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Thoughts on the Impending Third Epoch of School Education Policy in South Africa

Abstract

South Africa must embark upon the third epoch of education policy after the failures of the first two epochs: the 1953-1994 ("apartheid") era and the 1994-2021 era (the dawn of democracy and the dismantling of apartheid structures). There were not enough education opportunities to guide all the children of the country to maturity and acceptance of their civilian responsibilities. This paper examines the reasons why the education policies of the first two epochs failed and contributed to a poor, unequal and ineffective school education system. The paper also explores the challenges that the education system needs to confront to create a new education system that will support the attainment of the hitherto unfulfilled expectations and dreams that its citizens carried into the democratic era. The education policy of the third epoch must address critical issues to chart the way to an effective education system. There is a need to reorganize (reset) the education system in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A streamlined curriculum needs to focus on the essential skills and knowledge the country needs. The system can no longer ignore the need for the adequate provision of vocational and technical education to alleviate the sharply rising unemployment rate of young people and support the growth of the economy. Quality education policy must function despite the lack of funds for the provision of appropriate and functional infrastructure and competent human resources.

Keywords: third epoch, policy failure, challenges, system reset, vocational and technical
          education, infrastructure, competent human resources

Introduction

The title of this paper may be misleading, but it does not suggest that there was no education policy in South Africa before 1953. It points to the fact that it was only when the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 (Union of South Africa, 1953), enacted by the Queen of Great Britain (and then also Queen of South Africa) and the Union's Senate and House of Assembly, was implemented on 1 January 1954 that South Africa had school education policy provisions applying to all its people.

Functional policy (rooted in legislation) is an essential cog in the governance, leadership and management of effective public schooling. Schooling is probably the most important function of any government without which state systems are likely to collapse (Thro, 2006, p. 65). A discussion of aspects of past, present and future education policy is therefore appropriate because a radical revision of policy seems unavoidable.

Reasons why the education policies of the first two epochs failed

1953-1994

Although South Africa was the first African country to develop policy and legislation for its entire Bantu (Black African) population, the entire system departed from a white supremacist stance which was flawed as it viewed other population groups (Black Africans, Coloureds, and Indians) as inferior to whites. A much smaller amount of money per capita was spent on learners and educators of groups other than whites. Inevitably the quality of education to which the different population groups had access differed greatly and inequality characterized the system.

The apartheid ("separate development") policy of the ruling party led to many different entities becoming responsible for education policy and legislation development, promulgation and implementation. Towards the end of the apartheid era there were fifteen distinct racially divided education departments in South Africa.

National policy coherence, implementation and accountability were well-nigh impossible. In addition, non-White learners finished school without a reasonable prospect of being employed mainly as a result of "job reservations" for whites. They were mainly left with manual and unskilled labor opportunities. Non-Whites only had access to a small number of professions such as teaching, nursing, medicine and theology.

The educational inequality, discrimination in the broader society and the oppression by the government led to popular uprisings, resistance, insubordination, protests and revolts by educators, learners, teacher unions and banned political and other organizations. The Soweto uprisings of 1976 during which a large number of learners were shot dead by police for acts of insurrection are probably the best known of all these occurrences.

There is no gainsaying that education policy and practice were not successful in the apartheid era. This was exacerbated by the fact that school education was not compulsory for learners from all population groups.

1994-2021

1994 ushered in the constitutional democracy era and the pursuit of the democratic values articulated in S1(a-d) of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996) namely human dignity, the achievement of equality, the advancement of human rights and freedoms, non-racialism and non-sexism. It also ushered in adherence to the rule of law and a charter of human rights entrenched in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996).

These values and principles were meant to facilitate the development of a multiracial country where everybody would have equal opportunities to develop their potential and enjoy a dignified life. The dismantling of the legacy of apartheid was imperative for the democratically elected new government. Education policy and practice reflected the pursuit of both objectives.

Beckmann (2021, pp. 758-759) cites published research indicating that South Africa spends much more on education than its peers but has much worse outcomes. He refers to The World Economic Forum's (WEF) (2013) evaluation of South Africa's education as the third worst in the world.

Breier (2009, pp. 1-21) reports on the findings of a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study on skills shortages in South Africa. The study focused on

skills shortages in 11 professions including education, social work, engineering, medicine and artisanship. She comments among others that (p. 1):

- "South Africa's skills shortages are widely regarded as key factors preventing the achievement of the country's" growth targets.
- Many "of the high-level skill shortages in this country are blamed on the education system...".
- The "massive shortage of artisans is largely attributed to the decline of the apprentice system" in "the further education and training (FET) sector …".
- There has been "… a loss of senior capacity, largely as a result of affirmative action" and "many experienced white professionals" evacuating their posts.
- There is "still a very small pool of matriculants who have the necessary grades and subjects to access programmes like engineering, medicine and accounting" and there are also "particularly few African and coloured students in this pool" which makes employment equity difficult to achieve.

All of the skills shortages above point to the absence of sound education policy and practice to underpin the country's pursuit of an equitable, free and economically sustainable and prosperous country. However, the DBE has started to implement a curriculum model to route more learners to technical and vocational education, possibly alleviating the severe skills and artisan shortages in the country.

Jansen (2002, p. 1) points out that developing countries are replete with narratives that attribute policy failure to "the lack of resources, the inadequacy of teacher training, the weak design of implementation strategy, and the problems of policy coherence". In his opinion, the "making of education policy in South Africa is best described as a struggle for the achievement of a broad political symbolism that would mark the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid society" instead of "policymaking connected to any serious intention to change the practice of education 'on the ground'" (Jansen, 2002, p. 2).

Jansen's essay identifies several important problems regarding policy making and practice in South Africa in the second epoch:

- "There are few countries in postcolonial Africa that has [sic] drawn more heavily on international consultants in its first few years of 'independence'" (p. 7).
- Education "policy borrowing" signifies that "elected officials and politicians are more likely to be interested in a borrowed policy's political symbolism than its details" (p. 7). Extensive use was made of overseas experts who oftentimes not only took part in deliberations but also drafted the policy(ies) in question, often resulting in [contextually unintelligent] policies which were more suited to their overseas origins than to South Africa [Insertion by the author].
- Jansen (2022, p. 9) questions "the heavy attention paid to formal participation in the policy process irrespective of its final outcomes". He states, quite correctly in my opinion, that "this faith in process itself … granted legitimacy to policy, irrespective of the final outcome". There was no guarantee that participants' views would prevail or even be considered.

It is also trite knowledge among policy analysts that policy making and implementation did not meet criteria for success such as:

- Sufficient, experienced and competent human resources and infrastructure to implement practicable policy. This is partially due to the legacy of apartheid but also to practices of the ruling party such as 'cadre deployment', a practice which seems to transgress the provisions of Section 195 of the Constitution of 1996) (RSA, 1996). People are rewarded with posts purely on the grounds of their loyalty to a political organization (the African National Congress, the ANC).
- Clear implementation and communication strategies including in-service training opportunities for implementers.
- Policy stability – there has been a surfeit of policies and policy amendments that have led to 'policy fatigue' among practitioners. The national curriculum has been amended at least 4 times between 1996 and 2011 (Gumede & Biyase, 2016, pp. 69-70). A normal life cycle for a curriculum would be closer to 12 years.
- Clear allocation to, and the acceptance of different responsibilities by stakeholders. In this regard, the ability of teacher unions to completely derail policies (and de facto usurping the decision-making functions of government) is an enormous problem in South Africa and indicates a misunderstanding of the roles of unions and governments.
- Quality drafting by qualified policy drafters practising a profession like legal draftsmen do. On 2 February the government (Department of Home Affairs, 2022) added policy and planning managers who can plan, develop, organize, direct, control and coordinate policy advice and strategic planning to the list of critical skills shortages in connection with applications for critical work skills visas and permanent residence permits. Sensible use of this opportunity to obtain the services of policy drafting experts could greatly assist education officials.

One has to conclude that the quality of education policy and practice in South Africa leaves much to be desired. Policy and practice need to be reset and revisited. The third epoch will face new and persistent challenges from the past.

Policy challenges of the third (after coronavirus) epoch

Following the ideas advanced by Schwab and Malleret (2020) in their authoritative publication written in their capacities as Founder and Executive Chairman of the WEF and Managing Partner of the Monthly Barometer respectively, I have chosen to refer to the third epoch as the after coronavirus epoch. I will explore the future of quality education policy as a non-negotiable prerequisite for a functional and effective new education system.

The consequences of COVID-19 for the education system have not been solved and must enjoy priority attention. The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS)-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) (known as NIDS-CRAM) carried out by Spaull and thirty-five colleagues surveyed various aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on society in 5 waves from 7 May 2020 to 11 May 2021. The fifth and latest NIDS-CRAM synthesis report (Spaull & Daniels et al., 2021) sheds light on several challenges for future education policy such as the following:

- Since the onset of COVID-19 up to May 2021 the number of learner drop-outs increased by 573 000 in a basic education system comprising approximately 13 million learners.
- Most primary school learners lost between 70% and 100% of the teaching and learning time they had in 2019. Making good these losses should be a priority in the after coronavirus era to prevent the virus from permanently destroying children's hopes to gain what they are entitled to receive from education. Some schools have already started their own initiatives to catch up on the education backlogs but there is still a dire need in 70% or more of public-school environments in this regard.
- Naidoo (2021), the CEO of the Youth Employment Service, refers to startling official data regarding unacceptable and rising youth unemployment figures. He states that "two out of every three young people (under 35 years) in South Africa are unemployed, and this rises to three out of four of the under-25s". He poses a question meriting intensive attention from policy makers: "If they cannot find employment or hope for themselves and their families, what does that foreshadow for the country's future?".
- Malnutrition and hunger are acute problems among many South Africans including school-going youth and three million children were affected by hunger despite the state's introduction of a National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Policy makers and implementing officials will have to address these problems so that children do not lack food security, experience "silent hunger" (where children have access to food but not to needed nutrients) and do not become stunted (short-for-age) because of exposure to silent hunger. 25% of children under the age of five are stunted and stunting leads to irreversible cognitive, physical and mental disabilities.

In addition to what Spaull and Daniels et al. (2021) indicate, education policy designers also need to study other countries' responses to the challenges of COVID-19 in education with a view to optimizing their own policies. In 2022, the OECD published a report (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní & Reimers (Eds.), 2022) on how 44 diverse countries were able to achieve "education continuity" during the pandemic.

The lack of support for educators in their efforts to neutralize the effects of the many days of learning and teaching lost has also emerged as a concern. The state does not seem to have a coordinated support plan for schools, but some outside organizations and NGOs are supporting some schools.

Two more substantial problems have been highlighted in recent times: the quality of educators and the funding of education. Firstly, BusinessTech (2022a) reports that the 2030 Reading Panel found that Bachelor of Education students in their final year of their initial teacher education programmes scored only 54% on a primary school mathematics test. This exemplifies teachers' incompetence that cannot be tolerated. Secondly, De Lange and Slatter (2022) cite the Budget Justice Coalition's (BJC) statement that, although the government has declared education a priority, it spends increasingly less on basic education despite the increase in learner numbers. The education budget has shrunk from 14,8% of the consolidated budget of 2017-2018 to 13% in 2021-2022, making the pursuit of educational excellence almost impossible.

How do South Africa's education authorities plan to tackle the challenges of the third epoch?

The South African government's responses to the challenges have been described as vague, insipid, uninspiring, boring and dilly-dallying. The responses are essentially tedious repetitions of promises dating back 18 years. A fine example of such a response can be found in the Minister of Basic Education's address to a governmental lekgotla (think tank) on 28 January 2022 (BusinessTech, 2022b).

The Minister said among others that:

- Digital learning is required now, not in the future. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has plans to give every teacher a laptop before the Minister's term of office ends in 2024. The DBE is also developing a new programme for online schooling and distance learning.
  (The plans are still in the planning phase and will require ample funding. Isolated private sector and state projects have seen some schools getting computers and new schools with all the necessary infrastructure built. The above government plans may only exist in the realm of dreams.)

- The DBE wants to strengthen the curriculum so that it will explicitly state the knowledge, skills and competencies learners need for the 21st century. The department plans to appoint a task team to effect all these changes.
  (The reference to the appointment of task teams is exasperating. Hopefully this task team will take cognizance of many experts' advocacy of a reduction of the number of subjects and curtailing curriculum content to facilitate catching up on lost teaching time and to focus on the skills the country needs urgently.)

- Lost teaching time needs to be made up through rotational timetables, updated attendance and enrolment tracking, extra classes and giving learners more homework.
  (Rotational timetables which halved the learner and teaching time for the majority of learners have now been discontinued and this has led to a crippling shortage of classroom spaces. A large number of unaffordable additional staff will be needed. It is not clear how extra homework can make up lost teaching time.)

Conclusion

Schwab and Malleret's (2020) comments on what the after coronavirus era might entail are worth repeating. Their outlines of a new era are only conjectures, but they believe that the world will become increasingly complex, be fast-changing (shortening the shelf life of policies will drastically) and be filled with many as-yet-unknown challenges. Decision-makers will have more information and analyses available than ever before but less time to make well-considered decisions. It is important to remember that there will also be many opportunities to restore and re-create education systems.

Expertly drafted policies to guide education in the uphill battles of the future are non-negotiable.

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