



■ EDUCATION

Schooling injustice

Education should never be a negotiated commodity

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PHILOSOPHICALLY, the introduction of school governing bodies (SGBs) into public schools in South Africa is largely considered an enactment of the principles of inclusivity (of all stakeholders) and decentralisation (of authority).

In this sense, SGBs have been constructed with the intention of addressing a very specific agenda: cultivating democracy through active participation and thereby shifting the onus of schools onto parents and communities. Politically, SGBs have highlighted unabridged disparities between historically advantaged and historically-disadvantaged schools and communities – bringing into question its philosophical imperative.

In this regard, we have to consider the unforeseen role of the SGB in relation to the widening of gaps in schools in post-apartheid South Africa.

In terms of Section 29 of our Constitution, everyone in South Africa has the fundamental right to a basic education while obliging the state to respect, protect, promote and fulfil this right (Section 7).

Given the scale of this and in light of its critical importance to the well-being of society, the constitution allows for the establishment of organisation of structures and institutions (Sections 91 and 92) as well as the distribution of functions (Section 104).

Hence, the SA Schools Act No 84 (DoE, 1996a) consequently proposes a partnership between the state, parents, educators and pupils concerning the funding, governance and organisation of schools, which led to the establishment of public SGBs.

The primary motivation of governance reforms in post-apartheid South Africa is the democratisation of schooling.

The Education White Paper 2 (DoE, 1996b) states unequivocally that “governance policy for public schools is



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based on the core values of democracy: representation; participation; tolerance; rational discussion; and collective decision-making.

Inasmuch as these responsibilities are underscored by unprecedented levels of decision-making, as well as the advancement of democratic participation, they infer a sophisticated level of skills and knowledge, which the majority of SGBs might not be capable of assuming.

What has become apparent are the inevitable tensions and gaps in light of the implementation of a generic governance institution, when the point of departure is so hopelessly unequal.

Thanks to the intensely differentiated contexts in South Africa, parents from historically advantaged and disadvantaged schools have had, and continue to have, widely disparate experiences of involvement and participation.

Unlike parents at historically-advantaged schools, parents from historically-disadvantaged schools have had

little to no experience of management or participation in their schools.

Consequently, despite its democratising intent, the SA Schools Act (DoE, 1996) does not provide any mechanism for avoiding and overcoming a re-enactment of the traditional power relations; and does not have a conscience to ward off the perpetuation of social injustice.

The ensuing disconnection between policy and praxis holds increasingly profound implications for schools and a socially just society.

Matters of language, fees and feeder areas often fulfil a dual purpose – of preserving historical ways of being and thinking, and of excluding those who are viewed as other to these ways.

To this end, the educational partnership that has been envisaged between the state and the SGB might not only undermine its democratic impetus, but the partnership might be used as an undermining and oppositional effect.

Inasmuch as our constitution, via

the SA Schools Act (DoE, 1996a) sets out to promulgate a democratisation agenda – in relation to schools, and hence society – SGBs use this democratisation agenda to act counter-productively to the cultivation of schools as diverse and inclusive spaces.

Consequently, one encounters a dichotomy between the ideals of democratic policies (Education White Paper 2, DoE, 1996b; SA Schools Act, DoE, 1996a) and the manner in which they are interpreted and implemented.

The time has come to question whether the SA Schools Act can best serve the good of all schools. The time has come to question a democratising project, which places social justice at risk.

While there are divergent arguments on the extent to which schools should be held responsible for the democratisation of citizenship and societies, there is consensus that schools have a role to play.

The function of schools cannot be limited to that of a curriculum; schools ought to be places for the cultivation of self-belief; belonging; recognition; knowing oneself; and knowing how to be with others.

Schools ought to be places where children can be who they are, and where hope and opportunity are equally distributed.

When the playing field, as prepared by apartheid, is so uneven, education, in particular, cannot be left to the mercy of a few.

Education belongs to every child; it should never be a negotiated commodity. If we hope to assign meaning to our roles as South African citizens, then we have to turn our unreserved attention to schools. We have to ask how we will ever attain a socially just society when our schools are descending into exclusive sites of inequities.

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