Bantu Education, People's Education, OBE: Whither Education in South Africa

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SOWETO students reject Bantu Education. Schools become staging grounds for the struggle against apartheid. Activists, researchers, and communities collaborate to develop new education policies. Curriculum reforms are grounded in neighborhood discussions. Teacher militants organize, protest, and challenge. A segregated marginal institution proclaims itself the university of the Left. Over several decades education in South Africa was at the center of the struggle to end apartheid and transform society.

Jump to the present. On the usual measures, much of the education system does not do well. Schools struggle to maintain quality. With equipment and fittings lost to thieves and drug dealers at their gates, students and teachers become dispirited and alienated. Many show up sporadically or arrive but do little work. Assured they are being empowered, teachers see innovations as imposed and unmanageable and regard national and provincial education departments with suspicion, distrust, or worse. Privilege, often still based on race and increasingly on class, asserts itself at every turn. University students mock integration and enthusiastically support reactionary parties. The gains—they exist, and they are significant—are regularly swamped by education's debilitating disabilities. The struggles are more about survival than social transformation.

Whither education in South Africa?

More than a decade since the majority rule election of 1994 finds South Africa taking stock on many fronts, including education. In part, that reflects healthy debates about public policy in a democratic society. In part, that reflects the challenges and tensions of leadership transition. In part, that reflects the tremors generated by the combination of an expanding middle class and increasing inequality. Schools both reflect and contribute to those social currents.

For education, that reassessment has a strong foundation. The analysts have been engaged, systematic, critical, and incisive. The exchanges have been pointed and sustained. The writing is rich, insightful, and instructive. A careful review, alas, is beyond the reach of this brief essay.

Still, it is clear that education has not been the dynamo at the center of social transformation. Regularly, schools have been the quicksand to avoid or the bog to be traversed, not the path to a new future and not the engine of change. Why?

Answering big questions—developing explanations—is an organic and collaborative process. Education in South Africa is a sharply contested arena, with complex overlapping issues, sharply contending agendas, and divergent, sometimes complementary but often incompatible, perspectives. It is fruitful here, therefore, to explore briefly several threads to be woven into a fuller understanding of education in contemporary South Africa. To be explained are not only troubling examination results and dysfunctional schools but also education's role in maintaining and transforming society.

Sharpening the analysis requires focusing on what has not gone well. That is not to ignore the successes nor to devalue the efforts of committed and dedicated educators. The gains are to be celebrated. Many more students are in school. The elite schools and universities are no longer forbidden territory to Africans. Curriculum reform is an on-going national project. Resources have been redistributed, with additional funds available to less affluent communities. And more. As Cabral reminded us, however, "Tell no lies. Claim no easy victories." Productive stock-taking requires frank discussion and demanding questions.

Reform, Not Transformation

One explanatory thread begins in the analyses and conceptions of the early 1990s. Education plans and projections emphasized transformation. That transformation was difficult but within reach. The assumption that power prevails was persuasive. Yet, electing a new

leadership was essential, but far from sufficient. The articulation of what was to be done was not accompanied by a parallel analysis of how that could be accomplished in majority-ruled South Africa. How, for example, was the broad popular support for the African National Congress to be organized into a solid foundation for radical education change? African parents demanded more schools and more access, not different schools. Who, then, was to explain to them that the structure of schooling, not simply its racial exclusiveness, was fundamentally conservative and that entering schools that had changed little would not end their children's disadvantage? Accordingly, post-1994 education practice focused heavily on desegregation and expanding access. With few exceptions, schools remained hierarchical, authoritarian, and teacher-centered. The goal was improved results in, say, mathematics or history. Critical reasoning, self-reliant learning, cooperative approaches, community responsiveness, environmental awareness, self-confident assumption of responsibility, political consciousness, engaged citizenship, and more were marginalized. Notwithstanding regularly reiterated high aspirations and grand objectives, a narrow conception has produced narrow results.

Managing, Not Leading

The energetic education activism of the 1970s–1990s nurtured intense debates about policy and practice, militant organizations that mobilized students, teachers, and higher education staff, and leaders whose ideas, public roles, and legitimacy were forged in the struggle. The senior post-1994 education leadership, however, came from a different direction. Their selection was conditioned by the politics of interests, constituency balancing, and public respectability that characterize the formation of new governments. In itself, that is not undesirable. Politics is an essential mechanism for assuring democratic representation and participation. For the momentum of education transformation, however, those selections were a damper, favoring management and incremental change over leadership and bold initiatives.

Also slowing change was the implementation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Among the compromises that led to the negotiated transition to majority rule was the inclusion in government of the former rulers, the National Party, and those responsible for apartheid-supported vicious anti-ANC attacks, Inkatha. Respect and reconciliation were the order of the day. Even though the ANC had won nearly two-thirds of the national vote (and perhaps more), its education program was regularly exposed to veto by its GNU partners. Very concerned to secure the support of those who opposed change, the new education officials moved cautiously. Largely, they assigned priority to legal and administrative frameworks, in contrast to Namibia, with a similar negotiated transition to majority rule, where systemic change strategies were at the top of the agenda.

Notions of reconciliation and unity facilitated the negotiated transition. They also inclined the new leadership toward management and administration and slowed and redirected the transformation envisioned by the education democratic movement.

Teachers as Technicians

The evolution of teachers' roles provides a third explanatory thread. As schools became principal terrains for struggle, teachers faced difficult choices. Some joined the activists, at high personal risk. Some took advantage of the intermittent disruptions and school closures to do little work. Others sought to labor on, trying to maintain their mission and protect their jobs by avoiding politics.

Majority rule inherited an education morass of a deeply embedded racialized philosophy, multiple authorities and institutional arrangements, and transition rules that required that no staff be terminated. Staffing, curriculum, and teacher education issues compounded the problems. Since class size was both an indicator and cause of education inequality, there was immediate pressure to increase class size, that is, reduce the number of teachers in schools in more affluent communities. As well although teachers were expected to

play central roles, the introduction of outcomes based education brought complex curriculum reform with inadequate preparation and support for already insecure teachers. With inconsistent messages about the direction and pace of political change, uncertainty about the consequences of curriculum reform and the provincialization of education for job tenure, and its parent confederation a partner in governing the country, the militant teachers union was pressed to focus on the practical issues of wages, hours, and working conditions, and especially on protecting teachers who faced retrenchment or termination. That, of course, is an appropriate union role. But as it concentrated on workers, it reduced its role in shaping and changing education and weakened teacher accountability. At the same time, mergers and consolidation in higher education closed most of the teachers colleges and attached others to universities, with resulting confusion about the orientation and content of teacher education and its ties to the schools.

Where transformation is the objective, teachers cannot be bystanders. Even where the reform objectives are more limited, they are unlikely to be achieved against active teacher resistance. Namibia again provides a useful comparison. Expecting the teachers to be the bearers of education reform, leaders assigned highest priority to the transformation of teacher education. Teachers are to be the change activists. Although there is an increasingly extensive evaluative literature, it is too soon to draw firm conclusions. Whatever the outcomes, the conception was clear. In contrast, South African teachers are regularly seen as the technicians of education, expected to implement education reforms in a setting of contradictory incentives and rewards. Accountable to provincial education departments for reforms most do not understand well and many do not support, they are also accountable to parents and communities for results on examinations that they do not develop and that thus far do not reflect the intended curriculum changes. Some teachers have seized the ambiguities as an opportunity to innovate. Many, however, have become alienated and dispirited, unenthusiastically presenting a minimal

curriculum and teaching to national examinations, with little effective accountability. Few are excited and activist champions of change.

Desegregation, Not Integration

Segregated education was critical to apartheid's master plan. Schools were to equip a few Africans with the skills deemed necessary, but most important, were expected to limit aspirations. Apartheid society had a place for Africans, and schools were to keep them there. Desegregation was a premise and promise of the anti-apartheid struggle. Discriminatory laws and rules were quickly eliminated. Also attacked energetically were the racialized history in school texts and explicit and implicit biases in other instructional materials. But what was to follow?

How were exclusively white schools to become institutions that welcomed mass education and black students? Who was to help teachers learn that what they regarded as human nature was neither inherent nor immutable? How could schools be desegregated amidst persisting residential segregation? What forms would transformation take as those who resisted desegregation used commitments to local control, to home language education, and to reconciliation to protect their privilege?

The former Model C schools provide a useful example. Community control was an initiative of the late apartheid era intended to enable white parents to preserve their schools, including facilities and equipment. The post-1994 Model C schools debate focused on two alternatives: terminate their special status in order to redistribute resources and reduce inequality or tolerate them in order to promote reconciliation and preserve their quality. Hotly disputed, those alternatives missed the larger point. The major challenge was not to eliminate or tolerate but how to transform the schools. With few exceptions, there has been little progress down that path. A few former Model C schools remain enclaves of privilege, now with more

Africans among their students. Many have simply decayed, either closed or enrolling African students but not offering an effective education program.

Education transformation in South Africa requires integration of two sorts. First, desegregation is necessary but not sufficient to enable schools to become productive and nurturing learning environments for all South Africans. As well, inadequate instructional materials, insecure campuses, teacher and student absenteeism, anger, and alienation are all corrosive of learning. While some of the problems that plague schools have their roots in the larger community, transformation requires that schools take the lead and not simply await solutions.

Second, education for all in South Africa requires integrating the different sorts of schools—poorly and well equipped, high and low scoring, rural and urban, perhaps even private and public—into a single education system with a common mission and a shared basic ethos. While that will surely take time, it is far from clear that current policies and programs are making progress toward that objective.

One challenge here is the locus of authority. Developing an appropriate and politically sustainable balance between central direction and local autonomy is an on-going process. But systemic integration is undermined when decentralized responsibility serves as a strategy for preserving privilege and withdrawing from the education system rather than contributing to it. Similarly problematic is the use of centralized authority to undermine and constrain local innovation and community activism.

Currently, mini school systems that serve different purposes and different communities, all clamoring for resources, are formally linked but in practice pull in disparate directions. More generally, slow progress on the second, systemic integration retards efforts to achieve racial desegregation.

The Higher Education Muddle

Higher education frames a fifth major explanatory thread. At the transition to majority rule there was broad agreement that reorganizing higher education required priority attention. At the same time, there was and continues to be a strong sense that what are regarded as the strengths of the elite institutions must not be jeopardized. Regularly, that has led to continuity at what is commonly perceived to be higher education's high status core and change at its lower status periphery, which has left most of higher education marginal to education transformation nationally. Leading white institutions have largely been sheltered from institutional rearrangements, while black institutions have been reorganized and merged. Intended to support quality, the higher education national funding strategy significantly entrenches the existing differentiation.

The elimination of two major higher education sub-systems, the colleges and the technikons, has not yet produced a well-integrated higher education system. Nor has the merger process effectively addressed the roles played by the institutions that have been eliminated and absorbed. In addition to preparing teachers, for example, education colleges provided opportunities for many students to continue their education beyond secondary school, and some were responsive to their local communities in ways that universities have not been and generally do not seek to be. Indeed, the reorganization has reduced the developmental mission and local and national accountability of higher education institutions. The national qualifications and accreditations system is likely to be more consequential for what are regarded as the second tier institutions and to influence relatively little the orientation and conduct of the elite universities.

Here too, definitive assessments are premature. Often, universities are resilient in their resistance to change and imaginative and resourceful in deflecting pressures to reform. It is timely, however, indeed essential, to assess the change process. The interim results are not promising. To date, higher education reform has not been transformative. Nor has that process developed a solid foundation for transformation.

With a few exceptions, higher education authorities have generally managed rather than led. Apparently intended to assure broad representation and legitimacy, the university council system has been generally conservative in its selection of senior officials and reluctant to initiate, or insist on, or support fundamental change. In recent years, neither the academic staff nor students have demanded that higher education content and process be assessed critically or proposed new directions. The dispersed authority for creating and organizing knowledge that is a strength of higher education can readily absorb, diffuse, and deflect the critiques that do arise.

Prominent here is the mystique of standards. Broad agreement that change is important is overwhelmed by the deep fear that change will compromise what are deemed the high standards of the elite institutions. One consequence is that the standards themselves receive little critical scrutiny. Even less well examined are the ways in which the standards impede innovation, reduce accountability, and entrench privilege.

Education for Elites

The transition to majority rule required South Africa's education system to address two major transformations. One was to transform a system organized by race into a system in which race was no longer a consequential criterion for selection, promotion, and academic success. The other was to transform a system designed to educate a small elite into a system that could provide quality education to all South Africans. The two transformations are intertwined. Both remain incomplete. Both are at risk.

The legacy was disabling. Apartheid education created neither the institutional framework nor the cadre of skilled and experienced personnel ready to address those transformations. Equally problematic, apartheid education did not encourage and regularly sought to block critical reflection on alternative approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education.

The democratic movement's intense efforts to explore alternatives and develop new strategies were involving, exciting, and promising, but in practice have had far less impact on post-1994 education policy than was anticipated. For the most part, for example, People's Education was a strategy for popular mobilization but has not become public education policy.

Desegregating education has moved rapidly. But deracializing education remains an unachieved objective. Visible indicators, though superficial, are instructive. It remains difficult to imagine a national list of primary or secondary school prize winners whose composition reflects the demographic characteristics of the country. So too the lists of students admitted to elite universities, or teacher educators, or university professors. Of course, rendering race unimportant in a system built on racial differentiation will be both painful and time-consuming. But progress is not automatic. Nor are achievements guaranteed. Pursuing desegregation rather than deracialization will slow the transformation still more.

South Africa regularly reports to the global education community that it has achieved basic education for all. Universal secondary education is on the horizon. Those pronouncements are premature. It is simply not the case that all young South Africans have equal access to quality education. The obstacles are both conceptual and practical.

The immediate post-1994 pressure was to expand access. On that, there has been great progress that must not be minimized. But opening the gates wider to welcome more students into a system whose structure remains fundamentally elitist does not and cannot convert it into a mass education system. That transformation requires philosophical and programmatic changes that have only begun to be explored.

For example, it is common to talk of the education pyramid. But if basic education is to be education for all, then its shape should be a rectangle, not a pyramid. All who begin the first year are expected to reach its final year. There should be as many students at basic education's top level as at its bottom. Retaining the pyramid image reflects the persisting deep assumption that schooling *is* about sifting and sorting and that there *should* be fewer students at the top than

at the bottom. A mass education system, however, where many students start but many fewer reach the top is seriously flawed. Of course circumstances and events outside schools, from home environment to neighborhood gangs to high unemployment influence education outcomes. But an effective mass education system must address its environment, not seek to be sheltered from it.

Consider what schools do. If all learners are expected to complete basic education, then there is little need for differentiation and selection during that period. Ample evidence indicates that grouping and tracking do not help the most successful students and retard further those labeled the least competent. Tests and examinations serve better to assess the health of curriculum, programs, teaching, and schools than to measure individual progress. Similarly, explanations for failure must focus as much or more on systemic deficiencies as on individuals' intelligence, or attentiveness, or hard work. Where the primary focus is on learning rather than teaching, schools become less hierarchical and more participatory. Where effective accountability is institutionalized, communities are engaged in and protect their schools.

The general point here is that even as it has expanded access. education in South Africa has maintained and perhaps reinforced its elitist character.

The overarching concern has been to protect quality. But the usual notion of quality is itself an obstacle to education for all. Consider a secondary school with consistently high examination (matric) results and equally consistent high female attrition. Since matric scores are the most common measure of quality, that school would be considered excellent. If the goal is educating a small elite, that school is indeed good. But if the goal is universal education, that school is very poor, since it has proved itself unable to educate effectively half the population. Put sharply, the efforts to preserve elite schools reinforce an understanding of education that subtly but powerfully undermines the development of quality mass education. Lionizing the elite universities without obliging them to play a leading role in education transformation compounds

the obstacles, both by reinforcing the narrow notion of quality and success and by justifying the differentiated education to which South Africans have access.

Quality and equity are not alternatives. In an effective education system, each requires the other. Transformation requires that each energize the other.

Threads to weave an explanation. These issue clusters could of course be organized differently. Space permitting, they could be expanded substantially. Accountability is another important thread, as are a surprisingly apolitical approach to public policy making and the internalization of external influence. My concern here has been to challenge the mystique of education in South Africa, outlining a framework for exploring both its progress and problems to date and its directions in the future. In that, I have drawn heavily on the substantial scholarship on education and on the insights of its analysts. And in that, I join with the colleagues whose contributions follow.