Schooling in and for the New South Africa

Neville Alexander is Director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. He has been advisor on language policy to various government departments. He has been special advisor on language policy and planning to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and a member of the Western Cape Language Committee.

We write about schooling in South Africa at a time when most knowledgeable educationalists and practitioners are agreed that the educational system is in a state of chronic crisis. Increasingly and ever more frequently, alternatives and "solutions" to the crisis, based on very different analyses and diagnoses, are being proffered from all angles, depending on and occasioned by the vested interests of the respective analysts and would-be reformers, be they parents, academics, business people or professional associations. Many of these suggestions are well researched and grounded in sound empirical evidence. Most of them have something that can be used. Very few are merely fanciful, since all of them begin from real experience of the inadequacies of the system. We have to take it for granted, therefore, that there is no single, all-encompassing blueprint that can or does contain the "final solution".

What cannot and, I hope, will not, be denied is the patently obvious fact that fundamental mistakes of a conceptual, strategic and political-pedagogical character were made in the process of transition from apartheid to post-apartheid education during the period 1993-1998 approximately. Not everything was wrong, of course, but many of the beacons that should have facilitated a soft landing for the new system were placed wrongly. And, to make things worse, subsequent attempts to address some of the obvious deficiencies of the evolving system, e.g., the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the mergers of higher education institutions, among others, were doomed to fail, precisely because they did not replace these beacons and, instead, themselves became no more than decoy beacons that had to end up in numerous but related crash landings.

As I write this, the third major overhaul of school education is being initiated by the administration of President Jacob Zuma. The deep irony of what is taking place now is that much of what is being packaged as 'new', is what many of us were saying and proposing 15 years ago. More than this, it is unnecessary to state in this article. Our writings and publications are testimony to the truth of this assertion. Suffice it to say that the current review and rescind process may well be the proverbial window of opportunity for all dedicated and open-minded educators, i.e., those who are not merely following or complying with the party line.

In what follows, I shall deal briefly and programmatically with only three of the beacons

referred to against the background of the universally accepted notion enshrined in the constitution that one of our primary goals is to build a united, non-racial, democratic and multicultural South Africa. My contribution, which is, hopefully, devoid of jargon is intended as a serious attempt to call things by their name and as an invitation to all practitioners to join in a meaningful discussion about what is wrong and how we can make it right under the circumstances we are forced to operate in.

In the final analysis, however, the failure to consider some of the fundamental implications and socially transformative instantiations of this mandate can only be laid at the door of the governing party and its allies that have been in office since 1994.

Deracialisation and integration

Educational institutions are the key ideological state apparatuses in all modern states. They constitute for that very reason a highly contested terrain. The post-apartheid South African state has as its constitutional mandate a specific set of liberal democratic values, derived primarily from the great bourgeois tradition that stretches all the way back to the Magna Charta. One of its fundamental tasks is to establish, entrench and perpetuate these values, of which the most important, as intimated above, are equality of opportunity, non-racialism, multiculturalism, democratic freedoms and attitudes as well as human dignity and a general sense of ubuntu, a flexible but useful descriptor for a humane citizenship.

Schooling in the new South Africa, besides its professional, strictly educational function of transmitting the crucial knowledge and skills required by the youth in order to operate in the modern world is, therefore, geared towards the realisation of these values, among others. Of course, other apparatuses such as the media, as well as diverse conservative forces often work against the realisation of one or other of these values because of vested interests. In the final analysis, however, the failure to consider some of the fundamental implications and socially transformative instantiations of this mandate can only be laid at the door of the governing party and its allies that have been in office since 1994.

Let us consider, by way of example, the structural issue of where schools are located and how resources are distributed. Having due regard to the political obstacles and the economic as well as the ideological and cultural constraints in which the transition was negotiated, a different approach to urban (and rural) planning could have initiated a very different, more integration-orientated pattern of siting and equipping schools from that which had characterised the apartheid state. In 1995, Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) published a book entitled *Taking South African Education out of the Ghetto: An Urban-Planning Perspective*, in which the benefits of such an approach were spelled out clearly and in detail. The book challenged the inherited pattern of localised community secondary and, in some instances, also primary, schools, especially in the larger cities, and pleaded for the establishment of well equipped (magnet) schools at important nodal points on the main transport arteries of the respective city, so that all children, regardless of colour, language group or place of residence would want to attend such schools. Resource hubs, consisting of expensive infrastructure, such as halls, libraries, laboratories and sports facilities would be shared by clusters of schools as well as the surrounding communities. The transport, management and coordination implications of such an approach would have to be worked out carefully but it was abundantly obvious that the educational and social benefits of this approach far outweigh the initial costs. Only new schools would have been affected but it was clear that some of the older, more established schools would have been emptied and given over to other important local functions.

Although complimentary copies of the book were made available to some individuals in the new bureaucracy and the approach was discussed with and positively received by cabinet ministers and urban planners involved in rethinking the apartheid city in Cape Town, it had very little impact at the time because of the timidity and tentativeness, i.e., lack of clarity and vision, that characterised the first years of the transition. Yet, unless we get back to this approach, complemented by and working in tandem with some of the other foundational changes that are required, social and racial integration among poor and working class children will remain a dead letter

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for decades, if not centuries, and the current two-tier system (one for the children of the rich and another for those of the poor) will be perpetuated. The point of departure of the PRAESA research team remains as true today as it was in 1995:

> *As a result of the extreme racial and socio-economic segregation of South African urban areas, the neighbourhood location of schools effectively reinforces polarization in education by limiting the exposure of pupils to the world beyond their immediate community, and also aggravates inequality in education between rich and poor communities. In addition, the dispersal of schools throughout residential areas means that limited educational resources are very thinly spread, resulting in large numbers of standardized schools of poor quality. The net result is an education system that is inadequate and restrictive.*[1]

Share, improve and expand existing resources

Urban and rural planning geared towards racial and social integration addresses the issues at the level of the systemic hardware within the given historical context and the socio-economic parameters of a legitimate liberal democratic dispensation. The essential principle behind this approach is that all existing education related resources should be shared, improved and expanded in line with the priorities identified in the ongoing national debates about the character of the new historical community we are trying to establish. The principle can be, and is in fact being, realised in many different ways at local and school community levels[2]. Wherever possible, however, the mechanisms of clustering and twinning ought to be used in order to achieve the best results. As Smit and Hennesy[3] suggested almost 15 years ago,

> *One argument for the clustering of schools in accessible locations, rather than the dispersal of schools in residential areas, is that it would contribute to the integration of pupils from different communities, and would help reduce inequalities in education standards. Another argument in favour of school clusters is that they would enable facilities to be shared between schools and with the community. For example, instead of providing an understaffed community library and a number of ill-equipped school libraries, one fully staffed and fully equipped library to serve both the community and a number of schools could be provided within a school cluster.*

With respect to the in-service and pre-service training and professional development of teachers, the beacons have to be shifted radically, if we are to hope for any success. It is trite to remark once again that unless an educational system has a majority core of well educated, committed and professional teachers, no amount of curricular sophistication and OBE-type jargon can redeem it.

Given the generally understood and acknowledged legacy of apartheid, we have to follow a two-track strategy in most domains, i.e., compensatory measures in the short to medium term in order to fix temporarily what is not working properly and longer-term strategic initiatives geared towards turning the system in the direction that will bring us closer to the vision enshrined in the Constitution and, indeed, even beyond those horizons. In the domain of teacher education and professional development, we have at one and the same time to improve the subject knowledge and teaching methods as well as the professional commitment and dedication of the existing teacher complement and begin to put the entire system of teacher training on a different basis. We should, as I see it, identify in each educational district (and province, for some purposes) the most effective and charismatic teachers in every subject or phase of the school system. How we define "most effective" should be a matter for serious discussion in the profession and in the department and should not be reduced to the simplistic descriptor: "those who produce the best marks" at the relevant level. These "lead teachers" should be asked by the department to spend at least one full day every fortnight for a period of two years helping their peers in the relevant subject to work through the syllabus, lesson by lesson, as it were. Such workshops should be organised on

an egalitarian basis, i.e., all the participants can and should be expected to have valuable insights they will contribute to the discussion of any particular problem, issue or subject. After two years of consistent work in this mode, every district in the country would be ensured of a core of 75% to 80% of teachers who know their subject well and are able to communicate its basic principles and essential content to the students in their care. In the course of this process, innovative ideas for new kinds of textbooks and other learner and teacher support materials will undoubtedly surface.[4]

When I first put forward this suggestion as a contribution to short-term compensatory measures for improving the capacity of teachers and the quality of teaching, it was met with all the obvious doubts about feasibility and cost, none of which is worthy of serious consideration. Pre-service teachers, retired teachers, respected parents with a matriculation certificate can be recruited in each district in order to supervise students on the day(s) when the teacher(s) is or are participating in the relevant in-service training workshops. A small stipend would in most cases be a welcome addition to the income of such assistant teachers. Pre-service teachers, as I shall demonstrate presently, will learn important skills on the job.

The most significant objection to this proposal when I made it in 1998, came from the then Head of Education in the Western Cape Province, Professor Brian O'Connell, the current Rector of the University of the Western Cape. He agreed that it was a perfectly feasible proposal from an administrative and logistical point of view but doubted whether teachers would be willing to make the "sacrifices" implicit in the suggestion. To this objection, there are two responses. Firstly, this is a matter of leadership and management. If the relevant district officials and school principals understand what we are trying to achieve, they will without any doubt be willing and able to persuade teachers about the benefits that will accrue to themselves, their children, the system and the country. It does, of course, raise the crucial question of the effective management of schools, which is not the focus of this article. Suffice it to say that next to teacher quality, school management is the key element in making schools work properly. All of us know this and it is more than obvious that this should be one of the main foci of the new administration's strategic interventions during the next five years or so. The second response is now more than obvious: all the fancy notions about two- and three-day workshops, vacation seminars and cascading processes with their well known dilution of the message, which became the hallmark of OBE-speak and practice have not only been shown not to work but have confirmed that they are based on deficient epistemological understandings. One cannot pump a struggling person (teacher or anyone else) full of some "theory" and then expect him or her to "apply" what they have "learnt" in the classroom. While this approach may work for a few people, it is not the way in which most people learn, especially when there is no consistent follow-up monitoring of the "pupil's" practice.

This brings me to the longer-term need to base the system of teacher training on the apprenticeship and mentorship model. Although there has been a tendency towards more hands-on training of teachers during the past few years, it is still the case that predominantly, our would-be teachers sit in lecture halls for three to four years imbibing pedagogical theories and history of educational systems and approaches with only a few weeks spent in actual classrooms under the guidance of experienced teachers. This is clearly no simple matter, but it is urgently necessary that we shift the balance towards time spent in the school classroom as opposed to time spent in the college or university lecture hall. Besides the fundamental question of whether apprenticeship- rather than theory-based approaches tend to work better (it is never an either-or question), at this stage in our history where the ravages of the apartheid system are still so visible, we cannot pretend that approaches which are more theory orientated will be more effective. In any case, they have palpably not succeeded. For the same reason, we should never have shifted the entire teacher training programme to the universities. We still need the colleges of education, especially for the training of primary school practitioners. They should, of course, be staffed by the best trained education specialists on the same basis as the universities. It should also become a matter of good practice that every educational district has one or two demonstration schools where specialised attention can be given to particularly intractable challenges.

There is no blueprint for apprenticeship models but there are very good local and regional (state) examples in countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany and the USA. We could do worse in my view, than to make a thorough study of the administrative and logistical implications of such a system during the

next two to three years with a view to adapting good practice to our own conditions. Above all, we have to bite the bullet and move towards bilingual training of teachers. It ought to be the point of departure of all teacher training in South Africa that, generally speaking, any educator should be able to conduct his or her professional activities in both the mother tongue and in English.

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Mother tongue based bilingual education

The language medium issue is the last of the three systemic beacons that I wish to deal with briefly. One of the most obvious blind spots of the system is the language question. While most people agree that we have an excellent language policy in education, issued by Professor Bengu on 14 July 1997, all are equally agreed that it is seldom, if ever, applied in practice. Professor Asmal, Bengu's successor used to quip that we have a perfect language policy in education but it is unworkable, and I myself as well as some of my PRAESA colleagues have on occasion made the point that we need to move "from languish policy to language policy" in order to highlight the lack of political will in this critical domain. Let me make the point bluntly: the failure to understand and to address the language issue in the educational system is tantamount to an act of national suicide by omission. It is my view that people are dilly-dallying on one of the most important issues, if not the most important, issue in education. Indeed, if I may transpose a mispronunciation by a certain teacher at a workshop: instead of being a stepping stone to effective learning, language policy more often than not is perceived as a "stopping stone" that prevents such learning.

Generally speaking, we treat language the way we treat a window. We look through the window, and very seldom look at the window. Unless we begin to look at the window of language and see how we are mediating knowledge, the way we transfer knowledge via language, and begin to understand that the medium can be defective, we are not going to be able to make significant progress. Fifteen years into the new dispensation, the fundamental decision about language policy in education has not yet been made. This is no more and no less than the answer to the question: on what language do you base a democratic system of education? Do you base it on the mother tongues of the children as you do in every other country of the world virtually – outside of Africa – which is also in line with our proud boast that we have a learner-centred educational system, or do you base it on a foreign language, which is what English is for most South Africans?

That is the fundamental decision that has not been made. I contend that until we decide this question properly, we are off on the same detour through the educational wilderness that the rest of Africa has been on for most of the last 40 years since independence. Most of those states simply continued using the ex-colonial languages – English, French and Portuguese, mostly — as the main medium of teaching and learning after the first two or three years — in many cases in the French-speaking zone not even after the first two or three years but from day one – the ex-colonial language became the main language of teaching, training and tuition at all levels of education. The result, after 40 years of so-called independence, is that we have dysfunctional educational systems which service less than 10% of the population because that is, on average, the number of people in any one of these countries that actually have proficiency in the "official" language, i.e., in French, English or Portuguese. Only these 10% — the rising middle class, the established elite — can empower themselves via their proficiency in that language. The simple fact is that proficiency in the dominant European language, English in South Africa, constitutes cultural capital and this capital is used by the middle class in order to marginalise and perpetuate the oppression of the majority of the people.

Let me stress again that we are going to go on the same detour for the next 20 to 30 years unless and until that decision is made. But let me add immediately that the issue is not: either the mother tongue(s) or English. I want to make it very clear that the fundamental issue in a multilingual country like South Africa is both the mother tongue and English. The real question to which we have to find the answer is: how do you do this? What is the range of options and permutations that will enable most

South Africans to acquire reasonable competence in at least two, preferably three, of the official languages, of which English will necessarily be one? How and over what period do you phase it in? And of course, is it desirable? The answer to that question is that it is a class issue. It is desirable for the simple reason that the only way in which the majority of the people of this country and of any other African country can empower themselves is by means of the languages they know best. And, with very few exceptions, the languages they know best are their own languages. Middle class intellectuals and others are usually misled by their own proficiency in English, the global language. Such proficiency is the result of middle class privilege, but this is not the position for most of the people. For something like 70% to 80% of the population of South Africa, it is simply not possible currently to acquire the kind of proficiency in English that would empower them sufficiently to be able to compete on an equitable basis in the market for highly skilled and remunerated jobs. And democracy, we should remind ourselves, means power to the people. Language is one of the most important means of empowerment of both individuals and societies, and for that reason the language question is at the heart of a sound democratic system of education.

Placing English in the correct context

The second fundamental issue, which I have already touched on, is for us to realise that we are not going to get past English. English is the global language. It will not necessarily be so forever. Already, many people in English speaking and English orientated countries, including South Africa, are encouraging and enrolling their children to learn Mandarin Chinese. At the moment, however, and for the foreseeable future, it is English — we all know that. And from that point of view, of course, we are very "fortunate". For, if you look at the whole of the African continent, or even more narrowly at so-called anglophone Africa, South Africa is very fortunate because we have a fairly large percentage — between 8% and 9% — of the population that are first language English speakers and this fact has a definite influence on the quality of English that we speak in this country. But, let us not be too smug: a few years ago, I heard a very funny comment on a local talk radio show: A person from Leeuspruit in the old Transvaal was being interviewed and he must have felt that his English wasn't all that good. So he told the talk show host, "I'm terribly sorry. You know, my English is not very good. Normally, I only use English in self defence". English is the global language and therefore it will be counter-productive to suggest that we should be "against English". We are not against English, and in that regard the official language policy is completely clear. We want every child to get as proficient as possible in English, but there are linguistic, psycholinguistic and other pedagogical theories which indicate very clearly, that the way to gain maximum proficiency in any additional language is via the mother tongue. Incidentally, when I use the term "mother tongue", I am fully aware of how problematic the concept is.[5] Most scholars and educationalists in the area of bilingual education are agreed that the deeper one's grounding in the mother tongue, the easier it is for one to acquire maximum proficiency in English or in any other language.

What we have to oppose is the hegemony of English. I want to stress the point, not the dominance but the hegemony of English. The dominance of English is the result of market forces. We cannot stop that easily, but the hegemony of English, the feeling among non-English-speakers that without English there is no power, the feeling that African languages are worthless, that we cannot empower ourselves by means of African languages, for example, that is what hegemony implies. It means that you disempower yourself because the aspiration is to become English, to know English so well that you can get the best jobs and the highest status and authority. We have to persuade people, particularly people in government departments, politicians and bureaucrats, to understand that we have to counter this hegemony of English. We have to have a counter-hegemonic strategy so that some of the African languages, over a period of at least two generations will be able to compete with world languages like English in most domains of life. When I say compete, I do not mean that they will displace English; I mean it in the sense of complementing one another, i.e., English will be used where it is appropriate, as will isiZulu or isiXhosa or Setswana, and so on. On the basis of modern examples, one can safely say that it takes at least two generations to get to that point. If we look at our own history, the development of Afrikaans is a good indicator.

In this connection, the latest oracular statements from the Ministry of Basic Education point in the wrong direction. In the *Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement*, the following confused assertions are made with respect to language policy:

> *The thorough development of a child's language skill is a reliable predictor of future cognitive competence. This applies equally to the child's Home Language and Language of Learning. The two languages are in effect two sides of the same coin. While the Home Language plays the primary role in developing literacy and thinking skills and is of importance in enhancing the protection and further development of the indigenous language, the Language of Learning (in particular English) is the one in which students must master educational concepts, and provides a platform to participate and engage meaningfully in the information age on a global stage. The highest enrolment of any subject in the NSC is English as a First Additional Language. In 2007, 490 404 out of 564 775 Grade 12s (i.e. 87%) wrote this subject (DOE, 2007). We also know that the majority of our learners undergo the majority of their schooling learning and being assessed in English, as their second language. Crucial attention needs to be paid to issues of language, in particular First Additional Language, English, which remains a strong predictor of student success at school. (DoE 2009:41)*

This is not the forum for a detailed critique of the Report's recommendations on language policy. Suffice it to say that these are based on major misunderstandings of linguistic, especially psycho- and socio-linguistic theory. What they do very plainly is bear witness to the anglocentric monolingual habitus of the task team and of the ministry, if it adopts the Report as it stands. The time has truly come to "bombard the headquarters", if we are to avoid the continuing oppression and marginalisation of the majority of poor and working class children in our schools, for whom mother tongue based bilingual education, the actual language in education policy of South Africa, is one of a few keys that can open the doors of learning. Of course, this is a very complex issue. People are misinformed and most black people in this country do not believe that the African languages can become as important as English. They suffer from what I have called a static maintenance syndrome, i.e., they believe that the African languages must be cherished, they are very important in the primary domains of family, church, community, primary school, etc., but they cannot be developed to become languages of science, technology and computers. That view is simply not true. These languages can become powerful, but, if that is to happen, we will need leadership, we need vision and we need role models. South African presidents and other dignitaries, by way of a simple example, should make it a regular practice to deliver important announcements and policy statements in African languages instead of only in English. If Angela Merkel in Germany or Sarkozy in France or the leaders of Japan or of any other strong state in the world today make major foreign policy or other statements, they use their own languages. Our leadership should, generally speaking, do the same, so that the people can realise that their languages are equally able to be used in these symbolically and actually powerful ways.

In conclusion, I need to state clearly that space limitations necessitated that I put the spotlight on three of the many beacons that help to ensure a properly functioning system of education. The many other issues that connect up with the three I have chosen to focus on are as important. They range from the funding model at the macro level to the issue of class sizes and parental and community involvement in school education at the local level, all of which are necessarily interdependent. I trust however that the importance and relevance of the issues I have discussed here will give rise to a heightened sense of urgency among all educators and the understanding that our failure to address these, and other related, issues is a serious dereliction of professional duty.

NOTES

1 (Smit and Hennesy 1995:1)

2 An inspiring example of this kind of development in a "deep" rural area is Sosebenza Primary School near Tarkastad in the Eastern Cape where, through the initiative and support of the Winterberg Trust, 13 farm schools concentrated their resources in a school of which any middle class community in the big city would be justifiably proud.

3 (1995:1)

4 This observation is based on our experience in SACHED in the 1980s, when we organised teacher resource groups in different subjects in the Western Cape and elsewhere. Under the apartheid regime, it was impossible to publish officially most of the materials we developed but much of that experience was carried into the transitional debates about education and continues to be relevant today.

5 Elegant variations, such as home language, first language, primary language, L1, etc. are all acceptable and should be used in the appropriate context. The term "mother tongue" points to the comfort zone, nurturing dimension of the language of one's primary socialisation. This is the main reason why I prefer to use it.

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