
Editorial

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Developing Education in South Africa

Beeby's *Stages in the Growth of a Primary Education System* (1962) is one of the founding articles attempting to grapple with how to improve education within a developing context and it speaks directly to our current situation and the articles of this edition of JoE. Beeby points to two main drivers that affect the ability of an education system to improve the level of general education of the teachers in the system and the amount and quality of the teacher training they have received (1962, p.6). Both focus on the teacher, but the first points to the quality of their general education, the second to their training. Four stages of growth in how schools qualitatively develop are derived from this. At the lowest level schools start off with ill educated and untrained teachers working in ways that are unorganised, teaching very narrow subject content in a meaningless way, memorising being all important. Beeby provides the following account:

The bulk of teachers are ill educated. . .the syllabus is vague. . .teachers fall back on the very narrow subject content they remember from their own school days. It consists of little but the completely mechanical drill of the 3 Rs and memorizing of relatively meaningless symbols occupies most of the time. . .all except the brightest children cease to make progress (p.6).

This account resonates with what our current research is telling us about the state of education in most of South Africa's primary schools. Beeby then goes on to make a crucial recommendation that these kinds of schools should not jump straight into constructivist pedagogies. What is needed initially is more formalism. It might seem ideal to take teachers at this level and introduce them straight into teaching practically and directly from the world they know so well, using their own context to facilitate learners making meaning of the syllabus. However, this kind of learner-centred teaching is based on complex and sophisticated ideas of learning and pedagogy. The problem with schools at this level is that they are confusedly and inefficiently formal. They have "*all the defects of formalism and none of its virtues*" (p.6). More formalism is what is needed, not less – this from an arch constructivist.

It is impossible to take the whole teaching cadre and provide them with the full education needed to be able to teach in a rich and deep way. Teachers are

marked by how they themselves were educated. A teacher needs to be both well educated and well trained to perform at a sophisticated level. What can be done is to intervene at a training level and accept that training can only do so much. At stage two poorly educated but trained teachers work with rigid methods that have a 'one best way' mentality, with one textbook. It is a bridge too far to expect teachers at this level to mesh specialised knowledge forms with everyday life experiences. Basic mastery of the first is needed, otherwise teachers fall into everyday life discussions that are poorly related to knowledge forms. Basic but crucial knowledge forms and strategies need to become embedded in practice. External examinations and inspections need to be carried out to ensure that these key basic forms are taught and learnt.

In the third stage, with teachers better educated and trained, there can be more focus on meaning, but this is weakly carried out with little variation from the syllabus and textbooks. There is the beginning of experimentation, debate and engagement. Finally, in the fourth stage (and here I am moving into Beeby's canonical book *The quality of education in developing countries* published four years later), well educated and well-trained teachers work towards meaning and understanding within a wider curriculum that has a variety of content and caters for individual differences. Creativity and activity methods and problem solving are emphasised along with emotional and aesthetic well being (Beeby 1966, p.72).

It is a model that has been much critiqued for its evolutionary stage model and placing of constructivist education as the final attractor or endpoint of educational development (Guthrie, 1980). Beeby has accepted some of the criticisms and partly reworked the model into a more neutral description (Beeby, 1980). His major point is that these stages are hierarchical. It is impossible to jump from stage one to four without moving through two and three. Interventions must be directed specifically at the type of school involved and tailored accordingly. Retrospectively, this model speaks powerfully to South African education where we attempted to jump from levels one and two straight into the learner centred OBE of stage four. Many of the suggestions coming from the developing world and South Africa about improving quality in education are currently making suggestions that resonate strongly with level two – get a quality textbook and a specific method that works with poor learners in their home language and then externally examine and inspect. It is how founding texts like Beeby's work, they are foundational and force one to circulate around them and come back to them, no matter how profound the critique. In South Africa we are currently circulating around the

implications of this stage model as we begin to understand that we have a bimodal schooling system with a massive chasm between stages one and two (historically black and impoverished schools) and stages three and four (historically white and enriched schools). Policy makers and school development experts are beginning to argue that schools located at different levels need very different kinds of interventions and the attempt to treat all schools equally is resulting in a massive drainage of resources and waste of human endeavour. Beeby's stage model indicates what level must be aimed at to get schools functioning at level 1 (narrow subject matters meaninglessly taught in rote memorisation) to level 2 (one best way, one textbook, strict examination and inspection) to level 3 (more focus on meaning, begin to experiment with different methods) to level 4 (creative and activity-based learning in a wholesome classroom environment). The difficulty is that as the education system evolves it begins to have all of the stages within its ambit, and the attempt to push it too quickly or slowly can result in failure as either the newer or older teachers become disillusioned or disheartened. There is an angle to reform – the art is to not make it too sharp or flat.

Beeby worried about the attempt to introduce quality education for all without the wherewithal in the system to cope. Such a project, he maintained, would be 'infinitely harder' than anything the older Western nations had to deal with educationally (1962, p10). It is in precisely such an infinitely hard project that we are currently engaged.

Nick Taylor has systematically squared up to this infinite project for almost two decades now. Usefully located in a network and organisation that has influential intellectuals, policy makers and funders working synergistically together, he has consistently argued for interventions that work realistically at a level South African education can absorb. This involves a hard look at what is currently wrong with South African schools and then working accordingly. We asked Nick to break the account up into three separate papers. The first paper gives an account of how poorly the South African education system is working with time. Teachers do not arrive on time if they arrive at all, learners do not go to class on time, once in class teachers do not do much teaching and when they do the pace is very slow, working at the level of the slowest learner. Tightening up how the education system works with time is the first key measure that can be taken to address the poor performance of learners. The issue is how to effect the transformation, how to get a whole culture of schooling to shift into a consciousness of time as vital, precious, in short supply, of how to use time to specialise consciousness.

If Taylor deals with Time, then Dalvit, Murray and Terzoli aggressively argue the case for extended mother tongue instruction in an African language as a key element to improving the quality of education in South Africa. It is not the replacement of English they want, more the establishment of more rigorous and sustained forms of bilingual education. The patron saint of South African educational research, E G Malherbe reached a similar conclusion seventy years ago. The power of dual medium instruction was established beyond any doubt by Thomas and Collier in 1997. That we are still struggling with the political, cultural, economic and educational will to provide primary education in the major home languages of our citizens is an indictment on our ability to forge ahead with policies we know are right but cannot see how to implement without making everyone happy, or to be specific, the middle classes happy. The poor performance of our learners has as much to do with their learning in a foreign language as it has to do with the paltry amount of time they actually do get taught. Let's put it more strongly, when the majority of our learners finally do manage to get taught, then it happens in a foreign language with teachers who cannot properly speak it in the first place. Dalvit, Murray and Terzoli mount one of the most sustained arguments yet as to why dominant African home languages should be used as the medium of instruction and assessment. One of the trajectories that has obscured the key importance of this recommendation is that learners initially do fairly well in learning the basics of a new language, especially when still young, but as soon as the nature of the language becomes more specialised (around grade 5) performance decreases and drop out rates increase. On the other hand, learners that stay with their home language through primary school are able to learn the complex lexis and grammar in their own language and in English. This only becomes apparent over a ten-year trajectory.

We see exactly this tragically played out in Heila Lotz's interesting paper on epistemological access. A 12-year-old learner from her farm asks for help with homework, struggles to understand concepts in a 'foreign language' and eventually drops out. A number of such stories are told, each pointing to inadequacies in how teachers working in poor communities tackle epistemological access. Attempting to find a way of dealing with these inadequacies, Heila points to realist epistemologies that offer some assistance in working towards more satisfactory forms of epistemological access. Contrasted to Beeby and Taylor one could observe that these realist recommendations are not necessarily realistic, given the massiveness of the task facing us in South Africa, that what is needed is a brutal cutting down of complexity, of a honing in on basics and formalism rather than an embrace of

fallibility and open-endedness. That this is the end point is not the question, it's just not the beginning. In the beginning was just a word.

Although South Africa is a schizoid bimodal educational system, there are beacons of hope throughout the country where quality education is being delivered in high poverty conditions. These schools are increasingly coming into focus as the schools we can learn most from, almost in a survival of the fittest way, they are the outliers that point the way. They are also in high demand in terms of funding, where bang for buck means development organisations want already functioning schools that have potential for investment. Parents within townships seek out such schools for their children if they cannot afford schools outside the township or actively decide to educationally stay within a local context. This means that certain schools with a good reputation in the townships find their numbers growing while more ineffective schools find enrolment figures dwindle and eventually, thankfully, they close down. Msila makes the point that poor parents in the local communities know which schools are performing relatively well or poorly, which schools have a functioning culture of learning and teaching, which schools are well run or corrupt and then actively make decisions based on this information. Often the choice is between really dysfunctional schools and barely functional ones, but it is a choice nevertheless. It is a glimpse of hope, one made all the more poignant by the glory of the initial vision of our post apartheid educational world. Msila points the way in terms of levels of focus and discrimination. At whatever level one is working with there are grades of quality, those working at that level know what they are. It is our task to illuminate not only the basic default lines, but the many storied levels within the mansion.

Stepping away from the overarching theme of quality in South African schools, Sivil and Yurkivska provide a powerful analysis of the strike at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in February 2006, already three years hence. Those involved on the ground remember it somewhat wistfully and tell stories somewhat closer to 1968 than 2006. Not so Sivil and Yurkivska, who update us on the very real current issues being faced by universities, globally, nationally and locally, although, it has to be noted, their language is very '68. Here is the all or nothing nature of their analysis:

The very nature of the university has been fundamentally transformed through the 'university on the market' trope. And this change transforms everything that 'the university is and stands for' (Higgins, 2007)

You have to admire just how powerful post structuralism makes tropes and a longing for Marx comes through the back door. Very real economic changes have swept through the world and as always these have moved faster than the cultural superstructure can cope with, even the cultural superstructure of the universities. It is hard sometimes not to read the radical discourses with a sense that they are outdated, behind the times, and that Marx would have been asking what are the discourses emerging from the new, warning against the Luddites, chasing the forces nascent within the new logic, wanting to go through it to see what is on the other side. But then I go to a performance management seminar that does not have a clue what academic work is and everything that Sivil and Yurkivska say rings true.

If we had a competition for the most understated first sentence to an article, then Theron, Mabitsela and Esterhuizen would probably win. ‘Many educators who are affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, report that they are negatively impacted’ is the opening line. Within this lies the grief and suffering of a major part of our teaching cadre tensely combined with a severe strain on the resources of the system as a whole. Theron, Mabitsela and Esterhuizen provide an account of a supportive intervention for teachers affected by the pandemic and what they have learnt from it. Resilience is what is encouraged and developed – the process of functioning relatively well despite adverse circumstances. Participatory group processes combined with useful programme content focused on the development of protective resources and skills, acceptance of the status quo and a development of communities of like-minded individuals. Although only a nascent study, it does point the way forward in terms of both research and intervention in a key factor impacting on our capacity to provide a quality education for all within the country.

If understatement characterised Theron *et al.*’s paper then *Theorising researcher self-effacement and youth deep-insiders in HIV/AIDS research: an awkward binary* by Ronicka Mudaly wins the most impressive title award. Young researchers were enabled to become HIV/AIDS researchers. The idea is simple, get the young researchers to interview participants who they thought were sexually active and with whom they had been associated with and find out sensitive private candid explicit stuff about their sex lives and sexuality. The accounts are contained in an appendix at the end of the journal. Mudaly provides a complex account of what this process entailed as well as her own self effacement and angst as the young researchers frantically went off and gathered the data. She also charts her chagrin at the youngsters not being able to use the research equipment correctly, her surprise at just how active the

youngsters were and sadly, that the youngsters doing the research were out of synch, even nerdy, in comparison to the interviewees doing the sex. Seems like some of the patterns holding thirty years ago when I was a young researcher still hold today.

Oh, I was joking about the appendix

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