

No time to fiddle as education is burning

by Peter Kallaway

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It is enormously gratifying to educators that we finally have the beginning of a serious national debate about education in South Africa of the kind that has been occurring in the health sector. The problems are no less grave! The crisis that has been predicted by many experienced professionals ever since the early 'nineties is finally reaching such tragic proportions that we have to face the real prospect of a "lost generation" in terms that we never imagined in the past. The future of South Africa depends very largely on whether we treat this challenge with the seriousness it deserves.

The nature and size of the problem have been widely discussed in terms of failing literacy and numeracy rates, disastrous comparisons with international equivalent testing, teacher professional failure, curriculum disfunctionality, lack of articulation between sectors, discipline, and so on. Every student teacher who enters the schools returns with tales illustrating these issues. In response everyone has their own silver bullet – ECD, FET Colleges, School Libraries, Whole Schools Assessment, School Improvement Studies, more assessment, teacher performance goals, managerial strategies, private sector or community involvement, home schooling – what you will! This is not the place to discuss all of that – it was been well documented by numerous colleagues of the past few years - Pam Christie, Brahm Fleisch, Jonathan Jansen, and others.

But – what is to be done? How do we understand the nature of the problem(s) and attempt to engage with the fundamental issues in a serious manner. What lies at the core of the problem? How do we persuade the Department of Education to desist from the spin that it has become so addicted to so that we can together face up to the fundamental issues?

My theory is that the basis of the problem lies in a world view that has become pervasive in education, derived from the People's Education era. It is derived from a romantic view of education – perhaps the polar opposite to the mission school education experienced by many of the exile elite, or by the less fortunate who were at high school under Bantu Education or the DET. Those who formulated these views were reacting to two things - the sternly conservative disciplinary system that dominated schools (white *and* black it needs to be said) up until the 'seventies, and the fact that the curriculum was manipulated in ways which were intended to promote apartheid ideology.

In the first place there was an assumption that if one removed all discipline in schools one would liberate the students to pursue their own learning and thus cause "a hundred flowers to bloom." This is would automatically provide a platform from which cooperation and collaboration between teachers, community and students would provide an ideal educational environment and healthy learning would result.

This is an unfortunately romantic view of education that has a long history that goes back to Rousseau – as any teacher who has had to craft a strategy for meaningful education in public schooling will bear testimony. It omits to consider the hard work that is necessary to motivate both teachers and students, and fails to take account of the rigorous discipline required by both to produce worthwhile education.

The second issue is that *what* we learn is not arbitrary! Just because the apartheid ideologues abused subjects like history to promote their own political ends does not mean that formal knowledge that has characterized school knowledge since the advent of public schooling can suddenly be abandoned in favour of some fanciful notion of “constructivist knowledge” (“relevant knowledge” or knowledge crafted in your own back yard.) or Outcomes Based Education – if that still exists! The basic structures of physics or mathematics (or history) for school are not negotiable! Teacher and students in classrooms cannot “invent” new knowledge! The need is for good textbooks and resources to induct them into the heritage of knowledge that is our legacy – not just Western knowledge – but world knowledge!

The upshot of that dual reaction was to turn education on its head after 1994. The disciplinary system that teachers had come to consider a natural part of schooling was removed as corporal punishment was banned and teachers were left to cope with enormous classes without the traditional means of imposing discipline. There is, as any teacher educator will confirm, only one other means of controlling or motivating teenagers. That is to get them involved and motivated about the work of the curriculum. To inspire and motivate learners to understand the key levers of knowledge in order to enable them to explore for themselves. A necessary condition for that is that the teacher have a clear sense of what is to be taught/learned and that the teacher be capable of executing the task in a manner which earns the respect of the students.

If the teacher is deprived of the means of enforcing physical discipline in big, overcrowded classes, and does not have or is not given the means to promote positive learning, there is every chance of an explosive mix. At the very least very little learning takes place. At worst there is drop-out through boredom or frustration, or there is poor behaviour which sets up a cycle of animosity between staff and students.

To make matters immeasurably worse, the new curriculum did away with the very structure that would have given the majority of our modestly trained teachers a raft to cling to – namely the textbook knowledge that was the major aspect of their own training as teachers. The old curriculum was discarded as being a relic of colonialism and apartheid and traditional structures of knowledge were often abandoned.

Part of the explanation of the above situation seems to me to be that there has been a radical confusion between the content of education (the knowledge to be taught/the concepts to be mastered) and the means of teaching (the methods). By emphasising progressive methodology (teacher as facilitator rather than teacher as expert) we do irreparable harm to the project of education. Of course motivation is central to education – and any good teacher must learn how to get kids to engage with problem and promote a sense of wonderment and excitement at the nature of knowledge in all

its diversity – but that wonderment is not to be achieved through “tricks for teaching”/ self activity / student enjoyment / classroom games in themselves.

Unless the methods are located in a rigorous grasp of the fundamental levers of education the enterprise ends in frustration and disappointment.

In that situation the safety net for teachers was removed. Of course for teachers with a lot of cultural capital the operation of the new curriculum in well - equipped schools with libraries and computers it opened up a range of wonderful opportunities and allowed for more creative teaching than ever before. For the majority of teachers it led to a defensive stance that exhibited itself in a perpetual stand-off with Education Officials, who themselves often only had a tenuous grasp on what was required. We now have two nations in education !

In that situation where many teachers were feeling vulnerable to the formidable demands of the new curriculum and the prodigious demands being placed on the education system relating to preparing learners for democratic citizenship and for the global workplace, we closed Colleges of Education, because they were held to be relics of the apartheid system, or because they were out of tune with international norms in Higher Education, or because they were too costly – whatever it was – but the consequences were devastating. Large number of well - qualified and experienced primary school teacher-trainers lost their jobs and many well - equipped institutions were closed – just at the moment when there was a need for a renewal of all aspects of schooling. The notion of making teaching into a degree profession did not materialize as many poor or rural students who would have studied at Colleges were not able to access university teacher education. In addition the universities failed to embrace the challenge of training a new generation of motivated teachers as the rewards for doing so were very limited in comparison to the considerable financial commitments needed to sustain a faulty of education.

In that context the major teachers’ union, SADTU, was radical in rhetoric about teachers rights, but as Dr Mamphela Ramphele has noted, silent on questions of teachers responsibilities. Many of the current problems in our education system must therefore be laid at the door of the union that claims to represent the interests of the people in education.

Why is the educational community so muted on all of this? Why is it that in education there is seldom a harsh critical voice from the professional community? (In this regard Jonathan Jansen is a star!) Why is it often up to outsiders, often concerned businessmen, to take up the cause?

In short we have cut away the ground beneath our feet because we have had a romantic vision of education which is in keeping with the lofty and impeccable goals of the constitutions but which have very little real purchase on the realities that teachers need to deal with daily. We spend enormous amounts on band-aid solutions for education instead of realizing that what our teachers need are systematic courses on the disciplines of knowledge that they are expected to teach in the classroom. Once they have that conceptual knowledge they would be able to work on the pedagogy of HOW to convey it. At present we are asking teachers to engage with intellectual

challenges in the classroom that would often defeat the experts. And this in schools where there is little or no access to information or often even textbooks.

Few of the in-service courses that our teachers have to sit through engage with the fundamental issue of upgrading their knowledge of the subject that they teach.

What is to be done? A) we need to focus on assisting teachers where they need it most – by helping them to upgrade their understanding of the disciplines they teach along with more effective methods of doing so. B) head teachers must be provided with the means to operate their school effectively in order to manage effectively – something that would require government action on the power of teachers unions C) there is a need for a massive drive to promote the teaching profession by drawing talented and motivated young people to education. This would require generous funding for such student teachers (perhaps on the old bursary/loan system which would bind students to teaching for a number of years after qualifying) and carrots to universities to ensure that they take their responsibilities for school professional training seriously. D) all this would to my mind require a serious investigation of the new curriculum which I think lies at the core of many of the problems I have described – but this is the holy cow we are never allowed to criticize.

The good intentions of the educational planners of the post-1994 era have been shown to be seriously compromised.

This is no time to fiddle. Rome is burning !

Peter Kallaway
Emeritus Professor of Education, UWC
Research Associate, UCT
Former advisor of the MEC for Education in the Western Cape