

# WORLD education NEWS & REVIEWS

*A Publication of World Education Services Vol. 10 No. 3 Summer 1997*

## Transforming Education in South Africa: from Political Expectations to Reality

by Sarie J. Berkhout

Since the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela in May 1994, South Africa has undergone tremendous change. This is especially visible in the political arena where Parliament now functions according to the rules of the negotiated agreements and a new constitution. Newly-passed legislation and a newly-structured public service sector reveal the contours of a society in which formerly apartheid structures increasingly are being replaced.

The immense challenges posed by such a transformation are daunting. Although apartheid theoretically has been dismantled, the legacy of the past probably will continue to haunt South Africa for some time, especially if the public's expectations of a just and equal society do not materialize rapidly. Apart from the greater transparency of government processes and the changed tenor of the public debate, the daily experience of most people has not changed. The promises that fueled expectations of a sudden and radical restructuring of the education system have to a large extent remained just promises.

After initially working within the boundaries of a negotiated interim constitution, a final constitution was accepted by consensus in May 1996. The prominence of education in the political debate and in the transformation process is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that one of the last points of dispute before acceptance of the final constitution was the right to public education in the language of one's choice.

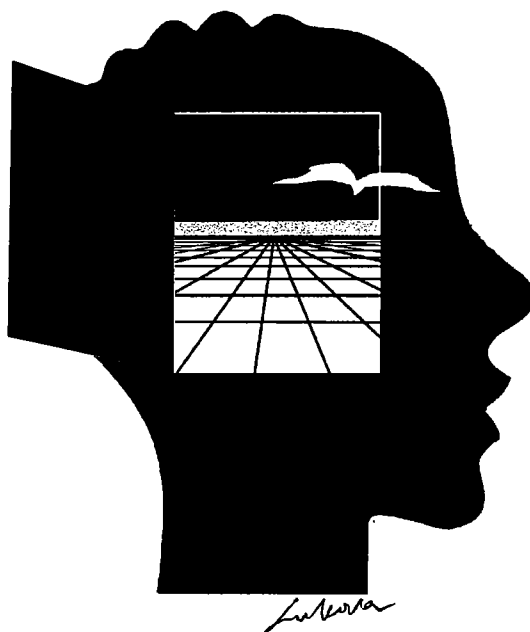
In terms of the new constitution South Africa is now a

country with eleven official languages, namely: Afrikaans; English; isiNdebele; Sesotho sa Leboa; Sesotho; Setswana; siSwati; Tshivenda; isiXhosa; Xitsonga; and isiZulu. This situation, coupled with South Africa's history of emotional political responses to language and cultural issues, could easily have resulted in cries of "neo-apartheid;" only a last minute compromise kept the process on track.

A *Bill of Rights* (Chapter 2 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996) now provides for basic education (including adult basic education) as well as for further education. The State has to take reasonable measures to make such education progressively more available and accessible, and has to provide education in the official language or language of choice, keeping practicability, equity and standards in mind. The right to establish and maintain independent educational institutions has also been established.

The past two years have been marked not only by the formal acceptance of a new constitution, but also by the national parliament passing legislation to determine education policy (RSA 1996a), to regulate the governance and funding of

schools (RSA 1996c) and to establish a national qualifications framework (RSA 1995). Within the context of the semi-federalist status of the political system, the control of education (excluding higher or tertiary education) has been assigned to the provinces, and a national education department established to set general policy and ensure equity. This meant that the plethora of 19 racially and/or ethnically based ex-depart-



**Sarie J Berkhout** is with the Department of Education Management at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

<b>INSIDE</b>
<b>2 Opinion</b>
<b>3 Updates</b>
<b>10 Taiwan</b>
<b>16 Profiles</b>
<b>18 Study Abroad</b>
<b>20 Egypt</b>
<b>24 Review</b>

*continued on page 22*



## TRENDS

*continued from page 1*

ments of education had to be reconstructed and integrated. Through a process of intense negotiation, promises of early retirement packages, redress of historical imbalances and the "absorption" and redeployment of staff, the education departments of the nine provinces (the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, Western Cape, North

West and Northern Province) were constituted. The different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts of these provinces, as well as their needs and inequalities, will probably have an increasingly important effect on the shape of the education debate in the future.

Generalizing about the national education system beyond the legislated-for contours is difficult in a country known for its cultural diversity and complexity. Not only have doubts been cast on the reliability of much of the statistical data officially published in the past, but data collected for the new Education Management Information System have not been released to date. Furthermore, data that should be forthcoming from a national census held towards the end of 1996 are also being awaited.

Apart from doubts about the reliability of national indicators, vast differences and contrasts exist in people's experiences with education on any level. For some, education means access to an educational institution that compares well with the best in the world. For others it might mean an education setting so scantily provided for that it could barely be described as such. These differences exist not only in terms of quality of the facilities and the availability of teaching and learning materials, but also in regard to teacher attitude, the quality of teaching, and the general lack of a culture of learning.


To indicate the extent of the problems, data provided by the Department of Education reveals that 11,908,000 students, of whom only 151,000 went to independent schools, attended school in 1995. During the

and participate in the ensuing public debate. While this process slows the pace of change, it is deemed essential for consensus in a country where civil disobedience long formed part of the political struggle. The freedom of having "your voice heard," unfortunately, also results in expectations of having "your will done," with resistance developing when this does not materialize.

The integration and restructuring that have taken place in the governance of education in South Africa are, however, seldom reflected in the schools. All public schools are now open to all pupils and any kind of differential access, whether in terms of language proficiency, achievement, or financial ability, could be considered unjust discrimination within the context of the new Schools Act (RSA 1996c). Since 1995 the published national education statistics classify the number of students in terms of new categories, that is per geographic region, instead of according to the departments previously responsible for the education of the so-called four different population groups (Asian, black, colored or white). Despite the increasing urbanization, particularly of blacks, most South Africans still live in more or less the same historically developed separate "group" areas where their children still attend the same schools.

There are also other factors preventing the integration process. The lack of funds hampers the provision of free basic and further education, as well as the transportation of students to available schools. A further problem is posed by the variety of languages spoken by both students and teachers. An exception has been the previously so-called Model C schools (schools for white pupils that attained greater decision-making authority under the previous government in exchange for parents accepting a larger financial burden) which accommodate racially integrated groups of students. [However, having the black elite/blacks from higher income groups send their children in increasing numbers to the better-equipped Model C schools results in the creation of new inequalities along class lines.]

A broad spectrum of stakeholders has been involved in an extended process of consultation and participation in an effort to restructure "what people really learn" (i.e. the curriculum) and educational assessment structures in particular. During 1996, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (RSA 1995) was initiated. SAQA will coordinate and lead the development of a



same year, 353,500 teachers were employed. Students attending the first seven grades numbered 8,125,300, with 3,750,000 in the final five grades. Although this is more than 25% of the total population of more than 40,000,000, it is estimated that almost 1,500,000 youths of school age are still out of school. The ratio 3:1 (1.7 million in grade one to 560,000 in grade 10) can be considered fairly high.

Democracy in South Africa is seen not only as universal suffrage and representation, but also as participatory. Genuine efforts are made to allow a voice to all people with an interest or stake in a particular issue. Policy proposals (in the form of reports, green papers and white papers) are disseminated to the major stakeholders, who are invited to comment on such proposals

National Qualifications Framework (RSA 1995a:2) to create "... *an integrated framework for learning achievements; facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths; enhance the quality of education and training; accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities; and thereby contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.*"

The curricular modular structure proposed for education and training in South Africa, however, still reflects the internationally dominant hierarchical character of most education systems. A General Education and Training Band, followed by a Further Education and

Training Band and a Band for Higher Education and Training, including alternative learning sites, are proposed. Plans for implementation target 1998 as the date for phasing in the new outcomes-based curriculum on the first and seventh levels, with the year 2005 scheduled for the first students leaving school after being assessed on the new basis. The immensity and complexity of integrating education provided in alternative settings with education in traditional institutions within a national qualifications framework will be awesome.

Meanwhile, an interim integrated national curriculum for all schools, regardless of their former racial or ethnic classification, has been announced by the Minister of Education. All students at secondary schools within a particular province are now sitting for the same integrated school-leaving examination at the end of twelve years of schooling. Although it theoretically implies that

are they required to become more relevant within the local African context and to accommodate increasing numbers of students from historically disadvantaged schools, but they simultaneously have to become internationally cooperative and competitive while having to cope with resource constraints.

Students with little access to financial aid and increasing numbers of students who renege on financial obligations are also contributing to a serious reappraisal of tertiary education. An extensive commission of inquiry and the public debate following the commission's report (RSA 1997) are leading to new legislation on higher education which will probably be introduced in Parliament during the second half of 1997. A reconciliation between equity and efficiency seems to be the greatest challenge faced by higher education institutions in light of demographic projections. By the year

all schools are now following similar curricula and that statistics are published in a "politically correct manner" (not reflecting racial categories), extensive inequalities, especially with regard to achievement, still exist.

As has been the case for a number of years, the largest percentage—20%—of the national budget is still earmarked for education (6.8% of the GDP). The present patterns of state expenditure, the pressure on the national budget for the provision of social services such as housing, health care, and police, and especially the growing interest in loans, indicate that little change can be expected in the allocation of resources.

Calculations based on demographic trends indicate, furthermore, that if the government were to provide basic education and meet expectations with regard to higher education, adult basic education and early educare (once pre-primary education and now extended from birth to age nine), free education would simply not be possible. During 1996, a policy was announced of "affordable" desired teacher-pupil ratios for both primary education and secondary education of respectively 40:1 and 35:1. This was done in an effort to redistribute resources in education to benefit the historically disadvantaged schools (or provinces) and was based on the fact that teacher remuneration constitutes the largest expenditure category (more than 80%) of the education budget. Teachers at schools with lower ratios would be given the option of being redeployed (appointed to schools with higher ratios) or retired. Instead of achieving the desired redistribution of resources, this measure had a seriously negative effect on the morale of people already highly stressed and left insecure by the demands of change. Furthermore, the absence of a culture of learning persists in scores of schools where students and teachers spent years in either resisting government action or in apathy.

Higher education remains the seat of contention and often unrest. Students' demands steer the transformation process on most campuses. Universities, becoming part of the international scene after years of either resisting government policy or being called the "handmaidens of the apartheid regime," find themselves in a vise. Not only

2000, student numbers are expected to increase to between 800,000 and 1.5 million, accompanied by more financial constraints.

Although great expectations existed for economic development and growth in a country that had for years been subjected to trade sanctions, little real investment or economic growth has taken place. The GDP has shown a rise of less than one percent. Estimates indicate that approximately eight million South Africans remain unemployed. Because foreign investors are primarily concerned with political stability, South Africa's increase in crime, especially violent crime, is becoming extremely alarming. This, together with the policy of redress or affirmative action, are also seen as provoking the emigration of between 800,000 and 1,200,000 mostly white and/or highly skilled people from South Africa since 1994.

The *Education Policy Act* (RSA 1996a) sets out the principles of a changed philosophy of education that strives to go beyond what was known as "Christian National Education." The latter became closely associated with the apartheid ideology. But it is easier to restructure government departments and to build new schools than to change people's mind sets. Getting to know one another after years of separateness and suspicion, fear, and even hatred is a slow process. There is, fortunately, a surprising amount of tolerance and goodwill, with President Mandela setting an excellent example.

The possibility of amnesty for crimes committed as a result of the political situation in South Africa has by means of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed dimensions of previously often hidden acts. Reminding people of the horrors committed under a cloak of secrecy will hopefully prevent the reoccurrence of similar disastrous acts in future.

Policy changes, as well as the realities being shaped in different cultural contexts, can often be more varied than historically emphasized racial patterns would indicate. Although extensive legislative changes propose to reshape a new education system, these changes have not yet been reflected in the "realities" of everyday life.