

**Tuesday 15 September 2009**  
**Democracy Development Programme (DDP)**  
**Khayelitsha Community Meeting**  
**What is Wrong with our Education System?**

**Guest Speaker:** Graeme Bloch, Education Policy Analyst, Development Bank of Southern Africa.

**Present:**

- Ms Vanja Karth, DDP Programme Manager, Cape Town;
- Mr Monde Nqulwana, DDP Community Representative;
- Ms Yoliswa Dwane, Equal Education Head: Policy, Communications and Research;
- Ms Bonga Yawa, Youth and Campaign, Equal Education;
- Members of Equal Education, Khayelitsha Education Forum, Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Social Justice Coalition.
- Learners from Khayelitsha and other members of the community.

Graeme Bloch is an education policy analyst at the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

He taught in the Education faculty of UWC and was project manager for the Youth Development Programme at the Joint Education Trust.

A graduate of UCT, he specialized in economic history.

Before 1994 he was an executive member of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) as well as the UDF.

He was detained and arrested several times for his involvement in the democratic movement and was banned from 1976 to 1981.

He has published several books and articles on educational matters.

Bloch said what was needed was to talk more about education in South Africa.

The biggest problem was that we had not been talking enough until now.

He invited students to aim high. South Africa's Department of Science and Technology had just sent its own satellite into space above Kazakhstan. If students excelled in science, they too could be space scientists and perhaps even be the first South African to travel into outer space.

He invited students to look up at the night sky. The view of the sky and the stars from South Africa was different from anywhere else on earth. One could study space from South Africa and one would have a unique perspective.

We should aim to be the best scientists who could look up at the stars and yet we also wanted to ensure that when we did so, our feet were firmly planted on the ground.

Bloch praised the Equal Education Campaign, noting that although educational problems existed in Khayelitsha, it was good that students were mobilizing support elsewhere and not restricting their campaign to one location.

That was what made the campaign "such a sophisticated one", he said.

Those involved in the campaign were on the one hand working with teachers, students, the Education Department and districts, but were at the same time mobilizing the community.

The campaign was sure to find wide support, he said.

As much as the demand for libraries was a necessary and appropriate one, students also needed to ask what else they could do, said Bloch.

Militance meant not just talking big on a platform but also organizing on the ground.

What about the issue of bursaries? Health matters? Teenage pregnancy and Early Child Development? And so on.

Bloch said that there was now a policy space which was very different from the space which prevailed previously.

Between three and five years ago, education was not a national priority.

President Zuma was now visiting the country's schools, encouraging young people to take advantage of education opportunities. Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande was doing likewise.

Our politicians were all talking about education and the Polokwane Conference had made it clear that education was now National Priority Number One.

But, he said, it was not good enough to wait for the government. Rather students and others who shared their concerns needed to keep putting pressure on the Government. Now that Government was talking the talk it was imperative to make sure that they walked the walk as well.

It was necessary to engage in a lot of talking and debating so as to avoid making mistakes.

A typical mistake made in the past had been to place so much emphasis on the issue of say Model C schools, for example. The issue of Model C schools was merely a diversion, he said.

What was needed was to fix schools here in Khayelitsha, where most students attended school, rather than placing too much emphasis on getting a few students into Model C schools.

It was also necessary to do something about OBE. But OBE could also be seen as just another bone distracting "the dog" from more important tasks.

The “real bone...one with meat...” was what was happening in our schools in the townships.

Bloch then turned to an analysis of why the school education system was not working.

First, the education system was not producing sufficient skills. The deficiency of skills in areas such as Maths and Science was an example of this lack of skills and was due, in large part, to a shortage of teachers in these subjects.

While countries such as China and India were building universities at a furious pace, in South Africa, perhaps only 30 percent of students were able to read or write or do Maths at an appropriate level.

South Africa was the worst performer in Africa in this regard and even poor countries such as Mozambique and Namibia had fared better.

The simple truth was that South Africa needed more skills in order to become a great country.

Second, when it came to that 30 percent who could read and write, a comparison revealed that while in the “ex-white” schools, approximately 62,5 percent of students could do Maths properly, in township schools, this figure was only 0,1 percent.

Grade Six results showed that while 84 percent of students in “white” schools were able to read, the figure in township schools was only 4 percent. While one out of every ten white students achieved an A aggregate, for their black counterparts, the figure was one out of every 1000 students.

The fact was that while education ought to be opening up opportunities, it was in fact reproducing apartheid and inequality.

Such racial inequalities 15 years after the demise of apartheid was in itself a human rights violation, he said.

He cited four reasons for this state of affairs.

First was the country's apartheid history. He reminded students that former apartheid architect H F Verwoerd had asked why black children should be taught Maths when their role in society made this unnecessary.

Apartheid education had been one designed for white dominance and black subjugation and this pattern was hard to change after all these years.

We also had a vastly under-resourced education system where 79 percent of schools had no libraries and the same percentage of schools had no laboratories or computers while their white counterparts had all these resources.

The prevalence of gangs, violence, alcohol abuse, HIV/ Aids, hunger and poor nutrition among students at township schools also contributed to the crisis.

Also today's students were the first generation to have access to a post-apartheid education and parents who were themselves not well educated, were hardly in a position to help students.

A problem common to both "white" and "black" schools was that of bullying and parents who supported bullies.

Second was the issue of those who were supposed to provide schools with support.

One had to ask whether principals and indeed members of the Education Department were doing their job to make sure that teachers could teach.

Bloch said he could walk into a school and immediately predict the school's results merely from its appearance.

A well organized school which was clean and orderly usually showed a principal was doing his or her job well and the school was sure to have good results.

One had to ask whether the Education Department was providing teachers, text books and curriculum advisers.

Students ought to be demanding that the department do its job and not waste resources such as time and money on red herrings.

He cited the current problem of violence and school shootings and the announcement that metal detectors would be introduced at all of the province's schools.

Although this step showed that officials were addressing the problem, it was obvious that if anyone wanted to get a gun into a school, it was very easy to do so; such a person could merely use a hole in the fence or come to school later with the weapon, he said.

The tendency of thinking in terms of quick fixes should be avoided.

Although no-fee schools were a good idea, the problem was that politicians then used the existence of such schools to justify the view that poverty was not a problem in the community.

But parents still had to pay for their child's food, uniforms, for transport to school and such things.

Rather than use quick fixes, solutions that went to the root of the problem should be sought.

Third, was the problem of what actually went on inside the school classroom, where students came face to face with their teachers.

Did teachers know their job? Were students and indeed even teachers ready to learn?

It was common knowledge that many teachers were not well trained and some did not even bother to come to class.

The most important level at which to tackle the education crisis was to ensure that teachers started to do their job properly. At Polo wane, the ANC had made it clear that teachers needed to be in class and on time.

Bloch said that although trade unions were important for looking after the interests of teachers, they should not be protecting teachers who did not do their job or who abused children.

Those who abused students should not be teachers, he said.

He cited the case of a school in Alexandra Township which suspended teachers for failing to come to class. Afterwards all the other teachers at the school went on strike and an important office bearer in SADTU, Ronald Nyathi, had actually warned students not to come to class or face extreme violence.

In Soweto during a similar strike, the MEC for education had put his foot down and had called a meeting of parents, at which the latter had asked teachers to be back in class.

Striking should be the last thing that teachers should resort to, said Bloch.

The unions had an important role to play, not just in fighting for the rights of teachers but also for the right to an education.

There was something wrong with the system at all three levels, resulting in what Bloch terms a “toxic mix”.

Most township schools were not functioning properly and those in the education system including students needed to take responsibility for fixing the problem as the government could not be expected to do everything by itself.

But, said Bloch, students should not just see themselves as victims. What was done in the Khayelitsha community, in the Western Cape and nationally were all things that would make a difference.

Yoliswa Dwane, Head of Policy, Communications and Research at Equal Education, said she completely agreed with Bloch's analysis and his recommendations.

She asked what young people such as those present were doing to support the campaign of their communities that were not education-related. Equal Education had been very busy organizing its own structures and thinking about education and having political discussions since its inception last year and this was necessary because it was important to understand the nature of the crisis in education and also for young people to learn to engage with politicians and even Parliament.

There had been many suggestions by Government and the Department of Education and researchers had come up with important findings too; what was lacking however was activism – taking action that would bring about real change.

Academic and political discussions were fine and indeed necessary but it was important to remember that power to bring about change resided in ordinary people who were affected by the current educational system such as students.

The TAC was composed of ordinary people who had stood up and rejected the health policies of the Mbeki government.

The TAC had set an example of how to stand up and work together with doctors, researchers so as to mobilize the community and was an excellent example of activism at work and what it could achieve.

But when it came to education, there was a very different political space as, contrary to the health and Aids crisis, the government and the ANC were not denying that problems in the education system existed.

Action had already been taken but more was needed.

There was a need to mobilize ordinary people to stand up and take further action.

Politicians in Pretoria could not know what was happening on the ground in schools in Khayelitsha and therefore students and parents had to look at examples of good schools in their communities and point out to Government what they were doing that made them better schools so that other schools could follow their example.

The Department's report on schools that "were working" had limited use, because it dealt exclusively with schools that had sufficient funds and were well managed and staffed. But the report offered little of use to township schools such as those in Khayelitsha.

Dwane referred to the problem of good principals who had just begun to achieve results at one school only to be transferred by the department to another school.

It was not uncommon to find that as few as five teachers among an entire staff complement at a school were responsive to the needs of students.

Most parents, however concerned and well-informed about the academic performance of their children, felt intimidated by teachers, who pulled rank and refused to discuss problems with them openly or on an equal footing.

As far as Government's call for teachers to be at school on time, Equal Education had run a successful campaign at schools to encourage teachers to set an example. This was an example of what could be done by stakeholders outside Government.

It was a pity that one often found as many as 100 people applying for a job advertisement in which only two posts were available.

Even the educated were struggling to find jobs. The government had a responsibility to educate people and to create job opportunities.

Equal Education did not restrict its focus to education issues. For example, with the Social Justice Coalition and the TAC it had focused on issues such as xenophobia in the past.

As Civil Society, we should also be organizing around issues such as access to health and housing as well as many others.

Such organizations used the media as their extended voice to “shout at” the department and at Government.

The most important thing about organizing was to keep up the momentum. People needed to be educated so that they understood the issues at stake.

## **Discussion**

A question was asked about the budget allocation for education.

Also, asked the questioner, why was it that a country like Zimbabwe which was so poor and unstable, was able to have one of the best education systems in Africa?

A student mentioned that one would have expected the talk of Mr Bloch to have been translated into Xhosa so that members of the audience could better understand.

The past should be blamed for the unequal distribution of resources but we could not continue to dwell on it.

He asked about investment on education because it seemed that money was not always properly spent. The budget was based on an expectation that

learners would leave school by the time they reached the age of 18 but that was not reflected in reality.

Other speakers described OBE as “a major problem in our country”.

Why blame the lack of resources when a country such as Nigeria, with fewer resources had a better education system?

Questions were asked about poorly trained teachers and what to do about them, OBE, which even educators themselves did not understand and the disproportionately large class volumes in township schools, especially when compared to Model C schools. Some classes at township schools had as many as 45 students.

A question was asked about how to create alliances with people who were reluctant or antagonistic and how to facilitate willingness and understanding. What could schools and the community do to address the lack of resources?

Bloch replied that many teachers and educators were not incompetent but just did not care enough.

As for South Africa’s poor education as compared to a country such as Malawi or Zimbabwe, South Africa’s history had definitely contributed to the problems of education – a country such as Malawi had not experienced the political upheavals and struggles of South Africa.

Our teachers were often not as committed, as organized or as dedicated and teachers as well as Education Department lacked accountability.

Teachers had every right to complain about class ratios and a lack of resources.

As for funds, we should perhaps ask whether we needed to spend as much as we did on arms and on fancy cars for politicians.

Most South Africans would be prepared to put more money into schooling if they knew where the money was going. Alliances could be built through action. For example, students should campaign about issues such as libraries and then see who else would support them in their efforts.

The problem was that there was not a sufficiently clear vision of education. We did not even know what we expected from our universities. Most tertiary students dropped out because of a lack of finances.

Everyone working in education had been too optimistic about the OBE system and its chances of success.

The problem with the system of OBE was that it required vast resources. With all the debate about its implementation, the basics had been lost sight of.

Although there was a need to go back to basics, it was certainly not necessary to re-write the curriculum and re-train teachers from scratch.

As for resources, we must demand that the government find the money. But that did not mean that we could not begin by doing certain simple things ourselves such as repairing broken desks or cleaning up litter at schools.

In Khayelitsha there were schools which had principals who had made learning happen, even in the worst and most challenging of circumstances.

A student made the point that at many school learners vandalized their own schools while blaming Government for poor conditions.

There was also a need to take more responsibility for our own education. In this context, what were teachers, parents and learners doing?

A question was asked about why many schools still used defective books.

School libraries were essential as students often could not afford to go to libraries in Cape Town.

Yoliswa Dwane, head of Policy, Communications and Research at Equal Education, said the blame for the failure of our education system lay not only with teachers and learners. There were many other factors that contributed to the poor quality of education.

Teachers had been poorly trained under the Bantu Education system and even in terms of the current system they had received insufficient training – often only five days.

Resources and management at schools were other contributing factors, she said.

She referred to the right to education, equality and to human dignity.

In order to realize these rights, it was up to ordinary people to hold the government accountable and to demand better resources, training and support for teachers.

Bloch concluded by saying that while it was clear that there was something very wrong with our education system, there was obviously nothing wrong with the country's young people and students.