

# Galvanising Education: Commissioning Editor's Overview



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“Parents and communities will have little say in the education of their children and teachers will have little scope to exercise individuality or originality or experiment” Helen Suzman said in 1966, opposing the Education Bill. “The Bill aims at uniformity in education and control from above”.<sup>1</sup> Suzman was opposing a Bill governing the education of white as well as black children. Although the worst effects of apartheid on education manifested in Bantu Education, there was much else that was wrong with Nationalist educational ideology.

However, every step away from both ideology and content of Christian National Education (CNE) seems to have had its own pitfalls. Who could have predicted, for example, that the welcome move away from segregated education would have curtailed exposure to mother-tongue, and thus impacted on the development of higher cognitive functioning in young children? (Alexander, Matentjie, Owen-Smith, Henning)

It is tempting to focus on the potholes our education system crashes into, and not on where the road to better education is leading us. Indeed, compiling lists of potholes of varying sizes has become a national pastime. But not all lists are equal. Some lists of our educational failings are paralysing and others are galvanising.

The writers in this Education issue of *Focus* are galvanisers. They offer remedies. They move away from government as the source of all problems and all solutions, and offer resources to improve our education system, school by school. They recognise both the complexity of the problems facing us, and the possibility of taking small steps, right now, in the schools, to begin to solve these problems.

The two key themes in this issue are partnership, and mother-tongue education. Mother tongue education, or its absence, has a particularly important effect on the development of reading, and therefore of higher cognitive functioning, in young children.

Higher cognitive functioning is essential for learners to cope with the new curriculum. The development of this curriculum is another important move away from apartheid education which has had unintended consequences.

*Focus* readers who recall rote-learned CNE history as a school subject, and history papers with many one-word and one-sentence answers, will enjoy the following new curriculum questions put to learners in the 2009 matric history paper:

“What, do you think, were the attractions that enticed people from East Berlin to defect to West Berlin?” and “You were a young teacher filled with hope and optimism at the time of Ghana’s independence celebrations in 1957. By the 1970s you decided to leave Ghana. Using all the sources and your own knowledge, write a paragraph... explaining your feelings for leaving”.

Sources to be used by learners answering these questions included photographs, graphs, cartoons and original written documents.

But which learners could have analysed those sources, and answered those questions? Those matric candidates at state schools who passed with university exemption<sup>2</sup> – 107 000 in 2008,<sup>3</sup> 61 000 of them black<sup>4,5</sup> and 109 000 in 2009, roughly 64 000 of them black<sup>6</sup> – would have been able to answer well. This is a significant number, but what about the two thirds of learners who passed without an exemption? They would have battled to cope.

These learners are caught between the devil of a new curriculum demanding advanced skills of analysis and written expression, and the deep blue sea of the absence of foundations of those skills in primary school.

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### **Educational foundations**

Writers in this issue of *Focus* are concerned with both the big and the small questions. They look at the pattern and process of learning to read (Henning, Owen-Smith, Matentjie) and they discuss where the reading leads – that is, what the goals of a good education system should be. They don’t just look at the potholes, they look at where the road itself is going.

Osman reminds us to ask not just how to move away from dysfunctionality in education, but what sort of functionality we want to move towards. Mkhabela is clear where we should be going, and it’s not just

towards better maths and English: “education is at the heart of reconciliation, reconstruction and nation-building programmes.”

Alexander agrees that education is about more than transmitting “the crucial knowledge and skills required by young people in order to operate in the modern world.” Education in South Africa, he states firmly, must be about “equality of opportunity, non-racialism, multi-culturalism, democratic freedoms and attitudes and.... humane citizenship”.

Owen-Smith makes a similar point about the power of language to join or to separate. Learners must learn to share their languages because “without social integration in the classroom, the social cohesion necessary for us to move forward as a country will be unattainable”.

Nation-building cannot be pursued at the expense of reading – both must be classroom goals, and it is teachers who must implement them. Can they do this? Cereseto paints a picture of teachers that is both alarming and reassuring. She reminds readers of the idealism with which many young people enter the profession – and the pressures which cause them to lose this idealism, and which fracture their professional identity. One of the teachers Cereseto interviewed wrote: “I used to be something else – now I am a sinking ship”, while another described herself as “a shining diamond – buried in the sand”.

What can be done to help the teachers? There is quite a lively debate on this topic. Alexander feels that teacher training should be much more practical, and that the teacher training colleges should be re-opened. Chisholm argues that not all of the colleges were good in the first place, and that all are now serving other purposes. For her, re-opening or not is the wrong question to ask; we should instead ask how we are to provide more and better teachers.

Osman argues for universities as the appropriate place for teacher training. She challenges the dichotomy between practice and theory with her concept of reflective practitioners who evaluate and innovate while teaching.

Although the authors wrote separately and individually, this pattern of dialogue – of agreement, disagreement, and picking up threads of an argument – continues across articles throughout the issue. Mkhabela,

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Osman and Alexander all call for demonstration schools, and are answered by Henning’s description of the experimental Foundation Phase school run in Soweto by the University of Johannesburg.

Ngoma and Cereseto, in very different contexts, both remind us gently of easily forgotten idealism – Ngoma describes the idealistic phase in which national education policies were first drawn up, and Cereseto writes about the individual idealism of teachers, which is easily obscured by press headlines.

As well as agreements, there are sharp disagreements: Alexander and Owen-Smith’s plea for mother tongue education is answered by an equally passionate argument from Matentjie. Matentjie sees inherent barriers to higher cognitive functioning within a mother-tongue where higher order thinking skills such as arguing, criticising, questioning and judging would all be deemed “disrespectful, argumentative and difficult” when produced by children.

Chisholm’s theme of false nostalgia for times past is picked up, although not explicitly, by Everatt who challenges the idea of Bantu Education having produced better results for black learners.

Bantu Education itself is described poignantly and personally by Lephoi. He paints a picture of Bantu Education which is both ideal and horrifying. Here indeed are the schools where “what we lacked in resources we more than made up for in great teaching” and teachers who “understood the concept of in *loco parentis* and played many parts in our lives”. The cost of this is the Bophuthatswana army patrolling to enforce a youth curfew, resources distributed at the whim of a homeland ruler, and corporal punishment that is in fact assault.

## Partnerships

What Lephoi describes is a totally hierarchical system, but an area of agreement between most of the other writers is the importance of educational partnerships. Implicit in Suzman’s criticism of the Education Bill of 1966 is the idea of education as an innovative partnership between parents, teachers and community. This is the “educational community with a common purpose” Chisholm hopes for.

Trust is the foundation for communities and partnerships in and around education. Hofmeyr describes parents making sacrifices to get their children to private schools because they believe in the school. Henning tells readers about state schools which operate as successful partnerships because teachers are trusted.

These partnerships are particularly important, Henning tells us, for developing reading skills. “A teacher who works systematically, a home environment where the school work is overseen and strengthened, and a school where learning is valued are essential ingredients of a young child’s formal education life. When children fail to learn to read it is almost always because school, or home, or both, have failed them”.

A partnership is not automatically a good thing. Ngoma calls for “extended networks of knowledge and expertise” and in particular for moving out of “limited... and familiar network zones which endorse known cultural, social, political and economic patterns”. The dangers that limited political and economic networks may hold for education are highlighted by Mkhabela, who notes that “school governing bodies are often utilised to achieve external objectives and... politically manipulated”. Matentjie also makes the point about culture and language sometimes providing a straitjacket, rather than a support, for learning.

A successful partnership increases resources, rather than limiting or appropriating them. Roos’s article explains how fee-paying parents increase resources in state schools. This partnership is often overlooked in wider education debates. The yearly contribution of these parents in fees alone is R10 billion; add fundraising and professional services not charged for, and the value probably doubles. These are resources directly transferred into the state education system – to pay teachers at state schools and build and maintain buildings owned by the state.

Of course paying teachers well is not the only way to motivate them. Hofmeyr offers a different model

of motivation and of partnership when she explains that in many of the small private schools for the poor, teachers earn far below what is paid in state schools, and deliver good results. Private Education for the Poor is another model of partnership offered, between state and various private sector actors.

What is appealing about well-functioning partnerships is that important roles are allocated to a very wide range of actors. So Govender and Dlamini outline how even the youngest learners have a role in countering the school bullying which feeds violence in schools and in the wider society.

## Conclusion

Problems in improving an education system are not unique to South Africa, or even to developing countries. The British sociologist Furedi<sup>7</sup> cites governments from both the left and the right – Thatcher’s, Blair’s, Reagan’s, Clinton’s – which have failed to solve the problems of mass education in their developed and wealthy countries, despite constant policy reform.

“This vicious cycle of educational reforms represents an enormous waste: of resources, of teachers’ energies and creativity, and of pupils’ opportunity to acquire knowledge”<sup>8</sup>. For Furedi, education is “a cultural institution, inhabited by young people who are influenced by their family, peers and community”<sup>9</sup>, and the problems of education cannot be solved by policy or pedagogical technique alone. Solving these problems will require partnerships within and across cultural institutions, and also the development of a culture of respect for education.

Culture, feelings, belief, and memory play an important part in the way all of us approach education.

Chisholm’s article describes a form of nostalgia, of “loss and longing” around education. The cadences of an education debate will never be formed only by logic. Education is about our own past, remembered and mis-remembered, and the future of our children and our nation. We engage the debate passionately, with fear and hope.

Mindful of both history and future the writers in this issue of *Focus* debate, ask questions and issue challenges to their readers. Everatt’s research challenges some of our current beliefs by questioning the poorest of the poor, and finding that education is the area of delivery with which they are most satisfied. Hofmeyr invites us to step beyond prejudiced perceptions of private education as a privileged ghetto, and presents evidence for the effectiveness of private education for the poor. Alexander demands that we examine the impact of geographical location of schools – it’s not just what happens inside the classrooms that matters, but where those classrooms are built.

Cereseto presents the clearest challenge to all the readers of *Focus*: are we encouraging our own children, and young people among our families and friends, to become teachers? Are we presenting teaching as a desirable profession to those who are close to us? If not, how will we build the road forward to an innovative, inclusive education system?

This road cannot, and should not, be built by government alone. Active participation in resource-growing educational partnerships is not just the terrain of governments or of corporations or other formal organisations. It is a challenge for individuals, families, neighbourhoods, community groups. In other words, all of us.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewsen, P. (Ed) (1991). Helen Suzman’s Solo Years. Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball. P 85

<sup>2</sup> The old term of university exemption is used here, as most readers are likely to be familiar with it. The new terminology is: ‘meets minimum requirements for admission to bachelor’s degree’

<sup>3</sup> Department of Basic Education (2010) National Senior Certificate Report 2009, Republic of South Africa

<sup>4</sup> Keeton, M. (2009). 2008 National Senior Certificate Results – feeling confused? Epoch and Optima Trusts. Retrieved 30 December 2009 from [www.tsi.org.za/uploads/Margie%20Keeton%20-%20matric%20results%202008.pdf](http://www.tsi.org.za/uploads/Margie%20Keeton%20-%20matric%20results%202008.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> South African Institute of Race relations Survey 2008/2009

<sup>6</sup> This is an approximate calculation, subtracting all the English home language and Afrikaans home language learners from the total of university exemptions, therefore slightly underestimating the number of black learners

<sup>7</sup> Furedi, F. (2009) Wasted: why education isn’t educating. London/New York, Continuum Books

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p 206

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* p 203