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Organising for Quality Education

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Joey Hasson and Brad Brockman – Equal Education

Introduction

This paper will sketch some key features of South Africa's present social and political landscape and the consequent opportunities and barriers for community organising for improved basic education services.¹ Institutional weakness, corruption and an inability to instil basic levels of literacy and numeracy skills generally characterise the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Its continued failure to provide the majority of South African children with a quality basic education takes place within a context of deepening social inequality, unemployment and political uncertainty. Equal Education's organising model will be described and some key experiences at grass roots level reflected upon.

Section 1 - The Context and Consequences of South Africa's Education Crisis

Public education has not played the transformative role envisioned by all who struggled for a new and democratic South Africa. Despite massive state expenditure on public education, eighteen years after the fall of Apartheid in 1994 and the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, class and race linked inequality has deepened in South Africa.² Educational performance and outcomes not only continue to fall below international benchmarks but are broadly determined by students' socio-economic status.³

The context of structural inequality and underperformance in South Africa's public education system is driven a number of interconnected factors:

¹ In the South African context Basic Education refers to primary and high school education, and Higher Education to tertiary level education.

² The Government of South Africa spends 19.5% (R143.1bn) of the annual state budget on primary and high school education. This amounts to \$1225 (R10 123) per student compared to Kenya, which spends just \$258 (R2132) per learner. As a percentage of Gross National Product (GNP), South Africa spends 4.0% on basic education, compared to an average of 3.1% in developing countries globally and 2.9% in Sub-Saharan Africa. (See: Nicholas Spaul, Presentation to Equal Education July 2012.)

³ The Western Cape Education Department Systemic Evaluation 2009 reveals that while 60.2% of Grade 3 learners meet the required standard in schools that were reserved for white children under Apartheid (and now attend black as well as white middle class children), only 2,1% do so in schools classified 'black' under Apartheid and still only attended by black children. See: National Assessment of Learner Achievement (NALA) Grade 9 Systemic Evaluation (2009). The following national statistics must be seen in this class and race skewed context. More than 80% of South Africa's poorest students scored a school average (across grades 1-6) of less than 50% in the National School Effectiveness Study (Taylor, 2011b). In the same tests, only 28% of all students in Grade 3 met the required standard for numeracy and only 35% for literacy. See: [Report on the Annual National Assessments of 2011](#). Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

i. **Lack of Leadership, Accountability and Capacity within Government:**

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) is a cumbersome bureaucracy tasked with the provision of a daily service to over 12 million students in South Africa. The DBE is characterised by poor leadership from its most senior officials. The scandal involving National Director General Bobby Soobrayan's connections to Libone Litho – the company awarded tenders worth hundreds of millions of Rands for the printing and distribution of workbooks – is one example of this.⁴

No progressive plan exists to redress inequalities of the past through the redistribution of human and physical resources. The failure to adopt binding regulations for the provision of basic infrastructure is an example of this, and has resulted in the compounding of underperformance within the country's poorest schools in favour of better-resourced schools.⁵

Despite some shining examples from dedicated principals, officials and teachers, high levels of incapacity, incompetence and corruption have resulted in the perpetuation of two systems of education in South Africa: one functional, well-managed, well-resourced system for the richest 25% of children and another dysfunctional, poorly resourced, underperforming system for the poorest 75%.⁶

ii. **Lack of Active Citizenship and Knowledge at Community level:**

The post-Apartheid political order is democratic and legitimate, founded on the principles of universal equality, dignity and justice. A progressive legislative framework in South Africa reflects these values and places substantial rights and powers in the hands of students and parents. This framework enables struggle for social change of a particular type – rights-based activism – which is the focus of this paper.

The Constitution and Bill of Rights, the South African Schools Act and the South African Education Act (among others) provide for and encourage active participation in the governance of schools. For example, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) have wide-ranging powers within the school and must by law have a majority representation of parents.

⁴ See: Equal Education calls for Dismissal of Basic Education Director General Bobby Soobrayan <http://www.equaleducation.org.za/node/724>

⁵ Since 2010, Equal Education has used all forms of public participation, picket and protest to campaign for the fulfillment of a promise by the Minister Basic of Education Angie Motshekga to adoption Uniform Minimum Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure: http://www.equaleducation.org.za/overview/minimum_norms_standards

⁶ In their analysis of the SACMEQ surveys of Southern and Eastern African education, Servaas van der Berg *et al* write: "The legacy of apartheid appears to have endured. The former racially separate education departments remain important categories for analysis. Not only have large performance gaps between former black schools and former white schools prevailed, but also the relationship between former education department classification and socio-economic status. This double burden of historical disadvantage and current poverty may help to explain why South African learners perform worse than African learners facing similar levels of economic deprivation."

From: *Low Quality Education as a Poverty Trap* Stellenbosch University (2011). See also: Spaull, N. 2012. *South Africa at a Glance*, SACMEQ Series, Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers

However, in spite of these laws and freedoms, communities have in general watched over the continued decline in public education, rather than seizing these democratic tools and organising to demand quality education and accountability from public officials. Parents feel disempowered, are poorly informed of their rights and are often intimidated by principals and teachers. Those who can afford to, opt to send their children to schools in the suburbs, hoping things will be better there.

Many high school students, for their part, pass through the education system unaware of what a quality education means, and without ever demanding accountability from teachers and principals. Low morale undermines solidarity among students, having an anesthetising and de-politicising effect on them. Where student frustration has boiled over, this has taken the form of spontaneous, often violent protests.⁷

iii. Inequality, Unemployment and Uncertainty in South Africa

The reality for most young people in South Africa is that they do not stay at school through to Matric / Grade 12 level.⁸ Where they do complete school, most of them do so lacking the skills necessary for employment or further study.

Unemployment in South Africa stands at 38% with 75% of the unemployed under the age of 35 years.⁹ Half of all people between the ages of 15-24 are unemployed, and two out of every three young African women are jobless.¹⁰ Young people's potential to contribute productively toward their own survival, as well as to society and the economy is undermined.

South Africa's unreformed Higher Education sector offers few real training opportunities for post-school youth. Only a tiny fraction of the most extraordinary young school leavers from working class and poor communities are able to join their more affluent counterparts in pursuing university education and the economic opportunities this brings.¹¹

The inability of the state bureaucracy to deliver the most basic public services: healthcare, education, welfare and community safety, increases the burden of poverty on the shoulders of the most vulnerable in society. The conditions described above must be placed in the context of the unchecked power of South Africa's ruling elite and the high levels of corruption across government departments – in collusion with the private sector – which are an outgrowth of it.

⁷ Chris Hani High School in Khayelitsha is a case in point. In October 2010, by rioting and throwing furniture and dustbins from the second floor of the school, Grade 12s at the school were able to compel the principal, Mr Mahlutshana to reverse his decision to withhold their final exam numbers and timetables, unless they paid the R150 "voluntary contribution" to the school.

⁸ According to the Department of Basic Education NEMIS Report: School Realities 2011, 923,463 students entered South Africa's education system in 2000. Of these more than half (53.7%) had dropped out of the system by the time they had to write their final examination in grade 12 (496,090 students in 2011).

⁹ Statistics South Africa see: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2012.pdf>

¹⁰ South Africa Survey, South African Institute for Race Relations (2011).

¹¹ Enrolment in post-school institutions is particularly low in South Africa. Less than 10% of South Africans attain at least 15 years of education which is roughly 30 percentage points below the norm for middle-income countries. See: *Low Quality Education as a Poverty Trap*, Servaas van der Berg *et al* Stellenbosch University (2011).

Against this background of rising inequality, poverty and uncertainty, the promise of a better life for all is beginning to ring hollow for South Africa's growing numbers of poor people. The ability of the ANC-COSATU-SACP alliance to give expression to and unite these diverging interests is beginning to break down. Widespread protests across the country and the recent police killing of 34 striking miners at the Lonmin platinum plant in South Africa's North West province is an illustration of this.¹²

Opportunistic and populist forces can be observed entering into this widening gulf, exploiting desperation for political and personal gain with increasing frequency. As this situation unfolds, the gains of more than 100 years of organised struggle for a just, free and equal society 'for all who live in it' are slowly being rolled back.

Section 2 – Equal Education (EE)

Equal Education's emergence as a social movement should be seen as a reflection of and response to the political, social and economic conditions described above. Government's failure to deliver equal and quality public schooling in South Africa must be answered with a call to organise communities. This call can only succeed if EE is able to unite students, parents, teachers and supporters from across South Africa's divided society – behind the vision of an education system that delivers quality education, is more open, accountable and equal.

Equal Education exists to:

- Organise students to make a difference in their own schools and the broader education system.
- Use all forms of non-violent civil action and where necessary litigation to secure a quality basic education for every child in South Africa.
- Promote peaceful activism in our communities and bring dignity back to the youth in South Africa.
- Empower parents to engage in their children's education and the affairs of the school.
- Work with community structures, school management, government departments, other educational organisations, teacher unions and civil society at large.
- Inform students, parents, teachers and the public about education issues by compiling and distributing detailed research and policy analysis.

The foundation of EE's community organising and advocacy model is an organised, disciplined core of young people at the heart of the public education system. These young people, called "Equalizers", are linked to one another by their knowledge of law, policy and campaign technique, and by their commitment to change in education. Supported by a growing number

¹² <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-08-24-00-marikana-the-latest-chapter-in-a-long-saga>

of activists outside the education system, EE is building a self-sustaining movement of young people who are increasingly able to identify and take up issues as campaigns within schools using the legal and political framework described above.

Using a hybrid mixture of policy analysis and research, community mobilisation, engagement with mainstream and social media, targeted non-violent civil action, as well as strategic litigation, EE has become a significant critical voice in the public arena. The movement's strength lies in its ability to remain relevant to its primary members – school students. This multi-layered movement can deliver sustainable and tangible campaign victories to EE's members – but as will now be discussed, victory depends on organisation and tactical alliances at school and community level.

Equal Education's Campaigns

Equal Education has initiated a number of long-term campaigns in its struggle to improve the quality of public education in South Africa. These include the Late Coming Campaign, the Campaign for School Libraries, the Textbooks Campaign, and the Campaign for Minimum Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure. This paper is neither a history of Equal Education nor an analysis of the successes and failures of its campaigns. Rather, it seeks to reflect on and draw lessons from the movement's experience of grass roots organising.

Section 3 – Organising in Khayelitsha Schools

Principals are powerful figures, tasked with leading and managing schools. Their power is meant to be checked by the school community – primarily through the SGB – the Provincial Department of Education, and the many laws and policies regulating principals' conduct. However, the reality for most schools is that their SGBs are weak, parents and students are not mobilised and the Provincial Department of Education is ineffectual. The result is a near total lack of accountability.

Equal Education has done most of its organising work in Khayelitsha, the largest township in the Western Cape. The township has a population of more than 700 000, a large proportion of whom live in zinc shacks and have limited access to basic services like proper sanitation. Khayelitsha's 54 public schools with just under 56 000 registered students in Grades 1-12 in 2011, annually produce some of the worst educational outcomes in the Western Cape. In 2010 Khayelitsha had a 50.3% Matric pass rate. In the same year the provincial average was 76.8%. 13 out of the 19 public high schools in Khayelitsha had a pass rate of below 60% – the marker used by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to define an “underperforming school”.

Engaging in community organising in this context, we have found significant barriers to our work:

i. Unlawful Practices by Principals and Teachers

Our experience is that it is common for principals to force parents to pay a “voluntary contribution” to the school by withholding students’ report cards, or sending them home, if their parents fail to pay this fee.¹³ Corporal punishment is widely practiced by principals and teachers, and principals also routinely suspend and expel students without following due process. One way in which principals illegally expel students is by issuing a transfer note – the document needed to register and deregister at a school – citing “parents’ own choice” as the official reason for transfer.¹⁴

ii. A Culture of Authoritarianism

Students often complain that their teachers, but especially their principals, do not listen to them and that their grievances are not taken seriously. Fearful of having their authority challenged, many principals and teachers choose to shut down debate, and exclude students from decision-making. Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs), which are meant to represent students’ interests, are widely seen as ineffectual, dictated to by teachers and principals.

Student members of Equal Education frequently come up against authoritarianism if they advocate for change in their schools. During 2010, when EE revealed gross shortages of textbooks in Khayelitsha high schools, EE member Sanele Mbayeka, a Grade 12 student at KwaMfundo High School, was called to a disciplinary hearing by the SGB. One SGB member physically threatened him after he had conducted a survey to assess whether learners at his school had received all their textbooks.

iii. Local Political Organisations

While teachers and principals in Khayelitsha generally deliver a very low quality of education, they are politically well organised.¹⁵ The Khayelitsha Branch of the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (SADTU) has site stewards in every school. When called, strikes by the union bring schooling in the township to a complete standstill. While the national leadership of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and SADTU have lent their support to Equal Education’s campaigns, the Khayelitsha SADTU Branch has not.¹⁶ Instead it has undermined our work by using its networks to block access to schools. The same is true of the

¹³ All Schools in Khayelitsha fall within poverty quintiles 1-3 and are therefore no-fee schools. While schools are encouraged to raise funds, it is illegal for them to do so by charging any compulsory fees.

¹⁴ In February 2011 the mother of a Grade 6 student at Chumisa Primary School in Khayelitsha presented Equal Education with such a letter. The student was subsequently reinstated by the school after EE and the mother’s employer took up the issue.

¹⁵ The Secretary of the Khayelitsha SADTU Branch is Ms Ayanda Mbava, the principal of Iqhayiya High School in Khayelitsha. In 2010, the school attained a 33,3% Matric pass rate – the worst in Khayelitsha.

¹⁶ In March 2011, COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi took part in EE’s Late Coming Campaign by standing outside Chris Hani High School to encourage students and teachers to arrive at school on time.

<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-03-02-cosatuzwelinzima-get-to-school-on-time>

Khayelitsha Education Forum (KEF) – which is meant to bring together all role players in education in Khayelitsha.

iv. Incompetent Department Officials

Administratively Khayelitsha schools fall under the WCED's Metro East Education District (MEED). Equal Education has engaged with MEED on a range of issues since 2008 in attempts to find common ground.¹⁷ While there have been instances of cooperation, there has been a general attitude of mistrust and hostility towards Equal Education. A long-standing accusation made by the District (and echoed by principals and teachers) is that EE's desire is to expose the Department's flaws in the media, and not to work together. On multiple occasions however, EE has presented information to the District where there was clear evidence of violations of students' Constitutional rights, but the District has failed to take decisive and appropriate action. Parents and students alike have lost faith in the will and competency of the District to manage its schools effectively.

For example, a complaint was brought to District Director, Mr Melvyn Caroline, on behalf of two Grade 11s at Iqhayiya High School in Khayelitsha on 25 January 2012. The students had been effectively expelled by their school principal, Ms Mbava since 12 January 2012, for failure to return textbooks from the previous year and donate a pack of computer paper to the school – which the principal had declared compulsory. Tens of learners were in the same situation. EE asked the District to urgently intervene, which it failed to do. Instead, the mother of one of the students on whose behalf we had brought the complaint was told by District official, Ms Manzezulu, that she should pay for the textbooks, unless she wanted her daughter to continue to miss out on school.

Section 4 – Some Lessons from Our Organising

i. United We Stand. Divided We Fall

Students and parents far outnumber principals and teachers. This is the greatest source of their power and schooling cannot take place without their cooperation. If students were to withdraw their cooperation, school would come to a grinding halt. Most students do not realise this. However, the only way in which students can effectively exercise their power is by coming together in an organised manner, acting with discipline, focus and purpose.

One example of students coming together in the manner described above took place in February 2011 at Harry Gwala High School in Khayelitsha. Equalizers at the school had taken up the organisation's Late Coming Campaign, encouraging their fellow students to take

¹⁷ During its 2008 campaign to have more than 500 broken windows repaired at Luhlaza High School, EE engaged the relevant Circuit Manager at the Metro East Education District and pledged to help the department have the windows fixed. The Circuit Team Manager, Mr. Robin Botes, claimed the issue had never been brought to his attention and referred EE to the WCED head office. EE met with the head-office officials responsible for scheduled maintenance as well as then Western Cape MEC for Education Mr. Yousuf Gabru.

responsibility for their education and arrive early at school. The campaign was successful in making late coming the subject of discussion and debate within schools. However, the principal, Mr Mlungu, objected to the campaign because it had not been sanctioned by his local SADTU Branch. He threatened Equalizers at the school saying that if they continued, he would call their parents and suspend them. The students decided to continue the campaign – and they did so with the support of their parents. In the end, Mr Mlungu took no action against them. Over the two-week period during which the campaign lasted, the percentage of the student body arriving late each morning decreased from nearly 70% to less than 5%.

ii. Parent Power

As has been stated, the South African School Act places considerable power in the hands of parents to determine how schools are run. However, in poor communities like Khayelitsha, SGBs are generally weak and dominated by principals. Parents often feel intimidated by teachers and principals, and having been denied a quality education themselves, often do not realise how dysfunctional their children's schools are and how poor the quality of their education is. Added to this, parents have to struggle daily to feed, clothe and house their families. This means that organising parents to advocate for their children's education is slow and painstaking work. However, EE's work mobilising and organising parents has shown that this is possible – and vital to building accountable, functioning schools.

An example of how parents were effectively organised relates to Macassar High School in Macassar, where in January 2011 students were told that English would no longer be offered as a medium of instruction. Only Afrikaans – the dominant language in the school and community – would be offered. This decision left more than 20 African learners who had been taught in English and could not make the switch to Afrikaans, without a school.

Their parents, who had not been informed of the change in language policy, went to the District to ask for assistance but received none. EE supported these parents in dealing with the District, the WCED and the high schools in Macassar. After a month and under the threat of legal action, the WCED finally provided their children with places at another school. While in the end it was the threat of legal action which compelled the WCED to act, if the parents had not remained organised, united and determined, their children would still be out of school.

Section 5 – Concluding Remarks: No Substitute for Organisation

The authoritarian culture of schools, the lack of effective structures to channel grievances, and a generally unresponsive Department of Education, leaves students and parents feeling powerless, frustrated and angry. From time to time this anger is expressed in the form of spontaneous, violent student protests. While these protests have sometimes resulted in student demands being met, these gains are quickly rolled back, because the core problem of a lack of accountability remains unaddressed. The only way to achieve sustainable change and build accountability in schools and across the education system is to organise students and parents on an unprecedented scale.