

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS: AN EGALITARIAN POSITION

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It is tempting to drop a debate on educational standards straight into all the deficiencies of the black educational system. I want to resist this temptation, because, if one does not do so, it is easy to make four mistakes. These mistakes do not have their roots in the defects of black education; but, when they are made, they distort our understanding of what is usually called "the education crisis". I therefore want to parade and inspect these four mistakes. And then I want to opt for the egalitarian side of the disagreement on how to set, maintain and improve educational standards.

WHITE SCHOOLS

The first mistake is to believe that students who go to a white school find it easy to bridge the gap between matriculation and graduation. This is a false belief. In 1985 the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) published a report on the performance of a representative sample of 4085 students who registered for a three year degree in 1980. In 1982, three years later, only 21% of the 1190 BSc candidates had graduated; only 27% of the BCom candidates had graduated; and only 38% of the 1981 BA candidates had graduated.²

The 4085 students in this sample came from all the universities in South Africa, as well as from the universities in Bophuthatswana, Ciskei, Transkei, and Venda. But it is possible to isolate the 387 students in the sample who had matriculation aggregate of at least 79%. The majority of these students must have been white; but even they did not do very well. After three years only 54% of the 178 BSc candidates had graduated; only 64% of the 96 BCom candidates had graduated; and only 70% of the 113 BA candidates had graduated.

Table 1 tells the story in more detail. It demonstrates that it is a mistake to believe that going to a white school, or obtaining an aggregate of at least 79% in the matriculation examination, guarantees that a student is able to bridge the gap between matriculation and graduation.

Firstly, the 1985 HSRC report suggests that our universities are trying to operate at too high a level. In other words, they are trying to operate at the same level as American and British universities do, but without having the admission requirements that these universities have. The performance of the 387 students who had matriculation aggregate of at least 79% confirms this suspicion. If matriculation exemption had been granted only to those 387 students who account for only 9% of the HSRC's sample, then only 61% of them would have graduated in the minimum time that is required for a three year degree. But nearly 40% of the best matriculants in the HSRC's representative sample were unable to bridge the gap between the school and the university, then it is difficult to believe that it

is only the school that is to blame for this alarming failure rate.

Table 1: The number and percentage of a representative sample of 4085 first time entering students who registered for a three year degree in 1980 and graduated either in 1982 or in 1983³.

Degree	Matriculation Aggregate	Students In Category		Students who graduated In 3 years		Students who graduated in 4 years	
		no	%	no	%	no	%
BSc	45-78	1012	85	156	15	183	18
	79 +	178	15	96	54	23	13
BCom	45-78	918	91	214	23	164	18
	79 +	96	9	61	64	15	16
BA	45-78	1768	94	638	36	264	15
	79 +	113	6	79	70	13	12
Total							
BA + BSc	45-78	3698	91	1008	27	611	17
BCom	79 +	387	9	236	61	51	13

Secondly, a recent report from the Department of National Education came to the conclusion that:

"the single most important factor in setting, maintaining and improving academic standards is the quality of the academic staff".⁴

It therefore argued that:

"problems in respect of academic standards will be most effectively solved by addressing the issue of the quality of academic staff".⁵

Finally, too many academics see themselves as lecturers rather than as teachers. This is one reason why they believe that they should not have to provide the remedial education that even many white students require. This is also why there is so much resistance to the idea that we do not need academic support programmes for students who have learning problems; that we need instead are programmes to help academics to be better teachers and, in particular, to be better teachers of students who have learning problems.

AN ACADEMIC ECONOMY

The third mistake is to believe that we have the money to establish a large number of bridging colleges, as well as to expand our academic support programme. This is a false belief. Although Clem Sunter has told his story at almost all our universities, we do not seem to have got his message:

"South Africa is an average country with an average economy."

We are in the same economic league as Yugoslavia, Mexico, Malaysia, Portugal, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil.

This is why our universities should stop trying to ape the way in which America tried to desegregate its universities. In South Africa, black matriculants are the majority. It makes no sense to try to provide the majority of the country's matriculants with bridging colleges and academic support programmes. And this country does not have America's wealth. This is why Michael O'Dowd, Chairman of the Anglo-Americans and De Beers Chairman's Fund, has told our universities to face *the facts of life*:

"The available resources are not endless and there are competing claims for them. South Africa is indeed a Third World country, with per capita incomes at only about one-seventh of those of the developed countries. We cannot spend what we have not got. The reality of our situation is that we will have to live with scarcity for the foreseeable future".⁶

A NO GO IDEA

The fourth mistake is to believe that there is not enough money for education because the government wastes it on the SADF and on the administration of apartheid. This is a naive belief. Nobody doubts that the government wastes our money, and not only on the SADF and the administration of apartheid. But in 1985 there were 6 175 745 pupils in our schools and the government spent R 5309 billion on education and R 5587 billion on the SADF, the SAP and prisons. If the education budget had been divided equally, rather than along racist lines, R 860 would have been spent on each pupil. And if we had to abolish the SADF, the SAP and the prisons, then an egalitarian distribution of their budgets would have given us only another R 905 for every child's education. In other words, even if we make the bizarre assumption that we do not need a defence force, or a police force, or prisons, then, in the light of the 1985 figures and on the foolish assumption that all the extra money should have gone to education, we would have been able to spend only R 1765 on every child's education. This is still nearly R 1000 less than what was spent in 1985 on every white child's education.

CONFLICTING VALUES

For all these reasons I believe that, in the debate on educational standards, we should reframe the problem. Our universities should stop dreaming of bridging colleges and academic support programmes for which they do not have the money. What they should do instead is to lower the level at which they operate. And they should lower the level at which they operate because our economic development requires a large number of graduates who have received an adequate education by our standards rather than a small number of graduates who have received an excellent education by foreign standards.

Some people are terrified by this suggestion. They find it frightening because they reject the egalitarianism on which it rides. I therefore want to defend this egalitarianism by exploring two questions that are opposite sides of the same coin: Should we try to create a few extremely expensive centres of excellence or many cost-effective centres of competence? Should our ideas for transforming our education system be driven by what the Americans did or what the Japanese did?

EXCELLENCE OR COMPETENCE?

Some people want to fudge the question that requires us to choose between creating a few extremely expensive centres of excellence and many cost-effective centres of competence. They argue that there is no reason why we should have some, unspecified, centres of excellence and some, unspecified, centres of competence. The only explicit and specified version of the compromise that I have encountered came from Ken Owen. On the one hand, he pleaded for a single centre of excellence:

"to be created around just one university where admission was solely on merit and which would seek to keep in touch with the highest standards in the world".⁷

On the other hand, he claimed that

"Wits is the obvious candidate, if it dares"⁷

for this special position.

Ken Owen's proposals are worth exploring in more detail; but only if one is as emphatic as he was that they should be confined to one university. The 1985 HSRC survey suggests that it will be a small institution. In addition, the idea is a political landmine. At least in the foreseeable future, most of the students will be white. And some universities will contest the idea that "Wits is the obvious candidate" for special treatment of this kind. But be all this as it may. For most of the country, we need to transform our education system in the light of what the World Bank and E. G. Malherbe have told us.

The World Bank argues for:

"the justification and priority for investing in primary education".⁸

It concludes that:

"primary schooling increases productivity in all sectors of the economy".

It also has other important socio-economic effects:

"it reduces fertility, improves health and nutrition, and promotes significant behavioural and attitudinal changes at the level of both the individual and the community, which are helpful to the process of economic development".

The egalitarianism that is implicit in the World Bank's plea that the government and the private sector should give more money to primary schools than to universities is explicit in E.G. Malherbe's warning. He directed South Africa's military intelligence during World War II and was one of the University of Natal's most distinguished Vice-Chancellors. His words require no comment. They are a summary of what has happened in this country, at least since Soweto 1976:

"The wider the distribution of skill and knowledge at all levels of society, the more potent education has been as a factor in the economic development of a country. To confine this know-how and human development to an elite minority can be not only a limiting factor in the country's productivity but may also in the long run become an explosive factor which can on occasion cause an enormous setback in the economic growth of a country".

AMERICA OR JAPAN?

The conflict between elitism and egalitarianism that drives the disagreement in the debate on educational standards can also be clarified by asking whether we should try to transform our education system by copying what the Americans did, or by copying what the Japanese did. South Africa, of course, is neither America nor Japan. But they represent the two options that we have. And Clem Sunter has left us in no doubt that we should try to imitate the Japanese rather than the Americans. I therefore want to make three points that are supported by his discussion of these two systems.

Firstly, the Japanese transformed their educational system from the bottom up rather than from the top down:

"In 1870, two years after the Meiji Restoration, they set the goal of universal compulsory primary education. After the Second World War, the target was universal secondary education".¹⁰

Secondly, the Japanese adopted an egalitarian rather than an elitist approach to education. The key to their success is a uniformly high standard of education in both the rural and urban areas:

"The Japanese have only 1 per cent functional illiterates versus 13 percent in America. The US has won 130 Nobel Prizes in science, whereas the Japanese have won only four. But Japan does not focus on Nobel Prizes. Because of the consistently high level of their education system, the middle 80 per cent of Japanese are well ahead of the middle 80 per cent of the United States: that is what counts in industry".¹⁰

Finally, the Japanese place a high value on their teachers:

"Teaching is a much sought-after profession in Japan and pay compares well with the private sector. There are five applicants for every teaching post."¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Quotations from Clem Sunter, E.G.Malherbe and the World Bank do not add up to a conclusive argument for an egalitarian approach to setting, maintaining and improving educational standards. But neither egalitarianism nor elitism are supported by conclusive arguments. Both approaches to education are driven by a fundamental intuition, by a "gut feel", as to what is fair. That is why I have surveyed four mistakes in the debate on educational standards, mistakes which suggest that centres of excellence cannot be created without increasing, or at least entrenching, the vast inequalities that exist in South Africa's education system. In this system, there are massive extremes. At one extreme, 701 745 people, or 30% of our population have never been to school. At another extreme, only 271 945 people of whom 90% are white have degrees. (Central Statistical Services Report No 02-85-06: 192-203). Statistics of this kind, as well as my understanding of the four mistakes and the three sets of quotations that I have collected, drive me to an egalitarian position on educational standards.

Our universities, therefore, should stop dreaming of bridging colleges and academic support programmes for which they do not have the money. What they should do instead is to lower the level at which they operate. And they should lower the level at which they operate because our economic development requires a large number of graduates who have received an adequate education by our standards rather than a small number of graduates who have received an excellent education by foreign standards. I therefore hope that we will stop wasting money on a few centres of excellence and spend it wisely on creating many cost-effective centres of competence.

Notes and Bibliography

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