



“Reforming the Education System – What is the Way Forward?”

Public Forum Report

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of changes to the schooling system that had been announced by the Minister for Basic Education and also mindful of the problems and the ongoing reform process in the education system, the DDP hosted a discussion forum on education policy. The objective was to discuss the viability of the announced changes and to exchange ideas on what the way forward for enhancing education in South Africa should be. The DDP was pleased to welcome Dr. Wayne Hugo, head of UKZN’s School of Education and Development, as its guest speaker. In order to represent a variety of stakeholders, Mr. Mbuyiseni Mathonis (SADTU) and Mr. Anthony Pierce (NAPTOSA) were given an opportunity to present their organizations’ views at the forum. Furthermore, two groups of learners from Okumhlophe High School and Greenbury Secondary School were given a chance to respond.

Presentation and Responses

In his presentation, Dr. Wayne Hugo located the current reforms in the South African education system within a larger context by pointing out findings of comparative studies of education systems in developing countries. He stated that it was typical for countries that undergo a transition to democracy to try and adopt very ambitious education systems and that, at least in comparison to the rest of Africa, the South African performance since 1994 has not been as bad as it was oftentimes said to be. The recently announced changes within the reform process in Hugo’s view constitute a shift away from focusing on outcomes based education and towards a system seeking to attain minimal standards in underperforming schools. Again, according to him, it was typical for new democracies that had embarked on more ambitious systems to turn towards education based on clear-cut basic lessons and the use of textbooks after a period of around 15 years. Hugo argued that the paradigm shift towards

minimal standards would result in a situation where private schools and those that cater to the kids of affluent families will largely continue to employ elaborate educational techniques while public schools especially in poor areas will work according to a much more basic style. “That rich kids should be taught differently from poor kids is a very difficult argument to make in South Africa”, Hugo said, but because of the fact that children already came into school with very different backgrounds and lived in very different circumstances, he argued that such a differentiation was a necessary step to improve education. Only after the basics were in place could more advanced methods be implemented successfully.

Mr Mathonsi of SADTU contested some of Hugo’s points, saying that OBE was not at all destined to fail but had rather been made to fail as the system had not been accompanied by sufficient resources. In his view, rather than setting up an education system that leads to a differentiation between richer and poorer schools or areas, one should rather make more resources available to disadvantaged schools. He stated that differentiation reflected a neoliberal approach based on restricting the resources that are put into public education – but that this was not appropriate in a situation where the aim was to revolutionize and transform society. In his view, additional resources would enable even disadvantaged schools to implement an advanced educational model.

Mr Anthony Pierce (NAPTOSA) underlined that good educators have always used OBE as a method of teaching even if they might not have called it that way. Thus, even though experts and the public currently reckoned that OBE was dead, it would surely continue to be used in classrooms. With regard to the current reform process, Pierce criticized that teachers had not been properly involved by the department of education. In his view, a lot of the problems in education could be solved by ensuring that teachers get back to the basics – like arriving at school on time.

Out of the two groups of students, the learners from Greenbury Secondary School were the first to give their input. They felt that “OBE could work wonders” for them but that currently the resources were lacking. They also identified a gap between secondary and tertiary education that in their view was too large. Finally they raised the question whether implementing large scale changes in the education system might not be much more expensive than to try and make more resources available for schools under the current system.

The students from Okumhlophe High School recounted their personal experience of shortcomings in public schools. Among others, they noted a lack of equipment, overcrowded classrooms, poorly qualified teachers and staff shortages. They also felt that oftentimes, parents were not sufficiently aware of their own role in the education and schooling of their children. The students agreed with their counterparts from Greenbury that “Before jumping into a whole new reform we should give schools the necessary resources.”

The different inputs at the beginning of the forum were apparently well-suited to fuel the discussion, as a lively debate emerged subsequently. Some participants raised the point that discussions around education policy oftentimes concentrated on the delivery of content and tended to forget about the need to nurture children’s ability of critical reflection. To this, Wayne Hugo responded that while this

ability was a very important one, there was no engaging in critical debate if the 'basics' are not in place. Returning to the issue of lacking resources, one participant stated that it was impossible to want to use education as a tool for change but then fail to put adequate resources into the system. Underlining the need to have good human resources for education in place as well, another input from the audience suggested focusing on developing better-trained teachers. One guest expressed worries that within the reform process not enough consideration was being given to making education inclusive so that it also caters to the needs of children with disabilities.

Besides the fruitful discussion, the DDP has also received a great amount of input through the evaluation forms handed out at the forum which is currently being evaluated.