilised has not included education. Where educational struggles constituted the vanguard of the internal anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, and catalysed other struggles such as consumer boycotts and rent boycotts, significantly, education has not, in these early years of the new millennium, entered the public consciousness as a site of possible political mobilisation. With the exception of relatively isolated instances where communities have organised around issues of school access and the lack of schools to accommodate their children, education has not come to be seen in the same light as health, water and electricity. Why this is so might have to do with the fact that in important respects the experience of education is a good deal better for the majority of South Africans than it had been under apartheid. And yet, as the reviews referred to above and new research are beginning to show, education is in serious difficulty.

How might one assess the achievements and challenges of education delivery? What kind of interpretive framework should one be working with to explain the nature of the country's performance in delivering quality education? The purpose of this short study, by way of assessing the state of education in the country, is to develop an analytic approach for understanding education delivery in South Africa in the last 11 years and to use this framework to pose a set of strategic questions about how policy might be framed to deal with delivery. The broad approach that is taken is to suggest that dominant approaches for understanding the performance of the system underplay the specificity of the country's context and specifically so its apartheid legacy. Significantly few studies have confronted the full complexity of this legacy. In this respect the work of Fuller (1999), Harber (2001), Marais (1998), inter alia, have been useful. They have drawn attention to the interlocking nature of the past and the present. Using this platform, this contribution argues that the apartheid legacy continues to be determinative in shaping, and accounting for the character of current social behaviour in the country, including the performance of children in schools. That rich and white children perform better than poor and black children to the degree that they do is a product of the country's history. It could hardly be otherwise. It is acknowledged here that this history can be used as an all-absolving über-trope for the country's ills and so free individuals of the responsibility they must take for their own lives and for their social accountability in every area of what they do as citizens and workers and professionals. Its role, however, must not be under-estimated. This paper is written as part of a deliberate attempt to re-institute a historical consciousness of how our present sociology, particularly the sociology of learner performance, is constituted.

The discussion begins with an overview of the country's achievements and failures in education and then proceeds, towards developing an analytic framework, to the task of explaining what the nature of its balance sheet is. In conclusion it makes some suggestions about a way forward.

In setting up the theoretical approach I use in this paper, two points of departure need to be understood. The first is that the compromise between the apartheid government and the liberation movements developed in the early 1990s was brokered around the reform, as opposed to the dismantling, of the country's major social institutions, including the school. Flowing from this, and leading to the second point, these social institutions therefore had to be restructured within the rules and the bureaucratic parameters of the institutions as they were found in 1994. The upshot of this, I suggest, is that the political and administrative apparatus of the state does not change. Its form remains intact. The

preoccupation of the new government (as opposed to the state which does not change), in the context of this transition, is to essentially give the form of the state it has inherited a new character. While this process is projected as a transformation exercise, its project is more correctly a re-forming one. Central to this process of re-forming is, firstly, the replacement of strategic personnel such as bureaucratic heads in state departments and secondly the introduction of new reformative policies to mandate the work of the new heads (see Soudien and Sayed, 2004). The work of Harber (2001) and Marais (1998) is important in understanding the socio-economic conditions surrounding these developments. Harber (2001, p. 13), for example, has drawn attention to what he descry "the tension at the heart of the government policy" and makes clear that the state's difficulties emanate from its social democratic political orientation and its commitment to a market-driven competition economic philosophy.

In this paper, I want to suggest that this process of re-formation and the circumstances in which it took place has critically circumscribed the ability of the new government to deal with what I call the substance, as opposed to the form, of its challenge. Central in this challenge, marking the everyday life-world of people, is the inheritance of apartheid and the social inequality that characterised it—what I call the A(partheid) factor—manifested in a range of indicators from school access to the quality of the schooling experience. The argument below will be made that the policy measures of the new government have not sufficiently comprehended the complexity of this inheritance. I contend, therefore, that the core of the policy failure of the new government was its inability to grasp the nettle of the relationship between form and substance. I suggest here that this approach profoundly misunderstands the nature of form and its relationship with the substance, how people experience the everyday. My argument pivots around the following contention: it is assumed in policy that the everyday is amenable to managerial manipulation. The central assumption is that transformation in the personnel of government—a transformation of form—would yield changes in the way—the substance—government manages its business and so would ultimately impact and improve people's everyday experience. If the bureaucratic order was redefined in terms of its personnel and new standing orders were placed in front of these personnel, it was believed that an improvement in the levels of inequality that people were experiencing would follow.

In taking issue with this approach, I want to argue that features of the everyday, manifested as social phenomena, and which are supposedly the object of address of the bureaucratic order—the bureaucracy is after all the modern world's mechanism for bringing a particular kind of order to the everyday—are obdurate and that while they can and indeed do respond to the managerial ministrations of the bureaucracy, they are more fundamentally inserted into and a part of other social forces in terms of which they are constituted. In this essay I argue that the substance of these manifestations is shaped by both structural and cultural influences and that policy innovation is required which recognises and can understand how they are constituted and so act upon them in more than a re-formative way.[1] This action calls for policy which is not simply *done* to people, but works with people in a deeply engaged way through on-going (not occasional, such as currently happens) consultation. The key example used in this paper to illustrate the nature of the distance of policy from these social phenomena is learner attainment. The argument is made that learner attainment, or the lack of it, representing the quality of the everyday for children in school, needs to be understood in relation to what it *substantially* stands for, rather than the symptomatic *form* it might suggest. Symptomatically absence of quality is fixable. The problem is more than about managing symptoms however. The substance of learner failure must be read as a sociological question. The point of policy, I argue, must be to engage with the sociological substance of the everyday and not simply or only the form it takes. In this respect, this paper seeks to supplement the arguments made by scholars such as Harber (2001, p. 85), who talks of the challenge of the South African transition as being rooted in financial and

[1] I am also aware, but do not have the space here to engage this line of thought, that there are other forces involved in giving educational policy and educational restructuring its particular character. I am particularly aware of the globalising pressures which have propelled South African policy in the direction of an international universalism, as in curricular innovation, for example, but critically also in areas of financial policy, such as World Bank prescriptions around the proportion of the national budget that should be devoted to social welfare. This dimension of globalisation must be taken into consideration in an attempt to understand how a preoccupation with form misrecognises local needs and the specificity of the everyday world as it is constituted out of the influence of local history.

resource constraints and Gilmour (2001, p. 16), who has pointed to "policy inconsistencies" in the implementation of new laws which lie in the conflation of equity and equality, to draw attention to the enduring legacies of apartheid. The contribution this paper seeks to make is to make clear by way of undertaking an educational balance sheet and showing how the results of this balance sheet might be assessed.

2. Achievements and failures in the last 10 years

The scale of educational devastation in South Africa at the point when it became a democracy in 1994 was enormous. The country had an institutionalised system of educational inequality characterised by a large degraded black sector on the one hand, and an administratively and pedagogically privileged white sector on the other. The black sector, to compound these difficulties, was moreover the object of political attack by those who were supposed to be its beneficiaries. The effect of this attack was to subvert the educational apparatus from within and to render it ungovernable. When the new government came into power in 1994 this sector was barely functional.[2] It is the nature of this functionality and the new government's understanding of what it had inherited which it is hoped will be shown to be the challenge later in this paper.

In addressing this situation the new government made significant strides. These are enumerated below (and are derived in part from Bloch, 2005):

1. Important symbolically, the 17 odd racialised education departments in the country were dissolved into a single national education department which assumed responsibility for developing a set of signature policies of which the most important was the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In terms of this Act, the schooling system was redefined as a single non-racial and equitable system. Significantly, also, the SASA made an attempt to bring disaffected parents back into the schooling system through the establishment of school governing bodies which gave parents considerable power over how their children's schools were to function. Some of these powers, it needs to be noted, have recently been reduced. Accompanying this were legislative and policy regulations aimed at shaping (i) the learning environment and (ii) the organisational and bureaucratic infrastructure.
2. In the provinces, as the work of Fleisch (2002) showed with respect to Gauteng province, administrative structures which were thought to be appropriate for the developmental needs of the system were established. A key administrative innovation was the establishment in most provinces of districts. The objective of the district was to devolve authority and to bring delivery of services closer to schools.
3. At the national level, a set of measures was introduced aimed at redressing the imbalances in teacher–pupil ratios inherited from the apartheid order. This measure attempted to establish norms that would hold for the system as a whole and to provide for the redeployment of teachers from schools where the ratio was deemed to be too low to schools where this figure was considered to be high. In the Western Cape, where many schools were deemed to be overstaffed, over 6000 teacher posts were closed down.
4. Compulsory education was introduced with the consequence that South Africa now has reached its enrolment goals in terms of primary universal education where figures approaching the 100% are being registered with gross enrolment ratios (GER) standing at 103% in 2001 in the compulsory phase of schooling (see DoE, 2003, p. 11). It is also apparent (see Bloch, 2005, p. 9) that the country has gone beyond its gender balance targets.
5. As Bloch (2005, p. 9) points out "Within the fiscal landscape … there has been a massive emphasis and priority on the education budget with some 6% of GDP and approximately 21% of the national budget being allocated (to education) at its height." A sum of approximately R65 billion (US$ 6 billion) was allocated to education in 2003.

[2] John "Shoes" Mashoeu, a well-known soccer personality in South Africa who was at Namedi High School in Soweto in the turbulent seventies, recently made the following remark about his education in the 1970s and 1980s: "Wednesdays, which were sports days, were my favourite days because I could do what I loved. But as for the academic side, I hated every little bit. The political era of the time didn't do much for us and, in the process, 'untaught' us. I passed my matric but still felt empty" (The Sunday Times, 11 December 2005:18, story by K Mokoena).

6. A critical innovation was the introduction of the new curriculum, Curriculum 2005, and its revision, the Revised National Curricular Statements (RNCS) in 2002. In tandem with this, and in some ways to support it, the government also put in place the following: quality assurance mechanisms for appraising teacher development and school improvement; The South African Council for Educators, a statutory body for the regulation of the profession and the development of the educator corps. Curriculum 2005 (C2005) based on an outcome-based approach sought to place emphasis on learner-centredness in contrast to the apartheid government's rote learning approach.
7. Underpinning the new curriculum was the establishment of a qualifications framework under the jurisdiction of a body called the South African Qualifications Authority. The overarching objective of the framework was to introduce the principle of vertical and horizontal portability of qualifications (and skills) into the general educational system with the objective of opening up and democratising learning pathways for the country's socially and educationally diverse population.
8. The exit examination for the country, the matriculation examination or the Senior Certificate examination, saw significant improvements in pupils' results. Where overall pass rates stood at 58% in 1994 and 47.4% in 1997, by 2003 they had improved to 73.3% (Bloch, 2005, p. 9).
9. The higher education landscape was rationalised with the objective of raising levels of quality and efficiency in the system through the Higher Education Act of 1998. Black student enrolment at higher education institutions grew from 191,000 in 1993 to 343,000 in 1999 and 449,000 in 2003. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) grew from R70 m in 1994 to close to a R1 billion rands in 2004 (Bloch, 2005, p. 10).
10. Since January 2000, provincial departments of education have been working assiduously at institutionalising their structures and policies. Every province was required by national treasury to develop five-year medium term planning frameworks (see Soudien, 2005). Some provinces went further and developed strategies such as the Human Resources Development Strategy, *Vision 2020*, in the Western Cape (WCED, 2005).
11. At the national level the Department of Education announced its *Implementation Plan for Tirisano* (Department of Education, 2000) which specified five key programmes, including one for achieving school effectiveness and educator professionalism, that were intended as the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, said, "to reflect what we can realistically expect to achieve in the time we have set ourselves" (Department of Education, 2000, p. 3).
12. Critically, the Department of Education instituted the commendable strategy of subjecting its policies to review and appointed a number of key Ministerial Committees and internal review committee in areas such as school financing, curriculum, school governance and teacher education. In putting these committees in place the department attempted to bring strategic outside expertise to bear on its work.[3] Practices also exist in the national department for working closely with the provincial departments in areas such as curriculum development. As a consequence of the review into C2005, extensive curriculum development work was initiated by the national department.

These achievements, in relation to what pertained in South Africa before 1994, are considerable and in large measure account for why education has not been made the object of social protest in the same way as have other areas of social delivery. Measures such as the SASA have been embraced and appropriated by the South African community. In the last wave of school governing body elections, for example, virtually every single school in the country was able to successfully elect its complement of parent representatives drawing in over 250,000 volunteer parents in approximately 27,000 public schools in the country (see DOE, 2004).

Impressive as these achievements have been, they have been blighted by the problem of quality in learner attainment across the country. While the system has had to deal with problems in a number

[3]It needs to be said that the Department has struggled to develop a systematic way of engaging with the reviews and the insights the reviews have put at its disposal. How the reviews, virtually every single one of them, have been utilised has been less than clear. The relationship between the review recommendations and the policy amendments and adjustments made by the department has not followed any clear and transparent process.

of other areas, such as maladministration (not, of course, inconsequential for the question of quality) (see Godden, 2005), racism (Vally and Dalamba, 1999) and infrastructural shortages (Fiske and Ladd, 2004), quality has proved to be its Achilles heel.

The dimensions of South Africa's educational quality challenges have only recently come into clear perspective and have emerged out of the following:

- The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) carried out in 1994/1995 (Howie, 2001, p. 12).
- The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (http://www.sacmeq.org) tests carried out, in two waves, first amongst a number of countries in the region in the late 1990 without South Africa and between 2000 and 2003 (SACMEQII) with South Africa.
- A national Grade 3 cohort analysis looking at attainment rates for literacy and numeracy (Department of Education, 2002), and
- Four iterations, two for Grade 3 and two for Grade 6, of attainment tests in the Western Cape between 2002 and 2005.

Both the TIMSS and the SACMEQ studies involved scientifically determined groups of learners in their samples. With respect to the TIMSS study, South Africa, as one of the 41 countries and the only African country in the list, had tests carried out on approximately 15,000 students in over 400 schools distributed around the country. The study was repeated in 1998 in 37 countries (The Third International Mathematics and Science Study Repeat, TIMSS-R). While an important core of countries remained from the first phase of the study, the second involved, significantly, a number of countries with similar developing-economy profiles to South Africa. The Western Cape tests were more comprehensive and involved every school in the province where there were more than 50 students in a grade. In each wave over 30,000 students were tested.

The findings of the various tests were remarkably similar and all showed exceedingly low levels of competence across the nation for both mathematics and reading. The 2001 national Grade 3 systemic assessment (the final report appeared in 2003) reported an average score of 30% for numeracy and 54% for literacy (Department of Education, 2003, p. 24). TIMMS-R placed Grade 8 South African learners 44% below the mean scores of all participating countries. South African pupils, moreover, came last in the list of 39 countries and attained a mean score of 275 out of a possible total of 800 marks (Howie, 2001, p. 18). Significantly, the best performing pupils in South Africa scored at the level of the mean of pupils in leading countries in the list such as Singapore. Less than 0.5% of South Africa's pupils featured in the international top 10% benchmark (Howie, 2001, p. 19). In the monitoring learner assessment (MLA) study for Grade 4 students, South African learners attained an average numeracy score of 30%, placing it last amongst the 12 participating African countries (Taylor et al., 2003, pp. 19–27). The calamity of these scores was repeated in the SACMEQII evaluation for Grade 6 which showed that relative to the pre-determined mean of 500 points as a benchmark for the project, South African learners scored below this value for both Mathematics (486.2) and Reading (492.4) (Moloi and Strauss, 2005, p. 65).[4] The study found that the modal competence level for reading for Grade 6 learners in South Africa essentially stood at Level 3 (Basic reading). This was only achieved by 19.1% of the learners in the study (Moloi and Strauss, 2005, p. 67). Only 26% of the learners could read above a Level 4 standard (independent reading). In mathematics the modal level of attainment for Grade 6 learners was Level 2 (Emergent numeracy), which was attained by 44.4% of the learners: "in addition, there were 7.8% of the learners who achieved only Level 1 (Beginning numeracy). Altogether this left less than 50% of the learners reaching competence levels higher than emergent numeracy" (Moloi and Strauss, 2005, pp. 68–69).

The Grade 6 tests in the Western Cape Education Department amongst 34,596 pupils in 2003 showed similar results:

(i) 15.6%, 5243 out of those tested, passed the numeracy test at the Grade 6 level,
(ii) only 35% passed the literacy test at the Grade 6 level, and

[4]The process of conducting this test, such as the development of the sample, and analysing the results can be found in the report by Moloi and Strauss, 2005. However, the full results are available on the SACMEQ website www.sacmeq.org/indicate.htm.

(iii) 63.3% of the learners failed both tests at the Grade 6 level (Western Cape Education Department Media Release, 25 May 2004).[5]

In assessing these outcomes in general, questions might be raised about whether they can be evaluated collectively, given the different ways in which they were constructed and carried out. The TIMSS-R benchmarks, for example, were very different in their international measures of standards to the particularised curriculum benchmarks developed on the basis of C2005 in the Western Cape. Questions can also be raised, as they have in the Western Cape, and has been the case elsewhere in the world, about the validity of testing (see Jones, 1996, p. 15; Burstein et al., 1995–1996; Koretz and Diebert, 1995–1996). However one approaches the tests, and taking regard of their criticisms, it needs to be acknowledged that they have an undeniable value and point, it is suggested here, to deep systemic problems. The system, it should be boldly acknowledged, is not working for the majority of South Africa's children.

In taking stock of the country's achievements and challenges, it is an undeniable fact that the country has made tremendous strides. But, and the reality is an uncomfortable one, one has to come to the conclusion that the impact it is making on the quality of the learning experience of young children is questionable.[6]

How one takes this analysis further is by no means clear-cut. In bringing this section of the discussion to a close, however, and setting up the next, there are two related and significant dimensions of the results that offer a way forward for understanding the specific nature of the South African problem.

The first of the two features referred to above is that relative to the performance of children in other countries with similar socio-economic profiles, South African children are performing distinctly more poorly. While it may be so that South African children do better than their counterparts in Swaziland and Lesotho, this is, pointedly, not the case for Zimbabwe and Botswana (see Moloi and Strauss, 2005), and much less so for countries such as Morocco, the Philippines and Chile (Howie, 2001). The second is that children from middle-class and black backgrounds in South Africa perform more like their working-class black than their middle-class white counterparts (Van der Berg, 2005).[7] Van der Berg, analysing the SACMEQII data, argues that children "in poor (historically black) schools,… with a middle-class background perform as poorly as their less well-off fellow students" (Van der Berg, 2005, p. 65). Children who are in affluent schools, on the other hand, routinely perform much better (in the Western Cape by a margin of something like 50% in median scores) than all the rest. When one is in a school that is regarded as affluent one's chances of attaining high scores on basic key indicators increase markedly. Conversely, without the other overlays which one could put on the results, such as race and gender, children from the middle-income group perform more like their very poor counterparts than the next social strata immediately above them, the affluent.

These two facts, taken together, provide one with something of a way forward in understanding the specific nature of the trouble that the South African educational system is in. In coming to the conclusion that the South African system is confronted with more challenges than accomplishments, the question now has to be asked why this is so. Why is it that a middle-income country, with significantly more resources than all of its neighbours, even put together, has achievement levels, especially in education, that are significantly lower than most of its neighbours? And why, alongside of this, are children who are in the middle-class socio-economic strata so much more like their very poor counterparts when, intuitively, one would have expected

[5]The full results are contained in a report of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) entitled "Grade 6 Learner Assessment Study 2003." This report can be accessed through the offices of the Research Division of the WCED. Please note that figures cited here have been made public through media statements released by the WCED.

[6]It might be said that conditions would have been worse under apartheid. The problem is that there are no learner attainment records at a national or provincial level for the pre-democracy era. And so one cannot say categorically that performance is either worse or better than it was before. Anecdotally, older teachers, especially in the former House of Representative schools (for children classified coloured), are making the claim that standards have fallen, but empirically the grounds for upholding this claim do not exist. What one can say is that the situation is not satisfactory.

[7]Middle-class, using Van der Berg's broad approach, refers here to children who fall in the national Department of Education's fourth quintile where the first quintile is the "most poor" and the fifth quintile, using departmental terminology, "least poor". This least poor is also sometimes described as "affluent", to distinguish it from the "middle-class" in the quintile immediately beneath it.

them to be much more like their affluent counterparts? Why is it, unlike in most other places in the world, that socio-economic status only "kicks in" for learners at very high socio-economic status levels and why is it, as the SACMEQII data shows, that socio-economic stfatus improves one's learning chances only moderately at the middle-class level?

3. Understanding the puzzle of performance in South Africa

These two dimensions of the results described above and the data, both at a national and provincial level, point, it can be argued, to social issues that are at the core of South Africa's difficulties and challenges as a developing country and that come to present South Africa in distinctive ways (if not as a special case). They have far-reaching consequences for understanding social development, community upliftment and school improvement and pose questions, in terms of the latter, at the local level about schools' ability to respond to the new conditions in which they find themselves, including asking what might be happening in traditional middle-class schools in the black community which routinely in the past had produced excellent results and no longer are. They also pose questions at a national level about the distinct kind of educational reforms that are necessary for producing the levels of education that are necessary for the country's skills strategy.

In attempting to explain why failure continues in South African schools a number of analysts have entered the fray. The most audible response, as far as the public is concerned, has been the answer provided by Jonathan Jansen (2005, p. 73) saying that South Africa has failed its young through the neglect of what are essentially the managerial matters of schooling, teachers, textbooks and time: "One way to explain the puzzle of increasing investments in national education without a corresponding increase in student achievement… is to track the lack of concentrated and co-ordinated management of these three key factors: teachers, textbooks and time". The work of Taylor, Vinjevold in *Getting Learning Right* (1999) and Taylor et al., *Getting Schools Working* (2003) is useful, making, as they do, similar arguments to that of Jansen. So too is the work of Crouch and Mabogoane, 2001, p.). The latter make the argument that "all of the disadvantage of being in a poor township school could be overcome via whatever knowledge and behaviours teachers with three more years of training exhibit over other teachers."

These approaches are profoundly important. Valuable as they are as explanations for learner failure, it could be argued that they do not deal with the problem posed above of the difference between South Africa and its comparable international counterparts, and the difference between South Africa's affluent and the rest of its social strata. While the answer of teachers, textbooks and time goes a long way to explain the South African situation, it does so only in what one might call a symptomatic and general way. It does not get at the social specificity of the problem suggested by the country's performance profile. Crouch and Mabogoane relate management to the legacy of apartheid, but essentially propose sorting out the management question on its own, almost abstracted terms. I am suggesting instead that their challenge needs to be understood in terms of its deeper history, and here the integrated framework used by Harber and Davies (1997, p. 168) where they suggest that if maximum achievement for all is to be understood, one needs to have all the actors involved in the process in one's sights. The key point that I am wishing to make here, therefore, is that in conjunction with issues of management one needs to understand the social aetiology of the difficulties that schools are going through and to recognise that they are deeper than the kinds of managerial malaises that one might be encountering elsewhere in the world, from whence the managerial prescriptions generally come, and that they have to be understood in the context of the social production of the people who inhabit our schools, our learners and our teachers and the social relations that define their lives. In terms of this there are social issues at play, inside and outside of the school, that we need to identify and analyse to understand the specific nature of learner attainment in South Africa.

Towards developing a framework I acknowledge the broad framework provided by agencies such as UNESCO (see Unesco, 2005), and the work of Harber and Davies (1997) referred to above. Important about the latter is its attempt to incorporate local conditions into the analysis. What the Unesco approach offers is clear advice about making the classroom the focus of one's policy interventions. It includes the following:

- Support reforms that focus on teaching and learning outcomes: appropriate goals and relevant

content, values as well as skills, sufficient and effective instructional time; structured teaching in child-centred classrooms; assessments for learning improvement.
- Get the enabling environment right, with good learning materials that are used well by teachers; a safe, healthy infrastructure, professional, motivated teachers, and well-organised, well-led schools.
- Build strong professional support systems and knowledge infrastructures (Bloch, 2005, p. 15).

In terms of understanding the South African educational landscape and poor learner performance in particular, it is true that these elements continue to be absent in many schools. As critics have shown (see Godden, 2005), there is a great deal wrong with South African schools in these terms. The problem, however, with the UNESCO (2005) framework is that it is amenable to and has been appropriated in a technicist manner. While it has an awareness of social context, and so included in the direction it provides, for example, is the injunction to "understand the diverse needs of learners, especially disadvantaged learners" (2001, p. 44), it lends itself to a narrowed and decontextualised focus of how learning might take place. What most people remember and use are the agency's pointers to the managerial end of the challenge to learning. Neglected is the social nature of the entire process in which managerial tasks are set.

What a new framework needs to accommodate and take heed of is the production of learner performance as a social act, and to understand, specifically, that there are very distinctive social conditions that precede and accompany the child on his or her way to school, and that, also, come into play while the child is in school. With respect to the former, or what one might describe as the external social factors, included in an explanation of the factors that precede entry into the school are physical and cultural forces and influences: hunger, physical and emotional trauma, exposure to distinctive leisure and recreational past-times. In some ways, the same kind of observations could be made about the teacher. Once they are inside the school, how the formality of the official curriculum is mediated is profoundly interpellated by the teachers' command of the discipline, the cultural capital of the children and their dispositions to work. In terms of this, the policy reforms that are proposed by UNESCO need to be understood as taking place within the context of a specific set of social conditions. In amending the UNESCO framework for generating education quality, what is described as the context influencing variables such as learner characteristics, enabling inputs and outcomes (see Bloch, 2005, p. 7; Unesco, 2005, pp. 35–36) needs to be able to show how, under different circumstances and conditions, different elements within the context can assume a greater or lesser importance. It is this that is understated in the UNESCO framework. In a possible South African version of such a framework, social context is absolutely central; the conditions that need to be emphasised must include race, class, gender and language, inter alia. In the absence of such a foregrounding, one will have a difficulty in attempting to understand how quality is produced (in this respect see Harber, 2001).

How then might such a framework help in understanding the specificity of the South African case?

As a point of departure Van der Berg's (2005, p. 65) findings are crucial. In talking of the SACMEQII data he makes the argument that the extent of inequality in educational outcomes between South African schools is far greater than for any other of the countries in the sample "and is much higher than for most other studies worldwide. A selection of almost 50 such national surveys around the world reveals a median value of 0.25 for the intra-class correlation coefficient for reading, whereas South Africa's value is 0.70." He makes the point that this reflects the extent of inequality between rather than within schools. He goes on to elaborate that:

> learner socio-economic differentials on educational outcomes depends on schools mean SES, much more than is the case for any other country in the (southern African) region and arguably for the rest of the world.
>
> For the top layer of schools (historically white and Indian schools), individual SES and school level SES interact positively to produce improved outcomes. Schools with a lower mean SES (historically black schools), on the other hand, on average fail to transform the future of children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, but also reduce the chances of children from better backgrounds or improving their status in later life. (Van der Berg, 2005, p. 69)

Important also in the way he analyses the data is the recognition that "outside of the richest schools,

SES has only a mild impact on test scores…. A threshold effect appears to operate that holds back even the middle-class from performing well outside of the schools of the rich'' (Van der berg, 2005, p. 70). These findings are extremely significant, but, interestingly, Van der Berg fails to explore them. He says quite clearly that there is a problem with the explanatory power of ''models relating to school inputs such as teachers, textbooks and equipment…. More resources do not necessarily, or unqualifiedly improve school performance'' (Van der berg, 2005, p. 70), but, unsatisfactorily, brings his analysis to a close by making a plea for improving the primary levels of schooling.

What his analysis is pointing to, and this is where one also needs to bring into perspective the question of the South African median learner performance relative to that of its most comparable international counterparts, is the need to understand how the social histories and the social experiences of both learners and their teachers are coming into play in the South African school. Why is it that the South African child who now commands relatively strong material resources in his or her home (as compared to that of his or her parents) can only ''cash-in'' that advantage in an environment where everything is operating optimally?

In taking a social analysis of this inability, it seems two levels of explanation can be explored which together could be used for developing a new elaborated approach to understanding South African learner performance. Both go back to apartheid. The first is to focus on the school as a site for analysis and to interrogate it in terms of what kinds of social attitudes it might currently be generating. The question must be asked of how the school is setting itself up as a learning environment. It seems if this question is posed self-consciously by the school, it may arrive at the Jansen tableaux of teachers, textbook and time, but it will do so in terms of what the blocks and the impediments are for developing the acquisition of those desirables. In the South African context if this question is pursued vigorously by a school, it has to come to the conclusion, one can wager, that the blocks are often self-perpetuating managerial or, differently and more searchingly, cultural ones. Presented as managerial problems, however, they are essentialised and then suggest themselves as being amenable to quick and easy solutions. If only, the line of logic goes, teachers would take more responsibility and would make themselves more accountable, the problem would go away quickly. Blame falls on the individual teacher. True as it may be that the teacher who is just a little more attentive to the child, in terms of the simple ''time-on-task'' adage, will get better results than those who are not as attentive, the problem is, however, not an individual but a social or cultural one.

Seen as a cultural challenge, the problem manifests itself in its full complexity, and so calls for much more complex policy responses. The current quality management regimes that are being promoted in South African schools are premised on a managerial mind-set and misrecognise the extent and the nature of the stubborn practices that have evolved amongst teachers and their learners. What these practices are is important for everybody to confront explicitly. School cultures have evolved in South African black schools that carry the conjoined marks of apartheid-imposed deprofessionalisation—where black teachers were systematically underprepared and underpaid—with the deeply anti-authority and anti-regulation habits of the struggle against apartheid. Out of this have emerged schools which operate only with the semblance of the conventional school. To return to the form–substance dichotomy introduced above, schools are schools in form only, but not so in substance. A child entering this kind of environment is entering a world of fragility where the social rhythms and regimens of a learning environment operate weakly and often capriciously. Responding to the form questions only, such as insisting that the Jansen tableaux is put in place, only partially addresses the difficulty. Not addressed are the deep reproductive anti-authority and anti-regulation dispositions of everybody in the school. This kind of school, even if it is largely composed of people who are technically in the middle-class socio-economic bracket, is in essence still a dysfunctional school. This is the long-term damage wrought by apartheid and it encompasses virtually everybody in the school. It presents a picture in which deep syndromes of disaffection continue to circulate and are reproduced and raise big questions about how the teachers in those schools ought to be approached. Clearly, I argue, a managerial mind-set of heightened accountability—amounting to a new version of apartheid's big-stick—is not the whole or only answer.

The second focus is the learner him or herself. This dimension of the problem is as complex as the first, if not more so because it is less amenable to internal school intervention. Van der Berg (2005)

made the point above that the materially better-off child has difficulty in holding on to his or her social advantages in a poor, or as he said, black school. Why this is so raises complex questions about processes of social formation in South Africa and points to the possibility of the emergence of a new kind of social class recidivism taking shape in the country. In the old South Africa, middle-class status was hard to reproduce, precisely because the apartheid laws worked against the concept of family inheritance and the passing down from one generation to the next of wealth such as property. What is being suggested about accession into the middle-class and the prospects for stabilising one's status there in the new post-apartheid environment is that these are not possible if one chooses the wrong school. Pointed to in this situation is the high degree of vulnerability of this middle-class. Status, whatever virtue one wishes to attach to it, is as easily lost as it is gained. Interestingly, as the high numbers of children travelling from the townships to established former-white middle-class schools in the city on a daily basis attest, families have come to understand this situation and have worked out what it is that they need to protect their children's chances. And it is here that the essential challenge of social class for high level attainment presents itself for the system. How is the system to address the aspirant middle-class about the choices it has at its disposal? The answer, it seems, can only take one form. The system has no option but to make the black school a school of choice. The system has to help parents develop a sense of confidence in the ability of the black school to produce quality. Seen in this light, the system has to address more than the form of the black school. It has to change it substantially. It is to this question that the discussion turns in conclusion.

4. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this paper has been to offer a way forward for understanding the character of learner attainment in South Africa. The argument was made that conventional models for analysing (and developing) quality in the education system inadequately attend to questions of the social production of learner outputs in the school. In responding to the question of why learner attainment levels in South Africa were so poor, the work of analysts such as Van der Berg was referred to pointing to the strong presence of social class factors. The essential point which emerged in the study was that learner attainment was located in the nexus between the social class status of the individual and the social class status of the school. While this, of course, is not a unique phenomenon internationally, it is the specificity of this nexus that contains and exemplifies the South African situation. Central in this specificity is the legacy of apartheid which makes itself felt in the historical evolution of the post-apartheid school but critically also in the social formation of class groupings. The central thesis then of the paper is that this legacy defines the character of the everyday learning experience and that the policy framework adopted by the new government has failed to understand this and so has attended to the form dimensions of the new school only. It is suggested here that it is in this preoccupation with form that the great tragedy of poor learner attainment in the country resides.

Concretely, what is required is a multi-level reconceptualisation of the policy platform and its implementation. Such an approach must address the problem of the school at every level, in the way the administrative bureaucracy is organised and directed and the way the school operates and the restructuring of social services around the school. Only a comprehensive policy approach, which abandons the discipline of the form inherited from the old order, will begin to contain the challenge confronting the state. Harber and Davies, (1997, pp. 168–172) drew the outlines of such a policy for the developing country. In this outline articulated into an approach is the full gamut of stakeholders with an interest in achievement, from the international agency to the parents. Important about this understanding of how the new state has to be nurtured into being is a recognition of the interdependencies of the various levels of achievement production. Anything less, either that of leaving responsibility to parents themselves, or simply taking direction from the state in a top-down fashion, simply perpetuates the problem of failure.

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