



A teacher with her class of 80 children in Amouti, KwaZulu-Natal, in 1982

Photo: Omar Badsha

THE HSRC INVESTIGATION INTO EDUCATION (1980-1981): An intent to provide equal education for all?

In June 1980, the HSRC received a request from the Cabinet of the Republic of South Africa to conduct an investigation into the provision of education in the country. It was requested to make recommendations that would bring “education of the same quality for all population groups” and “improve the quality of life of all”. *Dr Christa Van Zyl* writes about the investigation and the response to its findings.

The Soweto youth uprising in 1976 and the politics of resistance of the 1980s, including school boycotts, indicated a desperate frustration with the status quo of education in South Africa. It was the time of “grand apartheid” when education was seen as a vehicle to perpetuate and aggravate inequalities. The provision and financing of education was unequal, based on racial grounds, and was not supporting sustainable growth. Even in the white privileged sub-system of education, the focus was on overly academic outcomes. Such a system was unable to adequately prepare enough school-leavers or university graduates for the world of work in a growing, increasingly technological, economy. In some cases, education was not even compulsory.

School dropout rates were alarmingly high among black African and coloured learners in particular, further contributing to poverty and deprivation. Many teachers resigned during this period. Some, mostly white, were drawn to better-paying jobs in the private sector, while others, mostly black, found it intolerable to remain in the system.

A progressive request?

The wording of the cabinet request became the subject of subsequent debate. Some argued that such a broad and challenging remit was a delaying tactic by a ruling party reluctant to address burning problems. Others questioned how the ruling Nationalist party could have formulated terms of reference that were so progressive and inclusive.

The HSRC's response was rapid and decisive, which have led some to believe that there might have been prior consultation between at least three important role players in the HSRC investigation into education, namely Dr Gerrit Viljoen (then soon-to-be-appointed Minister of National Education), Prof. Pieter de Lange (rector of the Rand Afrikaans University, subsequently appointed as chairperson of the main committee of the HSRC investigation) and Dr Johan Garbers (HSRC president).

The HSRC investigation into education was one of the first national cooperative research programmes initiated in the context of the South African Plan for Research in the Human Sciences, an action plan for the coordination, promotion and financing of research in human sciences in South Africa.

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The De Lange committee

De Lange was appointed as chairperson and research leader of the investigation. He led a main committee of 26 members who came from public and private sectors, schools, the organised teaching profession and academic institutions. These included members from different population groups, but - typical of the era - only one woman. Eighteen work committees were established, each focusing on a different aspect of education planning and provisioning. A special “synthesis committee” was appointed later to help extract key themes and recommendations for inclusion in the main report.

The entire research infrastructure of the HSRC was made available to support the investigation, and those involved could commission new research and use research findings from inside or outside the organisation.

Some 1300 people were directly or indirectly involved in the investigation. Due to the short time available for the study, the focus was more on principles and structures than on the content of education programmes, which was also a bone of contention at the time.

A set of guiding principles

The investigation started in August 1980. The first work committee was tasked with developing a set of guiding principles to underpin all aspects of the provision of education in South Africa.

PRINCIPLES FOR THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION IN THE RSA

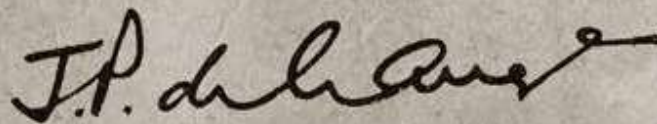
- Equal opportunities for education, including equal standards in education, for every inhabitant, irrespective of race, colour, creed or sex, shall be the purposeful endeavour of the state.
- Education shall afford positive recognition of what is common as well as what is diverse in the religious and cultural way of life and the languages of the inhabitants.
- Education shall give positive recognition to the freedom of choice of the individual, parents and organisations in society.
- The provision of education shall be directed in an educationally responsible manner to meet the needs of the individual as well as those of society and economic development, and shall, inter alia, take into consideration the manpower [sic] needs of the country.
- Education shall endeavour to achieve a positive relationship between the formal, non-formal and informal aspects of education in the school, society and family.
- The provision of formal education shall be a responsibility of the state provided that the individual, parents and organised society shall have a shared responsibility, choice and voice in this matter.
- The private sector and the state shall have a shared responsibility for the provision of non-formal education.
- Provision shall be made for the establishment and state subsidisation of private education within the system of providing education.
- In the provision of education, the processes of centralisation and decentralisation shall be reconciled organisationally and functionally.
- The professional status of the teacher and lecturer shall be recognised.
- The provision of education shall be based on continuing research.

Recommendations

The main committee made a broad range of recommendations. Several of the recommendations on the education structure resonate with the concept of the National Qualifications Framework that was adopted after 1994. The recommendations included the introduction of some form of compulsory preschool education as well as bridging programmes, and specific entry and exit points for movement between formal (more academic) and non-formal (workplace- or skills-based) education. The need for cost-effective, equitable and accessible services for

I am very aware of the hope entertained in many hearts that the investigation will contribute to a dispensation that will provide the rightful educational opportunities for every learner in the RSA, thereby helping to ensure a meaningful and prosperous future for the RSA and all its people. The direction of education towards this end is the responsibility of the policymaker and the educator. It is my sincere hope and prayer that the investigation will contribute to sound decision-making on the future of education in the RSA, assist teachers in their task and the many learners in their search through education for meaning and vocation.

We humbly turn to Him who will give final judgment on this human endeavour. His will be done.



J.P. DE LANGE
CHAIRMAN: HSRC INVESTIGATION
INTO EDUCATION IN THE RSA



This extract from the preface of the report provides a glimpse of the hope that Prof. Pieter de Lange, the chairman of the HSRC Investigation into Education, had to improve the education system with this work.

career guidance, school health and children with special educational needs, was highlighted in the context of structures for supporting services. Recommendations on physical structures included facilitating the acquisition of sites outside specific group areas and developing a computerised inventory of school buildings in the country, which, in post-apartheid South Africa, materialised in practice as the National School Register of Needs.

The recommendations around the management structure of education was perhaps, for 1981, the most important and politically the most contentious. The report called for a single national department of education for the overall planning, management and oversight of education

provisioning in the country. Many readers of the 1981 report felt that the argumentation lines running through the earlier recommendations pointed to the need for a non-racial basis for education provisioning and the management thereof, as well as in the way education departments were constituted.

However, the report fell short of explicitly stating how education departments – beyond the national level – should be demarcated. In an interview conducted in 1989, Viljoen indicated that this ambiguity had been on purpose, “...they told us they had left this question open, as a matter of political choice” (De Villiers, as quoted by Van Zyl, 1991:39).

The authors perhaps did not want to risk the entire report being rejected, if an unambiguous recommendation on a non-racial basis for demarcation was included.

The 1981 report was formally received by the government, and tabled without any changes in parliament. It was, however, accompanied by a four-page "Interim Memorandum" in which the government indicated that it was in agreement with the principles and recommendations contained in the report, but only as far as they would fit into the existing political landscape. The release of the memorandum was greeted with shock and disappointment on all sides. Those who had hoped for meaningful, rapid change, felt betrayed. Others felt that the report had gone too far, and that it could be regarded as a threat to the status quo.

The political dispensation into which the recommendations were taken forward, was changing, with introduction of a new constitution in 1983, which came into effect in 1984.

A single national department was established, and a new national education act, which cited, almost verbatim, all of the principles of the 1981 investigation in its preamble, was promulgated. But, although the same norms and standards, and even funding formulas, were adopted at the national level, the same factors were not applied for actual provisioning at the second level. Moreover, instead of being demarcated on a regional basis (as is the case in South Africa today), second-level departments were arranged – in terms of the 1983 constitution – alongside racially-drawn and still very unequal lines: "own affairs" for whites, coloured and Indians; "general affairs" for everybody else; and the provision of education in "homelands" not even covered by national legislation.

Several of the recommendations contained in the report were adopted in different ways, by different education departments, with varying levels of success. But the political context in which the recommendations were interpreted and implemented, to a large extent, quenched "the hope entertained in many hearts that the Investigation will contribute to a dispensation that will provide the rightful educational opportunities for every learner ..." as stated in the preface of the report.

Towards a new dispensation

In the following years, the HSRC established an education research programme that was overseen by a main committee with some continuity with members of the 1980-1981 investigation. Many areas that were highlighted as requiring further attention were addressed by this programme – for instance: the use of media (computers, radio and TV) in education; education for gifted learners; education for black disabled learners; language in education; history education in South Africa and public opinion on education.

A follow-up HSRC study was conducted ten years after the investigation, on the extent to which the recommendations of the De Lange report had been implemented. Its conclusions highlighted the perennial tensions and chasms between research, policy, and practice.

After 1981, many other initiatives and developments, not associated with the HSRC, helped to shape future plans. People's education emerged as an important movement in the 1980s, and the National Education Crisis Committee (later, the National Education Coordinating Committee) established subject committees for history and English, and a research committee. In the same period, education policy units at the universities of Natal, Western Cape and Witwatersrand initiated research in prioritised areas, and in 1992 the ANC established the Centre for Education Policy Development. The National Education Policy Investigation (1992) was a large-scale initiative consisting of more than 300 researchers who worked in 12 research groups, each dealing with a specific aspect of education policy. In the organised labour sector, excellent work was done on principles underpinning lifelong learning, career development and the recognition of prior learning, in consultation with international experts and counterparts.

Against the backdrop of a changing landscape, it is difficult to assess the lasting impact, if any, of the De Lange investigation, but it is possible that it helped to prepare the ground for a new dispensation. The consensus that had to be sought and built within working groups and a main committee, which were purposefully designed to include people from different racial groups and with different perspectives, helped some members to continue sharing insights, identify common principles and seek workable solutions.

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