WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Sharing the wealth has been an elusive dream; maybe it is time South Africans share in the poverty. The media should tell the real truth instead of systematically eroding public confidence in public education and destroying the self esteem of South African learners and teachers. Sarah Graham-Brown reported in 1991 that formally educating the poor, the most vulnerable and the marginalised has created new aspirations & demands. The poor are led to believe it offers hope of social mobility with the tension between the “ideal of education” and creating a “meritocratic society” with “limited job opportunities”. She argues that the poor are “least likely” to gain full access to an appropriate education of high quality.

Governor of the Reserve Bank Gill Marcus acknowledged a lack of education as "the greatest exclusion there can be," and called for initiatives that supported the education of the youth and said "we need many more of these initiatives so that the ugly shadow of our apartheid history is eliminated from the lives and opportunities of our children".

In the poor communities I visited the school is the centre of learning and teaching. Teachers are teaching, learners are learning and managers are managing. They give the best they have and more under the most trying of circumstances. The government are feeding learners, provide ever increasing access to preschool, learners can read, write and do mathematics; nearly all teachers have been trained in CAPS, and learners have been provided with DBE workbooks. The progressive teachers union are cooperative and adding value. The occupation of schools is the implementation of the national curriculum and the classroom at the centre of the schooling endeavour.

The school as an organisation is in its nature very similar but yet very unique. A lot of research has gone into school improvement and we know what it takes to be a good school...how to successfully become one seems to elude us. School improvement reminds me of baking a cake. We have the recipe with all in ingredients. But the oven must be prepared, ingredients differ in quantities, the sequence of adding ingredients are very specific and then you wait for your product.

Setting appropriate standards for all learners in South African schools Paul Barton asks the following questions; how should the country get started? How can it create an entity that sets standards *and* gains widespread acceptance? Since 1994 Government in collaboration with civil society role-player and stakeholders has agreed on many standards across the schooling system. Setting standards for schools is a method used to define “levels of achievement or proficiency”. Redefining standards and reaching consensus are more “easily envisioned than accomplished”. In order to set an acceptable standard the participants should also “resolve varied ideas about performance standards and determine which performance proficiencies are appropriate in core subjects at different developmental levels. Performance standards gauge the degree to which students meet content standards”. The standards setting process typically includes the following components; skills, knowledge attitudes and values (SKAV). ***Academic content standards,*** which reflect the ideas, skills, and knowledge in each discipline that are important enough for everyone to learn, ***Performance standards*** (sometimes called indicators), which define "excellence" and how good is "good enough" and ***Proficiency levels,*** which assign value to examples of student work expected at certain developmental levels.

Carol Paton in “Ten ways to fix school” made comment on a national longitudinal research study on school effectiveness “over three consecutive years, from 2007 to 2009, while in Grades 3-5”. The objective of the study was to learn, in great detail, what takes place — or doesn’t — in the classroom and what shape a child’s ability to perform”. Issues listed for fixing schools are; literacy, numeracy, poverty, home environment, school management, written work, language, writing, the curriculum and lack of teacher knowledge. Paton’s article highlighted the classroom which is the centre of learning and teaching.

So what needs to be done because we need to do more?

(1) Pastoral duty is not acknowledged in the input-output model yet in poor schools it takes up to 35% of learning and teaching time and impacts on the performance of learners and teachers. This should be systemically recognised.

(2) Teachers and managers should master the art of school-based research. Collecting and analysing school data into information and knowledge is critical for learner performance and organisational development.

(3) Instructional leadership should be the focus. School managers should spent most of their time (75%) to directly monitor the implementation of the school curriculum; planning, teaching, learning, reading and learner work. School monitoring and evaluation systems should be strengthened.

(4) School language of learning and teaching (LOLT) policy should be reviewed with required sensitivity and due consideration for best practise and practicality.

(5) At a systemic level control and accountability should be strengthened at District level and curriculum support should be further enhanced.

Although we are preoccupied with improving access and quality in the present education is about the future. Preparing for the future according to Grulke & Silber the duty of government should be to “learn to inspire rather than control”, not to do “anything that can be done better by someone else” and “get more efficient and smaller and make people smarter”. [Published in The New Age]