

Meeting Memo

Education dialogue

9 September 2011

Theme: Towards a shared understanding of the education crisis

This memo records the education dialogue under the following headings:

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. Framing the discussion
4. Points that reflect a shared understanding
5. Way forward
6. Conclusion

1. Introduction:

A dialogue was convened for 9th September 2011 at ECSECC to address systemic problems in education and to discuss how best to transform schools into effective institutions. The broad objective was that this discussion would initiate a series of further dialogues that would then feed into a longer term process of consensus-building and strategising. Participants included representatives from the following organisations; NMMU-School of Education, Ubuntu Education Fund in Zwile, Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, NMMU- The Centre for the Community School, UFH- Department of Education and the Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council. A register is attached.

The purpose of the meeting was twofold: firstly to convene a discussion with organisations engaged directly in school development that would allow for the respective analyses and outlook on education to emerge; and secondly, to distil a common understanding of how to address challenges in education. The mode of the meeting was conversational and reflective of practical work and insights gained from experiences in school improvement initiatives. Questions probing for deeper understanding of the issues were raised and discussed.

It should be noted that because this Memo captures the discussion both reflectively and projectively, the use of tense varies.

2. Background

Resolving problems in the domain of education is complex given the structural challenges of poverty, the ineptitude of the state and the persistence of apartheid legacies. These legacies are apparent in the social, economic and political exclusion of most people in the country, and have direct bearing on the systemic shortfalls in education. The discussion was prompted by this dilemma in education and sought to mobilise and harness agencies for educational transformation.

In post-apartheid South Africa, access to equity and to quality education have been key educational goals but these remain elusive for the majority of school children. We are aware of the collapse of the provincial department of education and the difficulties involved in providing basic infrastructure and resources to school communities, but what is most appalling is its abdication of responsibility insofar as leadership and support for teaching and learning in schools is concerned. As organisations and university departments we endeavour to support the state towards one goal, namely that of creating the conditions in which to develop a generation that is caring, critical and inspired, in spite of the structural, systemic, organisational and attitudinal issues that often put such efforts to the test.

While the plethora of policy documents disseminated by the state has not yielded significant advancement in education, non-government or quasi-government organisations are continuing to make interventions in school communities to inspire hope and to demonstrate success in schools.

It was with the hope of harnessing the potential of such groups that this dialogue was convened, with the intention to formulate a shared outlook or philosophy that will enable participants to give strength to each others' work, as well as to contribute to the provincial and national goal of transforming education.

3. Framing the discussion:

Three overarching questions were raised, of which the salient points are noted under distinct headings:

a. How do we conceptualise the role of community in education?

In order to understand and define a community's role, engaged social research is required that must be driven by activist approaches to education. Education for transformative purposes is a critical point of departure in this regard; however it is crucial to interrogate what is understood

by 'transformation'. Placing the emphasis on demonstrable solutions and success in school communities is key to transformation. This implies that our approach ought to be praxis-orientated. Another element that pertains here is the processes by which social consciousness may be raised in these communities so as to generate insights that will facilitate change, and which are shaped and sustained by the communities themselves. Practice-based models converge around a set of key issues, such as the importance of teacher development, as this affects how children learn, what children learn, and the principled actions that could prepare them for dealing with the challenges particular to social contexts.

b. What is the purpose of education?

An exploration of the purpose of education relates to the nature of the society envisaged, and an understanding of this will inform the approach adopted for educational development. Objectives such as those outlined below may facilitate a vision for a new society.

In the discussion, reference was made to purposes such as *communicative competencies, an understanding of the physical world, mathematical competencies for planning and analytical purposes, relationship competencies that combat rampant individualism and projections of greed rather than co-operative modes of relating, affirmative competence that will ensure children a healthy psychological development that addresses the psycho-emotional damage of apartheid. Such emphases should go towards instilling self-belief in children and engendering a confidence in their own capabilities* (Motala, PPEN: 2010).

c. How do we build public participation in education?

Deepening and broadening public participation in education through dialogue, and through other means, is an important aspect of educational development. Key developmental concepts arise when considering questions of accountability, democratic practice, empowerment and capacity building. These ideas form a set of key principles that should guide development planning and consensus building.

The trade unions are important role-players in this participation. Projected discussions of this nature, and initiatives that will hopefully arise from these dialogues should incorporate those who are influential in the policy space.

4. Points that reflect a shared understanding:

- a. *Humanising Education*: this is integral to who we are as human beings and it is imperative to ensure that precepts of humanising pedagogy are expressed in educational practices and thinking.
- b. *Agency*: we need to revitalise community involvement through, initially, working from the point at which each is located, and also through propagating these ideas in these circles as a preliminary step to engaging broader audiences. We need to build in accountability as a key feature of educational development so that community members, teachers and students have a clear idea of the core purpose of education, as well as their respective responsibilities.
- c. *Constituencies*: We should incorporate constituencies that play a role, or have an interest in developing school communities, such as teacher bodies, parents, students, universities, civil society and so forth. Participation of constituencies should be based on non- sectarian principles and be motivated by the common aim of educational upliftment.
- d. *Teacher development*: teacher development programmes should prepare teachers for the harsh realities, as well as the talent-yielding opportunities, prevalent in community life. One of the central issues in the schooling system that teachers need to be prepared for is the socio-linguistic disconnect that is manifest between the medium of curriculum delivery on the one hand, and varieties of community languages, on the other. The schooling system is currently trapped in a neo-colonial mindset of using English mainly as a medium for teaching and learning with children who are primarily Xhosa speaking, and - in fewer instances - Sotho and Afrikaans speaking. School language policies and practices need to be learner-centred, which means drawing on, and integrating the linguistic resources of the community with classroom practice. Apart from diversity related issues, there is a broader range of elements that needs to inform how we can conceive of new ways of training teachers. But ultimately we view teachers as change agents who are central to the transformative process. For this reason redefining their role is imperative.
- e. *Demonstration*: We should use situations that model current, as well as planned intervention programmes, as resources for the insight required in how to address educational problems. Universities should, increasingly, adopt research approaches that engage communities in ways that serve developmental ends - that increase capacity and heighten consciousness for an understanding that enables them to rise above their constraining conditions.

- f. *Alternative/popular education*: Our thinking should interrogate issues such as the relations of power, access to information; we should aim to harness the intellect of people in the community; we should assist them to formulate ideas that promote liberation from conditions of disadvantage. Drawing on the history and indigenous knowledge of people is another untapped resource which can evoke agency for the resurgence of people's power. In subscribing to alternative modes of education we also have the task, amongst many other things, to challenge the notion of skills development that is strictly aimed for the formal labour market.
- g. *Quality education* must be accessible to everybody, and in working towards this goal, we need to contest the notion of what the norm in education is. Structural inequalities that are manifest via class positions mean that the majority of schools are underperformers. However, a misleading perspective is created by the fact that the minority counterpart is considered the norm in education, and this does nothing to encourage an understanding of how to support most schools in the country in general, and in the Eastern Cape, in particular.

5. Way forward

The way forward is divided, firstly, into a set of propositions that are forward looking, and secondly, into a set of questions which it is hoped will deepen our insights.

Propositions:

- We should take a long term, historical view of systemic change but for the moment it would be helpful to have a minimal five-year perspective to address educational transformation (we know it will take much longer).
- Community mobilisation is central to the strategy. Those who share this view should be included in subsequent discussions.
- Broadening and deepening public participation in education, as one means of mobilisation, should be undertaken after we have initiated such engagement in our internal spheres of influence.
- We need to foreground the strategy of demonstrating that certain approaches work and are necessary for transforming education.
- Setting out our ideas systematically so that our common outlook to educational development is clear and can be advocated at opportune moments and on strategic platforms is a concrete way to give momentum to this discussion. Such advocacy exercises will be one way of engaging policy-makers and potentially influence critical decisions.

- We need to support the FET sector and synchronise our efforts in stabilising this educational band. In doing this we need to contemplate cooperative forms of labour that cluster, rather than atomise, people in ways that locate capacity building in organic teams. This cluster approach could, to a limited extent, address the phenomenon that many people are not, and will not be absorbed into the labour market.

Questions:

1. How do we conceptualise the skills question? *Currently this terrain is dominated by reductive discourse that reproduces alienated people as opposed to them being integrated co-operatively in labour. We need to think through how to challenge this discourse of alienation (Enver- vebatum).*
2. How do we define concepts such as 'community', 'participation' and 'transformation'?
3. What foundations do we need to lay in order to address educational challenges?
4. What is the role of the state in educational development? To what extent do we involve ourselves in working with them as a role-player in effecting systemic provisioning, for example.
5. How do we shift teaching and learning systematically?
6. How do we advocate praxis-orientated modes of feeding into change processes?
7. How do we develop teaching and learning tools for the curriculum that can work in our socio-linguistic contexts?
8. Teachers feel demoralised and we need to build their competence and confidence. They need support in two ways: professionally and psychologically.
9. We raised the question of post-schooling and its relation to the formal economy - which is an outstanding issue that time did not permit us to discuss sufficiently.

6. Conclusion:

All participants acknowledged the value of knowledge that is praxis-orientated and that draws on the history and experiences of communities to inform how we address systemic challenges. A strong spirit of commitment came through which was a basis for a shared understanding to emerge, albeit that much more probing discussion needs to take place. The primary statement made in this forum was that the complexity of agency in communities is at the centre of educational change. It is here primarily, where problems ought to be formulated, understood and overcome.

Drafted by: Daryl Braam, 24 September 2011