

Avoiding a new basis for social divisions

IF EDUCATION reforms perpetuate the divisions between education and training or the vocational and the academic there can be no hope for a democratic education system in South Africa, according to British educational sociologist Michael Young.

Making the point that no one has yet been successful in tackling the issue of the low value attached to technical or vocational education, Young said the divisions in education originate not in the curriculum, but in the economic system. The education curriculum simply perpetuated the divisions.

He said the assumptions which informed the British education system were unavoidably part of South Africa's heritage because of the colonial relationship. If South Africans did not understand what that legacy entailed, it would continue to haunt their future.

The divisions pointed to a political issue which assumes a difference between those educated "to know" and those educated "to do". "This is the very antithesis of democracy," said Young.

Other countries had tried various strategies to grapple with the problem:

- Low status vocations can be upgraded – a solution typical in America. However, in Britain (and arguably in South Africa too), the issue is not so much about the content of the work than about its

connotations.

- In France academic education is diversified to provide multiple routes into higher education. This has gigantic financial implications, but it also means that new forms of stratification emerge and with them, a new hierarchy.

- If one accepts the inevitability of divisions, it is possible to try and strengthen both routes, as implemented in Germany. This depends on a culture which accords high status to the world of work.

- The most radical alternative — but the one most needed, according to Young is to begin to envisage a unified system of curricula and qualifications. This would create a more flexible system in which people could move freely between the world of work and that of full-time study.

"The world of work must be a practical and theoretical part of all education . . . We must envisage a new model of what education is about about how people transform the world, not about truth and employability."

If education reforms in South Africa repeat the mistakes of Britain, then even though racist laws may be abolished, a new basis for social divisions will be created.

State must engage in schools' battle

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- To engage meaningfully with the state people must be empowered with the necessary facts and figures to challenge and counter the information that the state may produce.

- A broader definition of "the people" is needed to transform education meaningfully. If "the people" are defined simply by their opposition to the state, they will be disempowered when the state openly identifies with the struggle and presents itself as progressive. A "people's" government must still be monitored and the differences and tensions between the government and civic society must be understood. "If the struggle ends, the terror begins," he added.

- Transformation of education requires resources. Buckland offered figures on the per capita spending in South Africa: in white schools it is R1 002, in DET schools it is R320, in KaNgwane it is R36. Unless there is significant redirection of resources to rural and marginal areas, transformation will fail, he said.

- A bureaucracy is necessary. "Bureaucracy is the worst possible way of managing an education system, except for all the others!" Unless a sensitive and democratically accountable management system is created all plans and policy documents will be meaningless.

- Expertise is essential in order to progress beyond slogans. When governments finally agree to the people's call for an end to something and ask for alternatives, constructive suggestions must exist.

- Transformation requires time. Buckland said "top down" reform sometimes had to be implemented because transformation would take too long. He cautioned however, that "every time we make that compromise, we subtly undermine the transformative capac-

A learning culture needed

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had intensified over the last 15 years – had created a "bitter and deeply alienated youth". The social consequences of the erosion of a learning culture could not be calculated statistically, but it was a reality which needed to be addressed.

The exclusion of parents and teachers from education was both a consequence and a cause of the erosion of a culture of learning.

In 1987 the school enrolment figure in South Africa was 8,5 million. It is estimated that this will have reached 14,5 million by the year 2020. The past, present and future had to be addressed simultaneously, said Samuel.

To rebuild a culture of learning it was necessary to infuse a sense of urgency into political organisations, trade unions, churches, women's organisations and youth and student organisations. Learning and education must be placed firmly on their agendas.

Samuel concluded that "a climate of learning" needed to be encouraged and developed to establish a new society. "Education and learning are social activities and if the appropriate climate is not created after years of destruction and devastation, then we will not be able to rebuild and recreate a new society."

In a panel discussion on educational priorities, representatives of the NECC, the Department of Education and Training, the Democratic Party and the African National Congress put their views.

Yusef Sayed, an educationist from the University of the Western Cape and an executive member of the NECC, said education



Education sociologist Michael Young.

policy had to meet the needs of parents, students and teachers.

The basic ingredients of people's education included a more relevant education system and syllabi that overcame the legacies of racism, sexism and manual/mental work. Education was the state's responsibility and a fundamental right of all people. The NECC was opposed to any moves towards privatisation of education.

The education spokesperson of the DP, Ken Andrew, said the content and syllabus in any education system should meet the basic needs of literacy and numeracy, as well as being relevant to South Africa, Africa and the technological age. Schools should

offer as diverse and flexible a curriculum as possible.

Andrew said it was impossible to finance education spending at current "white" levels. In white schools there was empty space to the value of R2 billion which could be well used if schools were open to all.

The Cape regional director of the DET, Mr Bill Staude, comparing himself to Daniel in the lion's den as he faced the conference, said there was only one priority in education – the survival of the individual, and of the individual in society.

Education should equip people to be technologically knowledgeable and competent so that they could sell their skills and be capable of generating finance rather than simply being wage-earners.

On the question of administration, Staude said the community school should be the basic unit of education. The battle over schools in the black community was ulti-