

Furthering development in education: Are we clawing back?

Should government become more directive and once again prescribe how schools should be managed or should we treasure the autonomy and democratic system of our school governing bodies? Or, is it time to redesign the entire system? Experts raised these questions at a recent HSRC seminar about South Africa's education legislation and policy. *Antoinette Oosthuizen* reports.

The proposed Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill that aims to limit the powers of school governing bodies, caused some recent controversy.

The seminar that spoke to this issue was based on the HSRC's macro report, "Furthering the Developmental Imperative? An assessment of the past 20 years of education legislation and policy in South Africa" prepared for the National Education Collaboration Trust.

Presenting the findings, HSRC CEO Prof. Crain Soudien said the dramatic overhaul of the South African education system since 1994 included at least 172 policy interventions establishing a "social justice apparatus with such a heavy agenda that experts are still struggling with it".

The introduction of school governing bodies was one of the most important interventions.

Democratic governance

The South African Schools Act of 1996 dissolved multiple departments of education to concentrate on a single national education system, managed with the principle of cooperative governance.

"The establishment of school governing bodies was a major opportunity to build democracy. It became a practice space for people to learn the craft of taking control over their own lives and managing the state of the people by controlling decisions of admissions, curriculum

and language of instruction," said Soudien.

"But there are issues. We have seen our school governing bodies use their powers to keep people out by restricting admissions in to schools. They have also been able to determine the language of instruction in problematic ways."

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HSRC research specialist, Dr Andrea Juan, said the main points of contention in the proposed amendment bill are that schools and school governing bodies will need to submit their admission and language policies to the head of department for approval. It will also attempt to limit the powers of a school governing bodies to recommend candidates for appointment into certain promotion posts.

"Naturally, school governing bodies are opposed to these amendments, because they severely limit their autonomy. In the apartheid system, we had a traditional bureaucratic system of government that relied on force. Then we moved to a system of governance based on inclusion and participation. Are we moving back into a system of big government which relies on direct state

intervention to ensure effective policy implementation?" Juan asked.

Intangible resources

Soudien said the differences between white and black schools during apartheid were seen in the ratios of teachers to learners (1:18 in white schools and 1:39 in black schools), an issue that the government is still trying to address.

The quintile system was established. In time, quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools became no-fee schools and quintile 4 and 5 schools were able to supplement their finances with school fees and fundraising.

Soudien questioned whether this system effectively dealt with the apartheid legacy. "We no longer have white and black schools, but rich and poor schools. The issue is complicated, because in relative terms, even our poor schools are better resourced than many countries in the world, but we are still struggling."

He said that school resources include not only material things like infrastructure, books and money, but also intangible cultural and intellectual resources, such as language, and that the struggle has a lot to do with the latter.

Language and executive function

PhD intern Jaqueline Harvey described why the difference between children's home and instructional languages hampers

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their development throughout their academic career, an issue not properly addressed in language policy.

“Many learners attend schools where they learn in a second or third language, which impacts on their executive function, a mental skill-set that we use to manage our thoughts, actions and emotions in order to get tasks done. When a child reads in grade one, a single word can take long to master, because they have to individually focus on and understand it letter by letter.

“Initially, they use all their mental capacity to read and not to understand what they are reading. When this process becomes automatic, they shift from learning to read to reading to learn. However, this process can take longer for learners who are second language speakers. If they don’t make this

shift, they struggle to engage with content. All of their executive function goes into trying to read rather than actually learning. Later, they enter a complex environment where each field, such as science and information technology, has a language of its own.” (See article on page 27)

Teachers and curriculum

Soudien also discussed issues around the repeated attempts to redesign the apartheid-era curriculum, the unique challenges of rural schools and teacher training. He said that it is wrong to assume that a common curriculum and equal treatment of teachers mean equal quality teaching. He said some teachers continue to reproduce the cultures and habits of their pre-1994 environments and we need to consider the contextual differences between communities.

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Duncan Hindle, education expert and former director-general of the Department of Basic Education, responded to the debate around the closure of teacher training colleges in the 1990s. He pointed out that the most recent data from Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies and the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality show that the best performing learners were taught by teachers under the age of 30.

"These teachers have been trained by universities, so there seems to be some empirical evidence that university training is working in terms of learner outcome."

Schools as silos

Tina Singh, chief director for exams and assessment in the Western Cape Education Department, questioned the assumption that all poor learners should attend quintile 1-3 schools (no fee schools). "It is a huge debate in terms of separation and wanting again for the poor to attend poorer schools and secure 4 and 5 schools for a certain category of learners."

Soudien conceded that it is a difficult policy issue. "We need to understand the issue of schools as silos inside a school district. Should teachers be appointed to districts rather than schools? Should the reproduction of a particular school and its character coming out of 1994 be allowed to persist or should we intervene? We

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have not had the courage to deal with the political aspect."

Clawing back or redesign?

Hindle described the proposed new bill as part of a "clawing back process". "The 1996 South African Schools Act set up a very liberal decentralised framework and every bit of legislation since then has tried to tackle a particular aspect, pulling back some of the powers bit by bit. We did the same thing with the curriculum by setting up a liberating outcomes-based model in 2005 and then pulling back to the tightly controlled CAPS.

"Do we keep tinkering in that way or is it time to go back and ask if the fundamental architecture was right in the first place?" he asked.

According to Soudien, the education system is still in transition. "Is the scale of what came out of 1994 such what we need much more directive big government interventions? Opposed to that, is the question of how we build people's confidence in this country so that they feel sufficiently capacitated to make their own decisions."

Soudien also referred to the Cuba example of 1959. When the country became a democracy, schools were closed and the education system completely redesigned. "There was a managed discussion about what people wanted. We did not do that and still need to go to our communities. The school governing bodies can play an important role to hear from people what they want."

