

Submission on access to education

by the Pestalozzi Trust

to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, Parliament of the Republic of South Africa

in response to an invitation to the public issued on 10th November 2009

26th February 2010

We greatly appreciate the opportunity afforded to the public by the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education to make submissions on a matter that affects everyone in South Africa most intimately. We hope that our submission may be helpful.

1. What is “Education”?

It is noticeable that the term “education” is not independently defined in any of the primary legislation on education (such definition as exists is a circular definition, stating that education is what happens in schools while “schools” in turn, are defined as institutions where education happens).

For the purpose of this submission, we define education at the most basic level and in accordance with pedagogical literature, international law and the South African Constitution as “creating conditions that empower learners to develop their inherent potential to the maximum, to the benefit of the individual, the community and society at large”.

We also believe that this definition of education conforms to the letter and spirit of the NEPI Report produced by the National Education Policy Initiative, a project of what was then known as the ANC Education Desk, in 1993.

2. Institutionalisation of education

The above definition includes all forms of education, wherever they may be found. This is “education” which is protected by Sec 29(1) of the Constitution, and includes education that may be obtained in education institutions as contemplated in Sec 29(3) of the Constitution, as well as education obtained outside of institutions.

The existence of and the right to non-institutional education is effectively recognised in Sec 4 and 51 of the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996 – “SASA”).

However, at the level of subordinate legislation, policy and implementation, there has, especially over the past few years, been a trend to recognise only institutional education, thereby reducing access to education.

For example: For almost ninety years, South Africans had the right to educate themselves to meet the requirements of what was known as “matric”. They could simply buy the books and prepare for the examination.

They were able to obtain recognition for this non-institutional education by the simple expedient of registering for and sitting the “matric” exam. Anyone off the street could write the exam and obtain the qualification and tens of thousands did so every year. Among them, former President Mbeki. It was the mechanism that gave out of school youth, prisoners and many others access to education by having their non-institutional education recognised.

Some organizations developed that would, at a reasonable price, help one to prepare for the examination, mostly by “correspondence”. However, it was not necessary to use such services – one could simply do it on one’s own, and we know many who did so with success.

Getting one’s matric in this manner could cost as little as about one thousand Rand in today’s money.

With the introduction of the new National Senior Certificate three years ago, access to a “matric” certificate was completely closed for those preferring or reliant on non-institutional education. The examination is now only available to candidates who have been registered with some kind of accredited institution for at least three years (which might soon become four years).

No such accredited courses are provided by the State for students other than those studying full-time. Only private institutions are available, and they come at a price.

The “matric” certificate, which could be obtained for R1000 or less three years ago, now costs in the region of R30 000 – about the same as a BA degree at UNISA. The reason is that it has been fully institutionalized and institutional education is (as a rule) far more expensive than its non-institutional counterpart.

This is but one example – there are numerous others, including the closure of farm schools, closure of teacher training colleges and so on.

The most important way in which access to education is being reduced, however, is simply by requiring individuals to attend education institutions that do not educate or do not educate adequately.

3. Trends in education

Everyone knows that South African education is in crisis. The Minister of Education tells us so, and so did her two predecessors in office. And everyone else tells us so.

And, if our education system is in crisis, it means that our learners do not have access to adequate education.

However, we should recognise that our problems are not unique – education systems the world over have been causing increasing concern for two or three decades now. The theme of “crisis in education”

pops up almost daily in the media of countries in the America's Europe and the East. That includes countries like Italy and Germany, whose education systems have been judged unsuitable for developed countries by a report from the European Union. It includes the Netherlands, which, even though they still consider their education system to be one of the three best ones in the world, are seriously concerned about its inadequacy for the needs of the society.

In the USA, as long ago as 1984, a presidential commission of investigation reported that the American education system amounts to an act of war of America against itself. A summary of the was published under the title "Nation at Risk". The old methods of education, effectively unchanged since the industrial society of the nineteenth century, were no longer adequate for the demands of the environment.

The American response to this was the OBE project, an initiative to design an approach to education that would meet the demands of the 21st century post-industrial world. The project was called "Curriculum 2000" and was intended to be fully implemented at the turn of the century. However, it failed and most school systems phased it out within three years of adopting it. In the year 2000, which was to be the culmination of the project, it was defunded by Congress.

It was not only the USA, however, that was faced with the problem that the old methods of education no longer worked. All developed and developing countries experienced the same problem. As a result, OBE travelled around the world in a wave, being adopted by one country after the other (including South Africa) and being abandoned soon after (including in South Africa).

Even the most cursory survey of education internationally leaves one with the conclusion that school systems are failing world-wide, and not only in South Africa. The old methods no longer work, and the "solution", OBE, is even worse.

And no-one has an answer.

Around the world, school systems continue to become less and less adequate for the needs that they are supposed to address, with no major progress being made towards a solution.

What this means is that access to education is deteriorating as fast as access to schools is improving!

4. The role of non-institutional education

To the extent that institutional education fails, individuals must necessarily rely on non-institutional education to augment, and even to replace institutional education.

"Access to education", therefore, also means empowering individuals to obtain such education as they want or needs wherever they may find it. That includes educating themselves through the many autodidactic means of education that are becoming increasingly available, but it also means learning from whoever is able and willing to share their abilities with others.

“Access to education”, therefore, means empowering everyone who has abilities and a willingness to share them to do so. It means that if a grandmother in a village is able to teach children to read and write at her kitchen table, she should be encouraged to do so. And there are many individuals in almost all our communities who possess greatly needed abilities which our schools are failing to teach children.

“Access to education”, therefore, means mobilizing the vast amount of human capital that is locked up in our society for the purpose of educating the next generation.

5. Recommendations

The drive to institutionalize all education arises, we believe, from an erroneous conflation of two different (and opposite) provisions of the Constitution – Sections 29(1) and 29(3).

The right to education – Sec 29(1) is not limited to a right to receive the institutionalized education contemplated in Sec 29(3). And, conversely, the right to provide education in accordance with Sec 29(3) does not necessarily ensure access to education as contemplated in Sec 29(1).

Accordingly, we strongly recommend (as did the NEPI Report in 1993) as follows:

- a. While the necessary educational institutions must continue to be provided, access to education should not be further reduced by forced institutionalization of all education.
- b. Access to education should and can be improved very cost effectively by empowering individuals and organs of civil society to provide non-institutional education by sharing whatever knowledge, skills and values they possess and which are not being successfully (or cost effectively) taught in schools.
- c. Access to education should be improved by providing recognition for education obtained through non-institutional means.

Yours sincerely,



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