

Learning about education from history

CONCERNS have been raised that the state's free schooling initiative will widen the gap between rich and poor. Some historical perspective on the issue may provide insight into the significance of the development.

The extension of free and compulsory schooling to all children has been a key demand of democrats in SA since it was introduced for white children almost a century ago. Since 1994, it has been extended to all children, but in a piecemeal manner. The South African Schools Act (1996) made education compulsory but not free. Instead of being free, all schools became state-aided, such aid being equitably provided to cover salaries and some learning resources.

Black schools were state-aided for a large part of the 20th century, until they became state-controlled and funded at extremely low cost to the state from the 1950s. The majority of schools, serving coloured and Indian children remained state-aided well into the 1960s. White schools became state-aided after 1994.

Inequalities continued, not only because of the additional resources in the form of fees and sponsorships that formerly privileged schools could command, but because they built on a century of adequate resour-

cing and communities rich enough to subsidise schools now no longer in receipt of privileged state funding.

Fees for poor parents continued to be a major source of contention after 1994. Then, in 1998, government introduced fee exemptions. But research showed fees were still an obstacle to schooling for the poor.

Fees, as an education department investment into school finance found in 2003, were only one of the costs of schooling that poor parents had to bear.

But they are an unjustifiable cost when these parents can ill-afford food, clothing and health care for their children. Evidence continued to be presented that even the exemptions policy was not working, as it should, and that principals, often in need of the funds, were not informing parents of their rights.

So, in 2005, the Human Rights Commission conducted public hearings on the right to basic education. Fees and poor implementation of the exemption policy were an important reason for its finding that the right to education was still not being met.

As of this year, a new regime of fee-free schooling is being introduced. This can be interpreted to be in part a result of civil-society mobilisation, and in part because the resources exist to support it.

It does not mean that compulsory schooling will be without any costs for parents, but

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there is no legal obligation for children at fee-free schools to pay fees, while the departmental allocations for stationery, textbooks and so on are being increased at fee-free schools and exemptions for poor children in suburban schools are being strengthened.

Viewed historically, we now have poor, African schools that are increasingly fully state funded rather than state-aided. Important as this is, it cannot compensate for broader social and economic inequalities that make schools rich or poor.

It is a start, though not enough, and will require enforcement, but it is important to recognise what has been won and to see this as part of an ongoing struggle. We need to insist on provinces spending their money to

make sure that fee-free schools, and all township and rural schools for that matter, realise their promise. We need more fee-free schools, we need larger allocations to fee-free schools and we need treasury officers and district officials to ensure that teaching and learning are actually happening.

We don't need, as some are proposing, a payment-by-results system. This was all the rage across colonial SA in the latter half of the 19th century — and was abandoned, according to historian EG Malherbe, because of its "numbing" and anti-educational effects.

Even the implementation of free and compulsory education for whites at the beginning of the past century took some time to take effect across the board. When compulsory education was introduced just before union in 1910, large numbers of poor, white children were still out of school. But free and compulsory education after union brought them into school. The result was a great increase in school attendance over a period of 15 years. Quality issues then were addressed to make access meaningful, albeit for a minority at the expense of a majority.

Malherbe's analysis, in 1925, of the improvements in white education in the decade after union are instructive when compared with the 10 years since 1994. In the years after union,

the gradual extension of compulsory and free education for whites far the most important change in education. This extension re- and involved increases in building staff transport, hostels and buildings. The number of teachers doing Teacher training was expanded. Teachers' salaries improved, and depended on the additional financial resources available to education through union finances.

The net result, as Malherbe observed, was that "SA today 1925) spends more upon education than any other country for data could be obtained."

Then, as now, it was the poor participation in financing it, the key to spending; and then, today, their priority was education. The education share of public spending has not only been decreasing in recent years, much of it has remained unspent. There is evidence of all manner of waste resources. None of this is necessary. A century later, we can, still improve dramatically the possibility of the poor to get a good education. Our history suggests it.

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