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WITH COMPLIMENTS

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
AND THE JOINT EDUCATION TRUST
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The Present Crisis

Political perspectives on the current crisis in the education and training system are well known. In fact, the arguments are rehearsed so often that, not only can we recite them in our sleep, but there is the danger that they will lose their edge through sheer over use.

I don't want to deny that the roots of the educational impasse are fundamentally political, nor do I want to shift the search for solutions out of the political domain. But I do want to attempt a slightly different perspective on the problem in the hope of finding fresh insights for the way forward. I want to look at the problem in terms of a crisis of resources.

It seems to me that four kinds of resources are needed for any successful educational endeavour. These are : human expertise, the financial means, knowledge of various kinds, and finally, time. I want to look briefly at each of these in turn.

Human expertise

This is by far the most important resource needed for any social enterprise. Dedication and ingenuity can do much to overcome shortages of other type of resources. But education, in turn, is one of society's chief means of nurturing and directing the moral inclinations and

technical skills of its citizens. Ideally, there is a reciprocal relationship between education

and training, on the one hand, and the skills base, on the other.

In the South African situation, where this relationship is operating at minimal levels of efficiency, the key questions are:

- which skills do we prioritise in order to orient our society towards the future?
- what structures are best for sparking the synergy between education and skills?

Financial means

. Money on its own can be the crudest of blunt instruments, capable of effecting more harm than good, or of simply disappearing into the indifferent sands of misdirection and folly.

This point is amply illustrated when one looks at the growth in educational expenditure in

South Africa since 1976. While spending has remained above the rate of population increase

for the past 15 years, the growth in quality has been negligible. While new schools have mushroomed, their doors and roofs have been carried off to build squatter settlements, rather

than nurturing the production of engineers for thinking about issues of affordable housing and

orderly urbanisation. This is a telling metaphor for the inefficiency and illegitimacy of our

education and training system.

The first question in relation to financial resources for education is not how to increase the

pool, but how to spend what we already have more effectively.

Knowledge

The questions I have posed so far in relation to both human and financial resources revolve

crucially around questions of knowledge. On what basis do we decide how and which skills to prioritise, and where to spend our money? There is a double problem in answering these kinds of questions. First, the answers are extremely complex and difficult. And, second, the search for answers is distracted by the red herrings of easy generalisations masquerading

as obvious truth.

For example, export-led growth and competitiveness on international markets is widely being

heralded as the solution to South Africa's economic woes. While this may be true, an equal

priority should be attention to the basic needs of the dispossessed, not only for moral reasons, but also because without these, the anger and desperation of the underclasses may

destroy whatever basis we may have for staging any kind of economic recovery.

Another widely touted slogan is the need for more science and technology. But what does this mean? More of the kind of science that is badly taught with the best of intentions in our township schools, or that is effectively taught for perhaps the worst reasons - success in the matric exam - in our suburban schools? More specifically : what is the relationship between

science, technology and economic growth? And what are the curricular implications of this relationship? In getting to grips with these kinds of questions it is necessary to distinguish

between three categories of knowledge.

First there is knowledge about the development context for education and training. In defining a vision of development for South Africa we need to know more about alternative paths, the characteristics of each, their respective implications for education and training, and

above all, the contextual features which might predict success in inclining towards one of

these scenarios. It is one thing to glibly advocate adoption of the Taiwanese model in South

Africa. But in Taiwan economic liberalisation over the last 40 years has been carefully controlled by an authoritarian government. Is this appropriate for South Africa? Is it possible?

A second kind of knowledge needed to guide practice involves gathering information on and analysis of different models of education and training. We need to characterise more specifically what exists, what works, and how successful models may be replicated.

And finally, and closely related to both categories described above, are guidelines for policy.

Policy may be described as knowledge in action. It needs to be located within a vision of national development, and it should take account of political considerations, theoretical possibilities, economic opportunities, bureaucratic constraints and the realities of existing

systems and capacities.

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Time : the resource that can't be hurried

The passage of time is such an obvious element in any educational project that it often tends

to be overlooked. There is a Murphy's Law of Time that goes something like this:

Disasters always happen more quickly than we fear.

Dreams, particularly educational ones, always take longer to fulfill than planned.

In short, if things are going to go wrong they catch you unawares, and if they go right, they

take a generation to achieve. The lesson from this seems to be that, while all projects must

be placed within a long-term development goal, the best way to attain this is to set achievable, concrete targets in the short term.

A Way Forward for Corporate Sector Initiatives

I hope that my focus on resources serves to concretise the problems we face in education, and

to point to directions forward. At the same time, stepping back and surveying the terrain in

this way also has the effect of rendering the task so complex and large as to be insurmountable. It was all so much easier when we could blame apartheid for our problems, and hope that a solution would automatically follow the institution of a legitimate government.

But it is becoming increasingly clear that the only resource that may increase at that time is

perhaps a slight improvement in the supply of money, courtesy of international aid agencies

such as the World Bank and, as I have argued above, finding more money is not our principal

problem. The challenge for the future is the optimal utilisation of all our resources. In the

past, this is a particular problem in relation to international aid, if we want to have anything to

show for it in the long term, apart from an increased debt burden.

Let me turn from the abstract now towards our experiences in the Joint Education Trust (JET)

in getting to grips with these issues. I want to highlight five parameters which guide our activities.

1 Keeping in view what is possible

JET was launched in 1992 with a total of R500 million in its pocket, bent on making a visible difference to the education crisis within a space of five years. R100 million a year is less than 0,5% of the annual education budget, and five years is a drop in the ocean, considering the sort of time it takes to effect educational change. Clearly, in order to maximise the impact of this very small resource we need to think carefully about ways of adding value.

2 Acting in concert

The first step in adding value is to bring different kinds of human resources to bear on planning and monitoring the spending of these funds. Towards this end, the JET Board is composed of an equal number of donor representatives, on the one hand, and members of trade unions, popular education bodies and political organisations, on the other. The corporate representatives bring to this table knowledge about the efficient deployment of resources and some feeling for the needs of the economy, while the members of the mass-based parties offer legitimacy and the concerns and aspirations of their constituents.

These skills are complemented by small panels of assessors in each of our areas of focus, who offer advice on matters of policy and the assessment and evaluation of grantees. The choice of these panellists is based on the assumption that no expert knowledge is disinterested : the panels have been constituted so as to reflect the perspectives of labour, business, the academic domain and formal education.

Furthermore, recognising that the formulation and evaluation of policy and practice are activities that grow and develop over time, we are attempting to build long-term

relationships with our panels of experts, rather than utilising their advice in an ad hoc , snapshot fashion.

Working within a development vision

From my arguments above it should be clear that any educational initiative that is not located within a scenario of economic and social development is like sailing across the Atlantic without a navigator. Yet, while the term development is on everyone's lips, no one has anything more than the barest bones of such a vision.

This is not a major problem in the short term; in fact the absence of a detailed plan may even be an advantage at this stage since the sketchy outlines that do exist find broad agreement across a range of actors who might begin to tight about details.

Furthermore, such skeletal plans converge with respect to their implications for education and training. Consequently, the identification of three policy areas in which to focus JET activities was achieved with relative ease in debate amongst Trustees.

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

There is consensus that the achievement of literacy is a prerequisite for participation in a democracy, and for further education and training. In view of the fact that at least half of the adult population of South Africa is illiterate, the provision of ABE is an urgent concern.

Improving the Quality of Teaching

There is also agreement that improving the quality of the schooling system is essential to the production of intermediate and

high level skills needed for 'both social and economic development.

Youth Development

The inefficiency of the school system, coupled with high levels of violence in schools over the last decade and more has resulted in many young people leaving school without the skills required to enter the job market in anything but a menial capacity, or to embark on further education or training programmes. The development of productive capacities amongst this growing group of young people constitutes JETS third priority.

Finding a creative tension between immediate action and the development of long term policies

While the identification of areas of priority within the broad outlines of a development plan is relatively unproblematic, the initiation of projects within these priority areas is a more difficult task. Sooner or later the growth of such projects will meet the details of the emerging development scenarios. How can we be sure that they will converge?

Allow me to illustrate the point by way of an example in the field of ABE. The woefully inadequate literacy services which do exist are provided by a handful of night schools run by the BET, a similar number of industry-based private sector projects, and scores of tiny NGOs which typically serve a few dozen adults each. Their good intentions notwithstanding, the capacity within the majority of these NGOs is such that we have decided to set up Regional Support Agencies to assist them in strengthening and expanding their services, by means of activities such as teacher

training, management development and the like. The need is too pressing to wait for the emergence of national policy on this issue, and we have no alternative but to establish these as independent NGOs. A future government may decide to establish an identical set of services under the auspices of regional departments of education. Under these circumstances, counterproductive competition between the two bodies is a possibility.

While we can't guarantee an absolute avoidance of such situations, we can commission our agencies within an understanding that they develop in concert with the emergence of national policy. No doubt this is easier said than done, but the first step is to be mindful of the problem. Furthermore, it is most probable that national policy developments will draw on the experience of projects such as JETS Regional Support Agencies.

Similarly, in the area of in-service teacher training - which is dominated by maths and science programmes - we need to locate our interventions within a hard look at effectiveness. Millions of rand and person hours are spent annually in running courses for teachers, yet there is little evidence of any change in classroom practice, let alone of improved student performance. Talk is turning to whole-school models of development, which involve all the teachers in a school, the principal and other staff, and even community initiatives, which include the parents. Hard-nosed research and evaluation must accompany such experiments, in order to optimise their lessons.

Maintaining a systemic perspective

The South African education system is one of the most fragmented in the world. My brief description above of one feature of the ABE sector illustrates the point. Diversity per se is not necessarily undesirable; in fact, a degree of diversity is the engine of innovation and creativity. But the kind of diversity which results randomly in duplication in some areas and silences in others, and which leaves a sector so

fragmented that certificates of achievement have no yardstick of comparability, and hence no currency, is clearly wasteful of precious resources.

A degree of systematisation is required to promote rationalisation and coherence within the sector, and to align the ABE sector with other components of the education system. The trick is to find systemic devices which allow for diversity of delivery, while ensuring commensurability of outcomes. Certification is an obvious mechanism for achieving this balance, and for this reason JET is supporting the IEB in its attempt at developing a system of certification for ABE.

Turning to a second example, it is common knowledge that the emphasis within the DET on upgrading the paper qualifications for teachers, as opposed to focusing on programmes which prioritise improved classroom performance, has done more harm than good to the cause of teacher development. At the same time, however, in-service training programmes must take questions of accreditation seriously if they are to be located within a holistic notion of the professional development of teachers. In this respect, we are beginning to investigate the possibility of accrediting in-service training within a modular system involving partnerships between the universities, teacher colleges, NGOs and teacher organisations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to return to the issues of that most intangible resource, time. We always seem to have enough of it. Why hurry? Besides, by the time the full developmental effects of our initiatives bear fruit, we are unlikely to be around to savour them. What incentive is there for middle-aged bureaucrats like myself to be accountable to the future?

If we think of the future not as something our children inherit from us, willy nilly, but rather

as something we borrow from them, then perhaps our goal should be to return that loan, with

as much interest as we can engineer.