

# Overview and welcome



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*Welcome to the first 2013 issue of Focus, devoted to education and organised along the themes of Overcoming and Innovation.*

This issue of *Focus* is an attempt to broaden and deepen the education debate, moving beyond our stagnant litany of educational woes. It includes personal perspectives, as well as expert opinions, because education should be understood as much through the lived experience of learners and families as through policies and theories. There is an emphasis on the Arts, an increasingly neglected weapon in our armoury against both ignorance and exclusion.

Writers in this issue offer different resources for overcoming problems in education: Family and community, Information and Communication Technology, the Arts, individual perseverance. Readers are taken elsewhere, through Africa and the Middle-East, to encounter individuals and communities Overcoming and Innovating.

## Remedies that harm

Helen Suzman, defending her opposition to sanctions, explained her fear that the remedy might cure the disease but kill the patient.<sup>1</sup>

The same may well be said for the current public discourse on education. We are so busy pointing out the failings of 'the government'<sup>2</sup> that we dishearten those participants who are making a difference, particularly teachers, but also parents and whole families. When we constantly tell parents that the education their children are receiving is worthless, can we honestly be surprised when the parents in North-West decide to keep their children out of school to achieve other political goals? When we explicitly treat teachers like factory workers, clocking them in and out<sup>3</sup>, how do we expect the smartest matriculants to choose teaching as their preferred career option?

Suzman's credo was "see for yourself". She did just that, for the whole of her political life, visiting people in jails and bleak resettlement areas far from her comfortable constituency of Houghton. This issue of *Focus* seeks to take the reader onto some important but neglected education battlefields. Mabena (p13) reminds us of the obstacles encountered by Deaf learners, and challenges us to remove the label 'deficit' when discussing solutions for this group of people. She offers an innovative use of Arts teaching, not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for bringing different groups together, and respecting different languages.

Hlasane (p16) also describes Arts education as a better way of teaching a group with many difficulties to overcome. His *Keleketla!* Library in the Old Drill Hall in central Johannesburg does not just offer a safe reading space to inner city children: It uses its own historical location to teach critical thinking skills relevant to the young people's own experience of themselves as migrants and outsiders.

Dangazele and Mokuku (p25) provide new ways of linking Shakespeare into post-apartheid South Africa. This innovation is not an end in itself, but translates back into the English distinctions that matter for getting into university and acquiring bursaries.

We will need brave citizens to bring creativity back into our classrooms and political and social worlds<sup>4</sup>. We are not alone in having narrowed our teaching down to what is conveniently monitored and measured: from words to numbers<sup>5</sup>. Much of the education reform in the USA has excised the Arts from the curriculum, whether via the intended improvements of the old No Child Left Behind policy and the newer K-12 reform, or the unintended consequences of budget cuts. A growing chorus of comment is arising to count the cost of this.<sup>6</sup>

## Overcoming

Botha (p39) and Gambu (p35) provide an insider's view of the problems experienced at school and university by learners with insufficient finance, language, support from family, community and government. Both their stories are accounts of young people leaping the hurdles they describe so vividly, and triumphing against the odds.

Botha's insider-account of the difficulties of students who have made it all the way to tertiary studies helps us appreciate the graduation success-story described in Van der Berg's article (p6).

One of the reasons the education debate goes wrong is the way we measure our progress. Sometimes we choose a yardstick representing imagined excellence, elsewhere in the world, or in our own past. Van der Berg shifts the usual time-perspective and reports on a longitudinal study of NSFAS<sup>7</sup> students. He finds that over a period of 5-9 years, the pass rate is not very different from the overall pass rate of students in the USA: less than 55% of first-time college students graduate in 6 years<sup>8</sup>. The new South African figure is even more heartening when we compare it to the pass rate of first-generation students in the USA<sup>9</sup> which is reported at 11%.<sup>10</sup>

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Taking a strict pass-in-three years measure, the overall SA university pass rate has been estimated at 22%<sup>11</sup>. Expanding the time used as a yardstick gives us a more optimistic measure, not just of what is happening at university, but of what is happening in our society. Over time, young people who have persevered to overcome many obstacles are making their way via university into levels of society where they will have influence. It is to be hoped that they will give our young democracy a different shape, drawing on their life experiences as well as their formal education.

## Innovating

Dale-Jones points out that the South African education system is "rife with dysfunction, yet filled with creative innovation" (p50). She reminds us that innovation does not have to be the creation of something new, but that the term can also be applied to the deepening and combining of what already works. Both Dale-Jones and Smit describe the potential role of principals as leaders and innovators. Smit explains how current government performance measurement policies hamper this.

Information and Communication Technology is an obvious area of innovation in education, to improve teaching, to reach into under-resourced schools, and to cut costs. O'Hagan (p55) describes some of the many innovations in this area, some globally award-winning. South Africans are early adopters. They love technology.

The good news is that even South Africans on very low incomes are managing to access the internet.<sup>12</sup>

Brewer and Harrison (p60) have applied ICT to develop an affordable private schooling system. The research on which their work is based, has produced a useful figure: R22 091 per learner as the Cost of Schooling at the lowest level. This minimum figure helps us to expand the debate into where this money comes from for each learner? What is the contribution that must be made by state, parents, donors?

Mkencele's article takes ICT to tertiary level, (p68) referring to the Virtual University of Uganda. One of the exciting things about ICT is that it puts power in the hands of the learner. The box on p74 gives the story of Joseph Mathaba, who without any intervention from anyone else, passed matric with several distinctions with the help of *wikipedia*<sup>13 14</sup>.

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O'Hagan stresses the importance of creating conversations round technology that include all stakeholders. This edition of *Focus* is a contribution to such a national conversation.

### Winning, or not?

With all of these heroes, all of this innovating and intervening, why isn't it working? Why do 24% of schools in the Eastern Cape get under a 40% matric pass rate; why do 402 quintile 1 and 2 schools get a

less than 40% matric pass rate, and only 38 quintile 5<sup>15</sup> schools?<sup>16</sup> The counter-question to this is: winning, measured against what?

In 1969 Muriel Horrell of the Institute of Race Relations<sup>17</sup> reported that 13 Africans in every 100 000 reached matric. This referred to the Bantu Education matric, substantially less demanding than the common matric written today. Horrell compared this rate with the number of 866 matriculants per 100 000 of the white<sup>18</sup> population. Black learners with this inadequate education became teachers who are still in the system today: teachers with a poor grasp of English, who nevertheless are teaching through the medium of English. Sometimes they are even teaching learners attempting English Home Language for matric.<sup>19</sup>

We cannot put a correct value on where we are if we forget either where we came from, or the educational obstacles which still remain to be overcome. Education is a battle, everywhere in the world. Educating poor people is the hardest of all, as both Botha and Gambu remind us. Perhaps we should stop now and then, and spend some time celebrating every first-generation, every first-in-family student who makes it through matric and then through university. These students are both markers and agents of transformation.

### Surprising Allies

The education battle cannot be won alone. Not by government, nor by teachers, learners, or citizens. Alliances, some to be found in unexpected places, are the name of the game.

Part of broadening the education debate is listening seriously to a wider range of voices. The importance of the inclusion of the NAPTOA article (p46) is twofold.

The article makes a very pertinent point about the ambivalence of the official stance on accountability of principals. It also raises an important voice: that of unions striving for greater professionalism of teachers. It is easy to adopt an un-nuanced view of teacher unions. “Off with their heads” is a not uncommon South African response to all union activities in education. However, teachers are the bedrock of education improvement in SA, or anywhere else for that matter. If the state can be trusted with the well-being of teachers, well and good. Unions are redundant. But what if the state cannot be so entrusted? What happens to the country, if teacher working conditions are so bad that the chances of attracting competent young people into the profession diminish year by year? Then there is a role for unions in insisting that conditions of employment must be improved.

Unions in alliance with teachers seeking to play a professional role, in alliance with government and even with parents, are a potent force for change.

Dale-Jones (p50) describes the importance of developing alliances among teachers in communities of practice. Gambu, Mkencele (p68), EL-Namrouti (p43) and Dampier (p29) look at the role of both community and family<sup>20</sup> in supporting teachers

and learners. Mkencele describes the role of volunteer teachers in assisting South Sudan’s incredibly difficult switch from Arabic to English as an official language. South Sudan, like South Africa, has to combine development with cultural diversity, although South Sudan has the daunting task of dealing with over sixty different indigenous languages.

Education is primarily about numeracy and literacy, critical thinking skills and employability. But it can never be only about these things. El Namrouti and Mkencele remind us that it is also about identity, development and re-construction. It is about “the continued effort to establish a more equal, transparent and cohesive society.” (Dampier p29).

Education is about how we live in the world. Even, or perhaps especially, a very battered world. That is why, in the very last article in this issue of *Focus*, the story of the orphans appears. In the last article in in this issue, Mkencele describes how a group of young people in South Sudan, orphaned and taken as child soldiers by Joseph Kony, have come back, and established the Self Help Orphans Association. This is a self-funded school where older orphans provide education for younger orphans.

## NOTES

- 1 Interview published in Optima May 2004.
- 2 In the South African education debate, it is sometimes not clear who or what is meant by 'the government'. Is it the Minister of Education, or a specific district official, interacting well or badly with a particular school? Is it the South African Schools Act, or a national policy, or a provincial policy, or a common practice which does not comply with policy at all?
- 3 In the Sowetan February 11, 2013, the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga was quoted as saying that “Just like in factories, teachers have to [scan their fingerprints] when they report for duty. By 10 o'clock we will know how many teachers are not at school, nationwide. At the end of the day they must scan their fingers again and sign off.”
- 4 Nanjira Sambuli, Kenyan musician, mathematician and technologist, argues that most African governments believe that development of maths and science will promote competitiveness in the global market, forgetting that skills taught through literature, design, dance, visual arts, will encourage the originality and critical thinking which grow scientific discovery. Nanjira is quoted by Sandra Pitcher (2013) Three things mobile web East Africa taught us about the state of Tech in East Africa. Accessed 28 February from memeburn.com/2013/02/3-things-mobile-web-East-Africa-taught-us-about-the-state-of-tech-in-africa/
- 5 Sullivan, G (2011) The culture of community and a failure of creativity Teachers College Record 113 (6) 1175-1195
- 6 Collins DE (2013) K-12 Education Reform and Unlearned Lessons from Magnet Schools Teachers college Record February 15 2013. Accessed 22/2/2013 from <http://tcrecord.org> ID number: 17027
- 7 NSFAS is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme of South Africa, a state funding scheme available only students from low-income families. Many families who can in fact not afford to send their children to university, earn too much to qualify for NSFAS loans.
- 8 University of Charlotte accessed 25 February from [unc49er.com/588/study-shows-less-than-55-of-college-students-graduate-in-6-years/](http://unc49er.com/588/study-shows-less-than-55-of-college-students-graduate-in-6-years/)
- 9 First-generation students are those who are first in their family to go to university; often also the first in an extended family, and/or the first in a neighbourhood. Statistics are not kept separately for first-generation students in SA, but Van der Bergh suggests that many NSFAS students are first-generation, or face the same hurdles as first-generation students.
- 10 Groux, Catherine (2012) First Generation Students strive to persevere Despite Obstacles US News: University Directory. Retrieved 25 February 2013 from [www.usnewsuniversitydirectory.com/articles/first-generation-students-strive-to-persevere-desp\\_12269.aspx#.US4y86Ury-1](http://www.usnewsuniversitydirectory.com/articles/first-generation-students-strive-to-persevere-desp_12269.aspx#.US4y86Ury-1)
- 11 Letseka, M and Maile S (2008) High University drop-out rates: a threat to South Africa's future. HSRC policy brief
- 12 deLanerolle (2012) The New Wave: who connects to the internet, how they connect and what they do when they connect. South African Network Society Project. University of the Witwatersrand. Accessed 25 Feb 2013 from <http://www.networksociety.co.za>
- 13 Learners from Sinenjongo High School in Joe Slovo Park outside Cape Town are lobbying local mobile operators for free access to Wikipedia in SA. It is easier for learners in poor communities to access cellphones than computers. In India, Wikipedia Zero, which enables free access to Wikipedia for cellphones, was rolled out in 2012. [www.news24.com/Technology/News/SA-learners-lobby-for-free-Wikipedia-20121210](http://www.news24.com/Technology/News/SA-learners-lobby-for-free-Wikipedia-20121210)
- 14 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinenjongo\\_High\\_School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinenjongo_High_School)
- 15 South African state schools are divided into 5 quintiles, according to the socio-economic status of the area around them. Quintile 1 and 2 schools pay no fees, receive higher state subsidies and free books. Quintile 4 and 5 receive lower subsidies, may levy fees, and learners must supply their own books and stationery. The system goes badly wrong when there is a mismatch between the area a school is in, and the learners attending that school. A school may receive no additional subsidy for out-of-area learners who can pay no fees.
- 16 Department of Basic Education: NSC Examination Results 2012: Technical Report
- 17 Horrell, M (1969) Bantu Education to 1968. Johannesburg. South African Institute of Race Relations.
- 18 The Star January 10, 1969
- 19 Jonathan Jansen: Pupils Aren't the Problem The Times 31 January 2013. In a personal communication, Jansen told me that very many learners who did not speak English in the home attempted English Home Language, a very difficult exam, for matric because they believed it would improve their chances of acceptance into university.
- 20 Muller (2013)

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