CHALLENGING THE "APARTHEIDS" OF KNOWLEDGE

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Joana Bezerra, Craig Paterson & Sharli Paphitis (Eds)

Chapter 2

Thinking incisively about and acting effectively in Makhanda/Grahamstown public schools

Ashley Westaway

GADRA EDUCATION

ashley@gadraed.co.za

1. Introduction

South Africa is in the midst of a schooling crisis (e.g. Bloch, 2009), and there is consensus amongst academics and commentators alike about the dimensions and causes of the deep-seated and wide-ranging problems besetting the schooling system. The main problem, as all agree, is that the system comprises two sub-systems, one of which is deemed to be dysfunctional (e.g. Taylor, 2011). The vast majority of the country's school fall into this dysfunctional sub-system, resulting in overall systemic crisis. In this chapter, I suggest that the Achilles heel of this dysfunctionality thesis is that it cannot account for the extent of the problems. If schooling was merely 'in crisis' and the reasons for the crisis were understood, then there would be no justifiable reason for the duration of the problems. Yet, they persist and show no sign of dissipating.

An initial purpose of this chapter, then, is to put together a feasible and sustainable argument that explains the persistence of the South African schooling crisis. My starting point is simple: systems are reproduced not because of what they fail to do, but because of what they produce, because of what they achieve. In this case, that approach requires a willingness to explore and understand the functional value of schools that are typecast as 'dysfunctional'. To kick-start this exploration, I present Bourdieu's analysis of schooling in France to illustrate the usefulness of the functionality or productiveness lens. I then develop a summary

characterisation of the post-1994 South African state, drawing attention to the importance of patronage and welfare as techniques of power. This is the contextual basis upon which I make suggestions about the functional value and significance of so-called dysfunctional schools. It is this functionality, this productive contribution (rather than dysfunction) that accounts for the duration of the schooling crisis. If one adopts this kind of counter-hegemonic epistemic perspective, it is possible and necessary to posit some pointers and guidelines about how to frame interventions aimed at disrupting the educational status quo. Here the ideas of Gramsci are particularly useful.

Following this initial incisive analysis about public schooling and suggested resistance strategies, the chapter then describes and assesses a recent attempt to revitalise public education in the locality of Makhanda. This initiative was sparked by the installation of Sizwe Mabizela as Rhodes University's 6th Vice-Chancellor in 2015. On the occasion of his inauguration, he committed to re-positioning the university within the local context and specifically indicated that Rhodes would seek to play a much more deliberate and substantial role in public education in the city of Makhanda. The chapter concludes with an appraisal of the effectiveness of initiatives in the local war of position in the public education sector.

2. Establishing the limitation of the 'dysfunctionality' thesis

All informed perspectives on South African schooling and all data sets on the topic point to the same conclusion, namely that this schooling system produces very poor educational outcomes. For example, South Africa performs very poorly in international studies¹ assessing numeracy and literacy competence, and data generated through domestic examination processes (principally the Grade 12 'matric' examinations and the Annual National Assessments or ANAs) indicate generally weak and highly differentiated educational performance across the system. More specifically, only about 20% of South African public schools produce acceptable educational outcomes (e.g. Spaull, 2013). This 20% is made up of former white schools (10%) and exceptional township and village schools (the other 10%). That is, only about one in nine township and village schools actually deliver their stated educational purpose. Whether or not South Africa's public schooling system is the very worst in the world or not is a moot point; that

1 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ)

it is amongst the worst is not contested. The poor educational outcomes include low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst South African youth, high levels of school drop-out and high failure rates. Long-term consequences of this include low throughput to universities and other quality tertiary institutions and high levels of unemployment amongst the youth.

The response of the academy and education commentators to the schooling situation is remarkably uniform. They agree that the system is in a state of crisis, or, in the words of Bloch, "a national disaster" (2009:58). Furthermore, they agree that one of its most important characteristics is deep division, fashioned along the lines of race and class. Fleisch (2007) dubs the system 'bi-modal', whereas others such as Taylor refer to it as comprising "two school sub-systems: one which is functional, wealthy and able to educate students; the other being poor, dysfunctional and unable to equip students with the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they should be acquiring" (2011:11).

The term dysfunction is telling; analysts argue that schools that are not producing acceptable education outcomes are defined by what they are doing wrong and by what they lack. Weak management, ill-equipped teachers, inadequate teaching and under-utilisation of textbooks are some of the factors deemed to produce overall dysfunctionality. Herein lies the rub: these technical issues have been identified not only in academic work but also government policy documents such as the National Development Plan, and they should therefore be relatively easy to work on and resolve over time. Yet, there is no indication at all that the downward trend has been reversed, or even arrested.

Most recently, issues that have received academic and public attention include literacy levels, the 'real' matric pass rate and 'NEETs' (referring to those young people not employed and not in education or training). In late 2017, the findings of the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) were released. Earlier PIRLS reports had estimated illiteracy at Grade 4 level at between 55% and 60%. This assertion is on par with other data such as drop-out/push-out rates (per grade cohort) hovering around 50% and a further 10 – 15% of each cohort failing the final matric examinations. In the light of these realities, estimates of literacy rates amongst Grade 4 learners sitting at between 40% and 45% seemed to be generous, since in all likelihood this would translate into lower drop-out and failure rates than that of the reality. This has been corrected in the 2016 PIRLS, which asserts that illiteracy rates amongst Grade 4 learners are as high as 78%. Turning attention to the real pass rate, when the South African government releases the matric results in early January, it calculates pass rates in relation to the number of registered full-time candidates and not according to

the number of children who registered for Grade 1 12 years earlier or according to the number of teenagers who registered for Grade 10 two years earlier.

Because of the massive drop-out problem in South Africa, both opposition political parties and academic commentators have held that calculating the pass rate in terms of total cohort size (at either the Grade 1 or the Grade 10 stage) is a more accurate reflection of educational outcomes or performance, hence reference to this as the real matric pass rate. If one makes the Grade 1 calculation for 2017, the pass rate was 39%, while the Grade 10 calculation yields a pass rate of 37%. Gustafsson has criticised this approach, pointing out that it fails to take cognisance of factors such as grade repetition, supplementary examination performance and other second chance institutions (DBE, 2016a). On this basis he suggests a higher real pass rate, but by factoring in interventions that are independent of government and the public education system, his approach unavoidably has the effect of exaggerating its performance. Irrespective of exactly where analysts place the real matric pass rate, all are agreed that the drop-out and failure rates are very high and that this is the cause of the very high number of youth NEETs. Like much of the rest of Africa, South Africa is currently experiencing a youth bulge, but instead of this presenting in society as a 'demographic dividend' (opportunity), it is developing into a 'demographic time bomb' (threat). Because South African youth are generally undereducated, they cannot proceed to further or HE and they do not have the skills and capabilities required by the job market. In May 2018 Statistics South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2018) reported that the country's NEETs comprised 3.3 million people aged between 15 and 24 years, out of a total national age cohort of 10.4 million people. This statistic underlines the fact that South Africa's considerable unemployment problem is best characterised as a youth unemployment crisis. Worryingly, but unsurprisingly, Stats SA earlier reported that the proportion of young black Africans (aged between 25 and 34 years of age) in skilled employment actually dropped between 1994 and 2014 (Statistics South Africa, 2014:5).

If the South African schooling system was a neutral space characterised by lack and malfunction and devoid of power relations, then its technical problems could readily be solved by technical solutions. But it is not – it is part of and derives from a context that is teeming with power relations which produce a host of effects and outcomes. The dysfunctionality thesis analyses South African schooling from the fanciful perspective of what it should do (the liberating school), rather than what it does do. I suggest that what schools actually do, militates against them doing what they supposedly should do. Furthermore, in order to understand what they do – their functional *raison d'être* – one needs to

be willing to engage with underlying structural realities. From here the paper attempts to understand precisely these issues, namely the functional productivity of schools dismissed as dysfunctional and the context from which these schools emerge and are sustained.

3. Bourdieu's France

Michel Foucault commented extensively on power. One of his key assertions in this regard was that instead of expecting the exercise of power to always suppress or oppress, one should rather understand that it generally produces and enables effects. "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1977:194). This insight is useful in arriving at an understanding of why the educational system in South Africa is reproduced relentlessly, year-in and year-out. To smooth the way for my elaboration of the South African education system, I first present Bourdieu's broad Foucauldian analysis of the role of education in contemporary French society. His starting point is that the structure of social space is the product of economic capital and cultural capital. He goes on to assert that the educational system "plays a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social space" (Bourdieu, 2008:33). More specifically, the system functions to conserve and legitimise inequalities. It performs this role very effectively because it is technically accessible to all and treats everyone equally (2008:36).

The formal equality that the education system practices amounts to a promotion of the values and culture of 'the most favoured'. Because children of the rich are imbued with these values and culture from birth, they thrive in the system, while children of the poor flounder. For this reason Bourdieu claims that "the formal equity that governs the entire educational system is actually unjust, and, in any society that proclaims democratic ideals, it protects privileges all the better than would be their open and obvious transmission" (2008:36). Bourdieu asserts that justice in the system would necessarily involve giving "the disinherited the real means for acquiring what others have inherited" (2008:36).

According to Bourdieu, the "ideology of 'gifts' is ... the cornerstone of the whole system" because it enables competences that have been acquired socially to be regarded as personal aptitudes, and on the other end of the spectrum it excuses teachers from giving the disfavoured the means of acquiring

these competences (2008:37). In this way, the school “transforms inequalities of fact into inequalities of merit” (2008:38).

The operation of the schooling system gives rise to considerable ‘mystification’. That is, it persuades those who it excludes that their social destiny is due to their own lack (of gifts), and thereby prevents them from understanding the structural mechanisms at play. The exceptional success of a handful of individuals who escape this destiny (who Bourdieu calls “the miraculously saved”) both feeds into the ideology of gifts and accredits “the myth of the liberating school” (2008:38). The system similarly allows the privileged to perceive their success as a product of their own capability and application rather than as a predetermined outcome. In summary, the “educational system thus contributes to legitimising economic and social inequalities by giving a social order based on the transmission of economic and – still more so – cultural capital the appearance of an order based on merit and individual gifts” (2008:38).

In contemporary society, jobs and positions are increasingly tied to qualifications. As outlined above, educational qualifications are the preserve of the elite classes. Thus the educational system “makes a very major contribution to the rigidity of social structure” (2008:39). Finally, Bourdieu is critical of those who assess the educational system in relation to an aspired equalising function rather than in relation to what it actually does. These opinions have the effect of entrenching the myth that the system does offer equal opportunities to all, and in this way “they are complicit with the system that they denounce” (2008:34).

4. Brief characterisation of the post-1994 South African state

In order to put the building blocks in place to construct a Bourdieuan/Foucauldian argument about the productive functionality of the South African schooling system, it is necessary to briefly characterise the post-1994 state. Much has been written about the nature of the transition from apartheid to formal democracy. I concur with the likes of Mamdani (1996) and Southall (2016) who regard 1994 as only a partial break from the apartheid past. The reason for this was what I have described elsewhere as “elite co-option” of the ANC by global and national political and economic elites (Westaway, 2009:61). The much-heralded Constitution adopted and enacted in 1996 reflects the limited nature of the transition; specifically, it left the structure and ownership of the South African economy intact.

Southall's specific formulation in this regard contrasts state and corporate power. While the ANC government was able to take control of the former, the

latter has remained in hands of white elite groupings. Consequently, the ANC's focus over the past two decades has been to reconfigure the state. Amongst other things, this has involved a massive change in the racial composition of government and the public service. Moreover, successive ANC governments have developed various strategies to exercise power, two of the most important of which are welfare and patronage. For the purpose of this paper, welfare refers to the government's attempts to mitigate poverty and sustain the lives of those without the material means to fend for themselves. Because of the exclusionary and exploitative core of apartheid, there were many million black South Africans in this situation in 1994. In terms of *realpolitik*, one should also recognise that these people constitute a sizeable proportion of the considerable mass of the ANC's voting bloc. Over the past twenty years, three basic forms of government grant were initially designed and then dispensed to greater and greater numbers of recipients. These are the state pension, the child-support grant and the disability grant. In addition, there are numerous other forms of state welfare that have been introduced over this period, including the provision of housing (so-called RDP housing) and low-paying menial jobs (through the Expanded Public Works and Community Works Programmes). All told, there are around thirty million South Africans (half of the population) who benefit from state welfare of one description or another.

Welfare has essentially been a mitigation strategy, a technique of power designed to avoid calamity and death; by contrast, patronage is more ambitious and transformative in its purpose. It seeks to empower and enrich; over the past twenty years it has been the key mechanism used to expand and build a black middle class. Key mechanisms through which patronage has been dispensed have been cadre deployment, employment equity (affirmative action) and black economic empowerment. Cadre deployment refers to the practice of installing people with political credentials into professional positions. Employment equity is legislated government policy that requires employers to implement affirmative action in order to build a representative workforce, specifically in relation to race and gender. Black economic empowerment is also legislated; it is prescriptive in relation to the ownership and management levels of companies and to company practices such as procurement. Cadre deployment can only happen in those institutions that are themselves controlled by 'cadres'; invariably therefore this mechanism has been used in state institutions. Employment equity and black economic empowerment cover all significant institutions, in both the public and private sectors.

If one tracks the brief history of patronage in post-1994 South Africa, focusing on the two most long-lived presidencies, those of Mbeki and Zuma, one notices a clear shift of emphasis from the private to public sector. Mbeki came into the presidency focused on building a black middle class through deracialising the private sector. This is not to say that there were not significant changes brought about in the public sector during his presidency, but rather that he held that sustainable economic development had to be driven by the private sector. This, ultimately, is why he pushed through the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Plan (Gear) – an attempt to make South Africa a destination of choice for both foreign and local direct investment and to drive through a deracialisation of South African capitalism.

Zuma's presidency was significantly different from Mbeki's. He had little interest in engaging constructively with the established and entrenched corporate sector. Rather, he focused almost exclusively on the state and public sector. In the process, patronage degenerated into crony capitalism and corruption. The Gupta businesses are most notoriously linked to the former and the building of the Nkandla compound with the latter. During Zuma's ten years in office, economic growth slowed considerably and unemployment grew. His only counter to this was to increase the size of the public service and improve its conditions of employment. All the while, as the country's economic woes worsened, he had to manoeuvre to keep his grip on power. He did this by marginalising his allies-turned-foes, including Julius Malema (who later formed the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters or EFF), Zwelinzima Vavi (former General Secretary of COSATU) and Blade Nzimande (leader of the South African Communist Party). One of the consequences of these changes was that COSATU increasingly became a congress of public sector unions; the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), with a membership of around 250 000 people, is now one of the most powerful affiliates of COSATU. As patronage increasingly emerged as the more important mechanism to consolidate his power, the state's ability to sustain the welfare system declined. This had repercussions throughout the South African society, not only for the millions of grant beneficiaries whose livelihoods were threatened in the first quarter of 2017.

5. A characterisation of the functionality of so-called 'dysfunctional' schools

Having established the inability of the dysfunctionality argument to explain the persistence of the schooling system in South Africa, together with my summary of the inertia in the French education system and characterisation of the

post-1994 South African state, I am now in a position to suggest an alternative to the dysfunctionality argument. For purposes of contrast, we can posit this as a 'functional' explanation of the persistence of South Africa's schooling crisis. The argument that follows pertains specifically to those schools that are characterised by educationists and the media alike as 'dysfunctional'.

The argument is built by explicitly considering these schools through the lenses of patronage and welfare. First, we look through the patronage lens. South African children lack academic skills and competencies because they are not taught effectively and they are not taught enough. Yet, the teachers who teach badly and who seldom teach are not held accountable by either school authorities or education bureaucrats. While this situation seems incorrigible and incredible if one assumes the liberating school, it becomes much more logical when one recognises cadre deployment as a pervasive mechanism of patronage that cuts across the institutional landscape of South Africa. In the no-fee schooling context, patronage is tightly controlled and dispensed by SADTU. The extent of this reality was laid bare in a 2015 government report authored by a Ministerial Task Team under the chairpersonship of John Volmink (currently the Chairperson of UMALUSI). The release of the report, now generally referred to as the 'Jobs for Cash' report, had been delayed for a protracted period because of its explosive content and findings. The report finds that "[t]he Department of Basic Education has retained semblances of managerial and administrative control in three of South Africa's nine Provinces ... In all other Provinces, SADTU is in de facto control" (DBE, 2016b:119). As a result of its power and control in the education system, SADTU has what the Task Team calls 'undue influence' throughout, "in offices, in schools, Unions and everywhere else" (DBE, 2016b: 122). Unsurprisingly, this has led to certain instances of what can be regarded as extreme abuse, such the selling of posts. But more generically and endemically, cadre deployment has "weakened the education system because people without the requisite skills, abilities and commitment now serve in key areas" (DBE, 2016b:124). Put another way, many district officials, principals and teachers do not have the capacities required of them to be effective in their respective roles.

The combination of the rising political power of SADTU and rampant invoking of cadre deployment had positive financial and material consequences for teachers over the past decade. In 2008, their conditions of employment were significantly improved (Paton, 10 March 2014). To boot, their job security has increased apace, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to fire a SADTU member, whether for absence from work, non-performance or sexual harassment of children. Hence, Jansen is quite correct to refer to the teaching profession as

"the biggest job protection racket in South Africa" (Jansen, 2014, not page numbered). And so we reach a first insight into what South African schools are – they are sites that enable the dispensing of state patronage by the membership of SADTU, to the membership of SADTU. Ndebele points out that it is little wonder that SADTU's determination to "maintain a political hegemony now emptied of visionary substance" inevitably involves or requires the subordination of professionalism (Ndebele, 2015, not page numbered).

Viewing no-fee public schools through the lens of welfare is equally insightful. How, if at all, does the South African state manage the welfare of its young citizens in these institutions? If one thinks of welfare in strict educational terms, then the above summary about the very poor learner outcomes would lead one, inexorably, to a conclusion that the state does not look after the welfare of its young people. In fact, during Zuma's presidency, the schooling system was stripped further of educational character. Amongst other things, the past ten years have seen the introduction of progression and modularisation policies. Together, these policies regulate the passage of 'learners' through the schooling system, such that their retention does not impact negatively on the matric results. Progression prescribes that learners are not permitted to repeat a grade more than once per phase (e.g. Foundation Phase, Further Education and Training Phase, etc.). In the event that a learner fails a second time in a band, then he/she is progressed to the next grade regardless. If this policy was implemented in isolation, then it could very well have resulted in a low matric pass rate because there would invariably have been large numbers and a large percentage of very weak students writing the final examinations. Hence the Department of Basic Education introduced modularisation for learners who have been progressed into Grade 12. Unless these learners pass their June and September Grade 12 examinations, they are not permitted to write their full set of examinations across all seven subjects. Instead, they can only write four subject examinations and have to delay writing examinations in the other subjects until the following year at the earliest. Government officials spuriously maintain that this approach gives weak learners a better chance at obtaining a National Senior Certificate. These claims are not backed up by compelling evidence. A more likely explanation for the introduction of modularisation is that it enables government to claim a relatively high pass rate, which underpins the legitimacy of the entire schooling system in public opinion.

While the educational substance of the schooling system was further hollowed out during Zuma's presidency, that system increasingly plays a key welfare role in relation to the material survival of millions of poverty-stricken South

African children. A useful starting point in understanding the system's material functionality is the ANC's 'Good Story' election message crafted for purposes of the 2014 general election. Some of the main assertions made by the ANC about its achievements in education over the past twenty years were as follows:

- It has improved access to schooling, to the extent that there is now almost 100% access at Grade 1 level.
- It has introduced and rolled out no-fee schooling, such that many parents do not have to pay for the basic education of their children.
- It has introduced and rolled out feeding schemes at no-fee schools. All children at these schools receive one free meal a day.

South African schools deemed to be dysfunctional, are best understood as day-time repositories or storehouses for working class black children. The fact that the massification of black education that began under apartheid (during the era of 'Bantu' education) has now been completed – resulting in universal access to schooling – means that all working class children can be accommodated in these repositories. Furthermore, they are by no means empty repositories; on the contrary, they are places where services are delivered and goods are dispensed. First, employees called 'teachers' offer child care or child-minding services. Levels of oversight are low and the actual amount of care that the professionals show for the children is negligible. Nevertheless, the children are kept behind lock and key (schools are generally fenced and gates are locked during school hours) and they are supervised by adults. The supervision responsibility shifts, according to a timetable, from employee to employee. Children move from room to room between allocated time slots called 'periods'. The significance of this day care service for the children's parents should not be underestimated because they are very busy trying to make household ends meet. They spend their entire day in a menial job or explore other ways of trying to put a plate of food on the family table each night. So, for the state to take their children off their hands for almost the entire day, in a relatively safe environment, is undoubtedly beneficial and valuable for them. And, lest we forget, with the significant recent expansion in the number of no-fee schools, this is (in most cases) a free service. Second, the state provides children with a free meal daily. Because money is scarce in many black working class families, the importance of this welfare benefit of schooling should not be down-played. The ANC government is doing what many fathers and mothers would not easily otherwise be able to do for their sons and daughters – they feed the children. (By way of contrast, it should be noted that the welfare processes outlined above do not

pertain to former Model C schools: there, the middle class parents are required to pay fees and feed their children.) In summary, the so-called dysfunctional schools actually function very effectively as sites both where ANC state patronage is dispensed (to teachers) and where welfare is doled out en masse to working class black learners and their parents.

6. Thoughts about resisting hegemonic functionality

The epistemic approach to the South African public schooling system outlined above provides certain guidance in relation to fashioning and implementing interventions with transformative potential. In setting out the role of the intellectual, Foucault called for attention to the fissures and fault lines in the power configurations that make up the battlefield that is contemporary society (in our case, contemporary education in South Africa):

What's effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves ... In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield – that is the intellectual's role. (Foucault, 1980:62)

Broadly speaking, I would suggest that the beneficiaries of patronage (SADTU teachers and bureaucrats) exercise the most uncomplicated (least fraught) and banal domination within the prevailing education set-up, and therefore there is little disruption that can be effected through working with them. Further, it is clear that the ANC is too beholden to SADTU support for it to provide progressive leadership in the public education sector. That would be tantamount to the ANC shooting itself in the foot. And so the submission of policy proposals, participating in parliamentary hearings and the like, are unlikely to yield positive outcomes as stand-alone advocacy interventions. By contrast, parents and learners may be beneficiaries of educational welfare, but they simultaneously bear the brunt of a system that functions to fabricate them as loyal servants and dependent subjects. There is therefore scope to work deliberately and strategically with these groupings to be more effective in their exercise of resistance than is currently the case. But the key point is this: a necessary pre-condition for any improvement in the educational outcomes achieved in the 'dysfunctional' schools is a change in the prevailing power configurations that underpin and structure the schooling system.

In my experience of the development sector in South Africa, a nuanced and strategic blend of service delivery and advocacy work can be very effective in bringing about fundamental and far-reaching change. For example, in the land sector, the Border Rural Committee (which I managed from 1997 until 2009) advocated successfully for the settlement of the restitution claim of the Cata community in the former Ciskei. This breakthrough was then used both to advocate for the inclusion of all 'betterment' cases within the restitution process and to enable the implementation of an ambitious integrated local economic development in Cata itself. Therefore, when I was given responsibility to manage GADRA Education in late 2011, I set about trying to blend a suitable mix between service delivery and advocacy in the public education sector in Makhanda. I have written elsewhere about this approach; suffice it to say here that GADRA enjoyed more success with service provision than with advocacy over the period 2012 – 2015. For example, those learners whose applications to the GADRA Matric School (GMS) were accepted benefitted considerably, whereas there was no marked improvement in local no-fee schools over this period. The significance of the former should not be underestimated; whereas only approximately 10 GMS students per year gained access to Rhodes prior to 2012, by 2016 this number had increased fivefold to approximately 50 students. GMS is now the university's largest feeder school. But, in the bigger scheme of things, the size of a grade cohort in no-fee schools in Makhanda is 1 200 children.

Some of the specific reasons for the limited advocacy success were:

- None of the interventions disrupted the prevailing power configuration in the local schooling system, with SADTU remaining firmly in control.
- The interventions were unable to mobilise a critical mass of support amongst the constituencies with the most to gain from transformation, namely learners, parents and principals.
- The interventions failed to secure 'critical linkages' across the sector. That is to say, GADRA Education operated in relative isolation and did not therefore attempt to synchronise its work with the likes of Rhodes University and other education NGOs operating in the city.

While it is relatively easy to identify these issues as crucial in advocacy work, the question remains: how does one actualise a genuine alternative reality within the public schooling system itself? Is it at all possible to do this without provoking those beneficiaries of patronage who dominate the system into rear-guard action? I cannot answer these questions definitively. But there are certainly

useful indications in critical theory about how to think through these questions. For example, Gramsci argues that societal status quo is maintained through a combination of force and consent (Strinati, 1995). Whereas the former is exercised in political society, the latter is forged through hegemony in civil society. One of the key institutions of civil society is the public education system. Above I have attempted to describe how the public education system in South Africa is integral to the exercise of two significant forms of power, namely patronage and welfare. Gramsci does not stop with a description of the maintenance of state power; he also explores strategies of resistance. Specifically, he contrasts resistance against force (a war of manoeuvre) with resistance against hegemony/consent (a war of position). The latter entails a consistent and persistent building of counter-hegemonic institutions, agencies and ideas within society. Below I consider the post-2015 attempts by a collective of Makhanda institutions to revitalise local public schools and assess the extent to which these attempts amount to an effective war of position.

7. Case study: The VC's initiative to revive public schooling in Makhanda

The installation of Sizwe Mabizela as Rhodes University's 6th Vice-Chancellor provided a new opportunity to test possibilities in the realm of civil society in Makhanda. In his inauguration speech in February 2015, he undertook to re-position the university, such that it would become more relevant and effective in operating in its geographic locality, namely Makhanda. Specifically, he highlighted three sectors in which the university would enhance its local impact, one of which was public education in general and schooling in particular. This gave rise to what is now referred to as 'The VC's Initiative to Revitalise Public Schooling in Makhanda'.

In the immediate aftermath of Mabizela's inauguration speech, there was considerable discussion within GADRA Education about how the organisation should position itself in relation to Rhodes. My personal view at the time was that the speech opened a window of opportunity for GADRA to address some of the weaknesses and limitations of its advocacy work, as outlined above. Specifically, I was enthused by the possibilities associated with the university's considerable institutional muscle as well as the 'massification' potential that resided within the student body. Much of the discussion was held with Ms Margie Keeton, and focused on a discussion document that she was drafting at the time to inform the thinking and decisions of a committee that had been assembled by Mabizela. A short document was distributed to committee members on 22 March 2015. It

comprised four sub-sections, namely 'Common points of departure', 'Theory of change', 'Model' and 'Making it all happen'. Essentially, the document presented an inclusive and pragmatic framework within which a wide range of initiatives and interventions could be accommodated. Three key ideas were that students should be placed at the centre of the initiative, that it should focus resources on facilitating the emergence of schooling sites of educational excellence and that the building of a supportive environment was a critical success factor. The last-mentioned came to be re-framed over the following months as the building of communities of good practice across the public schooling sector in Makhanda. Mabizela's committee adopted the document, and in April 2015 GADRA Education agreed to a request from the university that it would manage the implementation of 'the VC's Initiative'.

It is informative and interesting to view the above framework through a Gramscian lens. This exercise yields a dual military strategy in this war of position: to take control of sites of strategic significance and to win over the hearts and minds of the civilian population. A few words on the logic and rationale of each of these elements are necessary. First, there are numerous benefits to establishing sites of educational excellence in the no-fee sector. These include the fact that one secures significant bases of control in the heart of 'enemy territory', from which one can build new supporters amongst both the learner and parent communities. The potential support emerges from improved learner outcomes and the long-term benefits thereof. This points to another major benefit: since one writes a new narrative, one in which black children thrive and excel academically, there can be significant propaganda advantages in the broader civilian population. It potentially becomes possible for this population to engage critically with the hegemonic narrative that black educational failure is inevitable and that blame in this regard can be ascribed to the learners themselves rather than the schooling system. At the level of the school microcosm itself, institutional transformation involves a changed configuration of power relations. The school governing body exercises effective oversight, the school principal and management committee ensure the delivery of effective education and teachers are required to teach (both enough and to a reasonable standard). In essence, the local transformation trumps national and provincial realities and constraints. These schools are restored as places of teaching and learning; the educational welfare of the learners is prioritised. Second, if a war of position were to be waged solely in select sites, it could easily be contained, countered and ultimately quashed. By contrast, if one's military strategy is widely dispersed and disseminated across society, then it is more difficult to rebut. In the case of the

VC's Initiative, it is recognised that there are communities of learners, parents, principals and teachers that exist over and above the level of individual schools, at the broader level of the city of Makhanda. It is also a foregone conclusion that there are good learners, parents, principals and teachers across the schooling system, not only at sites deemed to be emergent sites of schooling excellence. In order to transform a local schooling system, it is necessary to strengthen the communities of educational practice that inhabit that system, especially those capable of enhancing accountability, and thereby change power relations.

Having outlined an epistemic approach to South African schooling (which can be regarded as an application of the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu) and presented the VC's Initiative through a Gramscian lens, I conclude the paper by reflecting critically on the implementation of the latter over the past few years. (I should disclose that I carry professional management responsibility for the initiative and thus a critical stance is imperative, however difficult it may be to achieve and sustain.) Understandably, one of Mabizela's primary concerns is that the university should be accessible to as many deserving disadvantaged local students as possible. Thus, the focus in 2016, the first year of implementation, was on high school. From 2017 primary schools enjoyed more attention and by 2018 the initiative was beginning to strategise about how to promote early childhood education (ECE). The discussion will be presented in this (chronological but apparently top-down) order.

In 2015 Ntsika and Mary Water High Schools were selected as the emergent sites of excellence. (Nombulelo High School was added as a third site at the end of the following year.) From the onset, the flagship intervention at high school level was a Grade 12 (matric) mentoring programme called 'nine-tenths' or 9/10ths. This programme sees approximately 170 Grade 12 learners from the participating schools being mentored in a structured fashion regularly through the year by trained Rhodes volunteers. The main topics covered are personal planning, study and summarising skills and tertiary applications. Programme impact is measured largely in terms of bachelor pass rates and throughput to university. Performance in relation to both these indicators has been impressive (when gauged in relation to the historic track record of the no-fee sector). It should also be noted that there is compelling evidence that Ntsika is emerging as a school of genuine excellence. If one looks at Grade 12 performance, all the important indicators at the school (number of learners, pass rates, quality of passes, bachelor passes and throughput to university) have been moving in the right direction since 2015.

At the urging of Mabizela himself, in 2017 the GMS introduced a bridging programme for select students who had already secured bachelor passes. Specifically, 10 GMS students were registered for Psychology 1 as Occasional Students, while simultaneously upgrading their results in two school subjects. Eight of the 10 passed their final examinations and all 10 are registered as full-time Rhodes students this year. On the back of the success of the pilot, the bridging programme has been institutionalised and upscaled. It is clear therefore that the VC's Initiative has made Rhodes University more accessible to deserving disadvantaged matric candidates.

The VC's Initiative has encompassed interventions in all high school grades. In July 2016 the management team analysed the Grade 8 mid-year results at Ntsika and Mary Waters, a process undertaken as part of monitoring the impact of an English-support project called *linthetho zoBomi* ('existential conversations'). The analysis revealed shockingly high failure rates in Mathematics and English (especially at one of the schools) and this drew attention to the realities that educational foundations are built during one's primary school years, and that, if these are lacking, there is little remediation that can be done at high school level. There have been two consequences of these realisations. First, the high school interventions have increasingly been conceptualised as an attempt to maximise top-end learner performance. To elaborate, at Grade 12 level, more attention is given to bachelor passes and throughput to university than to basic pass rates. Second, since mid-2016, the management team of the initiative has given considerably more attention to primary school education (than in the initial period).

Various institutions, inside and outside Rhodes University, had been engaged in primary school interventions prior to the VC's Initiative. Most significantly, from 2015 a Primary School Consortium (comprising GADRA Education, Rhodes University, the Lebone Centre, amongst others) was constituted in response to a resourcing opportunity provided by the Vestas Empowerment Trust. The key advance made through this arrangement was that critical linkages were made across and between the city's most significant non-state primary education institutions. The consortium took responsibility both to sustain existing programmes (such as accredited teacher professional development or TPD) and to launch innovative new ventures. In relation to the latter, arguably the most important innovation was the re-imagination and reconfiguration of after-care facilities as education sites. The consortium comprised both in-school and out-of-school projects, but there was a growing cynicism amongst partners about the prospects of the former, unless strategically targeted and carefully

implemented. An institutional reality in after-cares is that they are not subject to SADTU control and therefore present opportunities that no-fee schools do not. Given the foundational importance of literacy and numeracy, the Vestas Consortium resolved to set up and sustain effective reading and maths clubs in six selected after-care facilities. The administrative and management competence underpinning these sites varies considerably, but in theory they have the potential to emerge and function as counter-hegemonic educational institutions.

GADRA's primary school programme was birthed in the late 2000s as a mechanism to enable no-fee public schools to improve. Since then it has been through various renditions, but never departed from this fundamental objective. Despite the organisation's best efforts, there has been no evidence of improvement in the Makhanda's no-fee primary schools. On the contrary, the poor quality of their foundation phase teaching means that most children entering the Intermediate Phase are not literate. Similarly, their Intermediate Phase offerings are chaotic and unsystematic, to the extent that the vast majority of children entering high school are unprepared for the complexity and volume of the Senior Phase. In 2016 GADRA and the Development and Care Centre responded to this stubborn crisis by setting up a literacy remediation and enrichment school, called Whistle Stop School (WSS). It was piloted at St Mary's School in 2017. Initially it was carried out with Grade 3 and 6 learners, but the latter proved impractical. From July, therefore, WSS worked with Grade 4 learners in the Intermediate Phase. The pilot involved thorough testing. The remediation intervention at Grade 3 level has enabled learner participants to address literacy deficits. Many of those who were behind the age grade reading level caught up to where they should be. Others, who were closer to expected reading level, leap-frogged numerous age-grades. Three of the participants were reading at Grade 6 level by October. The duration of the Grade 4 intervention was only four months, yet it too enabled participant learners to make excellent literacy gains (three times the normal rate of literacy development for the English HL learners and double the rate for English FAL learners). Based on the success of the pilot, WSS was institutionalised in expanded form from 2018. There are many benefits that come with effective counter-hegemonic institutions, one of which is the narratives that they enable. Whereas no-fee schools fuel narratives where the central character is the lacking/inadequate black child, the WSS narrative revolves around resourceful and capable black children. Over time, it will become increasingly important to broadcast this narrative throughout Makhanda, particularly in Joza.

Right from 2015, Mabizela had spoken about the imperative need for the VC's Initiative to support ECE. However, there was limited institutional capacity to address this need. It was only from mid-2017 that the management team gave practical attention to ECE. Modest research pointed to inadequate access to ECE sites and Grade R, and to generally poor quality ECE and Grade R offerings respectively, meaning that most of the 1 000 children entering no-fee Grade 1 classrooms are not school ready. In 2018, a team from the Rhodes Education Faculty formulated plans that are informed by the two central Initiative strategies of facilitating the emergence of sites of educational excellence and building communities of good practice. Fundraising to enable implementation has commenced.

It is too early to offer a definitive appraisal of the VC's Initiative as a strategy in the war of position for public education in Makhanda. There is clear evidence that certain project components, especially 9/10ths mentoring and the two bridging opportunities, have assisted local disadvantaged students to access Rhodes University. There are more students from Joza and other Makhanda townships now registered at Rhodes than ever before. This certainly amounts to important progress for Rhodes in its bid to integrate itself more thoroughly into the local community. However, the initiative cannot yet claim to have brought about systemic change in no-fee public schooling. The closest that it comes in this regard is the stellar rise of Ntsika High School, but the situation at primary school level is uniformly depressing and demoralising.

The three most important lessons that have been learned over the past few years are: 1) different educational opportunities and constraints present themselves at different stages of the schooling trajectory; 2) institutional credibility is a prerequisite for sustaining an intervention into the public schooling system; and 3) the stronger the key interpersonal relationships, the more durable the interventions are likely to be. To elaborate, firstly it is clear that as children get older it becomes increasingly difficult to remediate fundamental educational problems such as literacy and numeracy. Arguably, a reason that 9/10ths mentoring has enjoyed such success is that it deliberately aims to work with the strongest matriculants to maximise the number and quality of bachelor passes from the participating schools. (By contrast, it does not attempt to assist progressed learners to avoid modularisation, knowing that such a mission is futile.) At primary school level, there is a much stronger emphasis on building children's literacy and numeracy skills. Secondly, Rhodes University and GADRA Education have considerable institutional credibility amongst the Makhanda population in general and in its education community in particular. This has given

principals (together with their strategic management teams and governing bodies) the confidence to give a variety of initiative interventions access to their respective schools. Thirdly, very strong relationships amongst the leadership team of the VC's Initiative and between these people and school authorities underpin these progressive decisions (pertaining to access). Indeed, the strength of the relationships that have been built in the public education sector bodes well for the future of the initiative. Building relationships and networks are crucial in order to establish a firm foothold in civil society, which in turn is fundamental to winning any war of position.

8. Conclusion

While no-fee South African schools perform very poorly as educational institutions, they function very effectively as institutional sites at which the ANC state dispenses patronage to hundreds of thousands of SADTU cadres and social and material welfare to approximately twelve million black working class children. This functionality is fundamental to the reproduction of South Africa in general and of many of its distinctive characteristics in particular, including the political dominance of the ANC and the pervasive racial and class inequalities that cut so deeply through society. As a result, the educational status quo is so entrenched that it is seemingly immovable. There is no doubt that it is extremely difficult to penetrate this institutional space, let alone alter it. In this context, a Gramscian-inspired focus on making gains through engaging civil society seems to have more potential than any direct attempted manoeuvre on the state. The VC's Initiative to Revitalise Public Schooling in Makhanda demonstrates that a strategic war of position can win small-scale skirmishes, but it is already clear that big battles will only be won through persistent and relentless building of a substantial social movement in which conscientised parents will necessarily have to play a leading role.

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