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The challenge of quality and relevance in South African education: a philosophical perspective

D. Coetzee
School of Education, University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein, 9300 South Africa
coetzeed@hum.uovs.ac.za

A. le Roux
School of Education, University of the Free State

Within a changing South African socio-political context, quality education and schooling mean radically different things to different people. The call for contextualising education within an African life-world, and the fear of declining quality and standards in educa- tion, necessitate a closer look at the role and meaning of quality and relevance in education. This article consequently attempts a philoso- phical perspective on quality education and the role of educational standards and relevance.

Introduction

Although the mission of the Department of Education is stated as ensuring that "all South Africans receive lifelong education and training of high quality" (Department of Education, 2000a) and this is underlined in a variety of official documents (Department of Education, 1995; Department of Education, 2000b; Republic of South Africa, 1996:5), the concept 'quality' is not specifically defined. It seems however that during the previous dispensation the term quality was associated with elitism, and relevance of education was inter- preted within a eurocentric paradigm. The implication is that western cultural values were regarded as the origin of quality and exclusive standards in terms of which education for all the peoples of South Africa was measured (Da Costa & Meerkotter, 1992:81-87; Vilakazi, 1998:70; 74-76; Makgoba, 1998:49-51; Schoeman, 1995:103; Visa- gie, 1995:78). These values were imposed on learners of all cultural backgrounds, thus leading to a situation where the relevance of education within the South African context and the eurocentric inter- pretation of quality were being seriously questioned. Against the background of the history of inequality in South African education,

those who struggled against this policy came to view quality as an attempt to maintain standards in elitist (white) institutions of edu- cation.

It seems however that discourse on the quality and relevance of education in the new dispensation is also characterised by opposing viewpoints. On the one hand critique of the Western interpretation of quality is closely linked with the idea that education in a transformed South Africa should be relevant within the African context (*cf.* Makgoba, 1998:49-50). The concern that Africa has become a "non-living possession of Western civilisation" (Vilakazi, 1999:202), through "education for underdevelopment" (Vilakazi, 1999:221), has given rise to a call for "African education as a system of knowledge, theory and practice, informed and shaped by a content and form that are definitive of African space as well as the indigenous experience of Africa's peoples in all their diversity" (Mugo, 1999:225).

In opposition to this view are those who fear the lowering of quality and academic standards when institutions of education are decolonialised from the dominant Western influence with the ob- jective of developing a true African character. The present state of quality in education does however not help to change this perception since "the relatively high spending on education contrasts sharply with our poor educational performance" (Steyn, 2000:48). It is also feared that the demand for an egalitarian society may "tip the scale in favour of the equality paradigm", which may destructively impact on the maintaining of quality and high standards in education (Steyn, 2000: 48).

The general perception that South African education is on a "slippery slope of declining standards" (Steyn, 2000:48), however

necessitates a closer look at the meaning of quality education within the South African context, as well as the relationship between quality and relevance in education. Fact is that if we are set on building a true democracy within which the school could play a fundamental role, consensus about the meaning of key concepts such as quality, standards and relevance should be reached by all concerned.

This article will consequently attempt a philosophical reflection on quality education and schooling, as well as the role of standards and relevance in the South African context. Our investigation will also address the interrelatedness of the concepts.

Preliminary remarks on quality education

Although the traditional notion of quality education in South Africa has been associated with exclusivity and elitism, official education documents repeatedly promise quality education for all. Since these documents do not explicitly define their perception of quality, one can only assume that this idea of quality is far-removed from the traditional view.

Given the history of inequality in education it is understandable that the present government couples quality education with equality and equity. This does however not seem problematic, especially when equality and equity are viewed as principles that should underlie good quality education for all the citizens of a country. When viewed in this way, quality and equality should not be mutually exclusive, and one could agree with Steyn (2000:49) that both "(q)uality and equality in education should be part of the process of transforming South African society into a true democracy ...". The fact that quality education in South Africa should be driven by a number of principles does however not bring us closer to an understanding of the nature of the concept.

Various notions of quality can be found in literature: these range from definitions of quality in terms of exceptionally high standards, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, ratings; quest for zero defect; customer satisfaction; transformation and equity issues (*cf*. Harvey & Green, 1993:1-27; Lategan, 1997: 80-81; Lemmer, 1999:184). The Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) (1997:5-6) also refers to a number of these definitions, but argues that a notion of quality should be built from the various concepts of quality which are in use in higher education — thus emphasising the flexibility of the concept.

Although *quality of schooling* poses a somewhat different picture to that of higher education, it remains a flexible term that can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. Legislation promising "*education of progressively high quality for all learners*" (Republic of South Africa, 1996:5), and the recently published National Policy on Whole School Evaluation, setting the parameters for *quality assurance in schools* (Department of Education, 2000b:1-13), do however not give an indication of the nature of high quality education or whether a school qualifies as an institution of quality when it offers quality education.

Quality and the primary task of the school

The term quality is derived from the Latin root *qualis*, which means "of what kind". Quality thus has to do with the *essential character, the inherent property of the entity that the term describes* (*cf*. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1992:1023; Cosser, 2000:1). The implication is that when referring to a *quality school*, the term *quality* would have a direct bearing on the **inherent property** or **essential character** of *the school*. It seems thus that the school can be described as possessing quality when it functions in accordance with its inherent property or essential character. What then is the inherent property or essential character of the school?

It appears that the school is an institution which, in the process of the cultural development of mankind, came into existence owing to the fact that the cultural level of humankind reached a stage of development which made it impossible for the parents to continue to undertake the education of their children. The school thus came into

being as a typical societal relationship that can be distinguished from other non-school relationships such as *inter alia* the church, the state and industry. From this follows that a school exhibits a typical "design" that enables one to identify it as a school — referring to certain properties that are common to all schools. These properties not only characterise the existence of an institution such as the school, but also provide the grounds in terms of which different relationships such as the school and the church can be distinguished from each other. It seems therefore that these characteristics in terms of which a school can be distinguished from other relationships, relate to the existence of a typical and inherent design that constitutes the existence of the school. One could therefore argue that this basic design (general principle) would not only be universally valid (for all schools), but that it would determine the specific and constant conditions that a school would have to comply with to be distinguished as a school. While this basic design sets the structural boundaries for the school as a societal relationship, it also relates to an inherent typical (structural) task or aim based upon (school) typical power (Clouser, 1991:248- 249; Wolters, 1990:82-83; Le Roux, 1999:108-109).

The school as an institution with its own "typical structure" or design thus came into being on account of the organisation by people of a specific kind of (school-typical) power. As such the power of the state is judicial by nature, while the power of industry is economic and the power of the school is logical or scientific by nature. The characteristic (or qualifying) feature of the school by which it can be identified as a school and on account of which it can be distinguished from other institutions such as the state and the church, therefore also relates to the logical function of the child. The implication is that the school is a sovereign relationship with its own typical structure and power which should be allowed to fulfill its own typical task without being engulfed by another relationship (such as the state). The primary (or general) task of the school (for which it came into existence) would thus differ from that of the state, the church or industry, which implies that the intrinsic nature of a societal relationship determines its unique task.

One could further argue that the unique task of the school relates to: *initiating into an inherited tradition of knowledge, critical acceptance and application of knowledge, or the disclosure of the logical function* of the child (Schoeman, 1980:39; Walzer, 1983:198; Puolimatka, 1995:85). Popper refers to "certain *prima facie* social functions (such as teaching...) which serve certain *prima facie* social purposes (such as the propagation of knowledge ...)" (Le Roux, 1999:110). This does however not mean that the primary (or general) task of the school can be equated to mere teaching/instruction or the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Although teaching in the school is a logically qualified activity, the inextricable link between schooling and education brings a *normative dimension* into the picture. This includes what Higgs (1998:136) refers to as "that attempt to bring influences to bear that will empower the individual person's character, abilities and capacities with a sense of personal meaning". At this stage the primary task or purpose of the school can be defined as: *initiating the child into a tradition of knowledge, as well as normative empowerment*.

Before concluding our argument on the relationship between quality education and the primary task or purpose of the school, we need to clarify the role of relevance in education.

The primary task of the school and relevance

However, development of the capacities of the child has to be directed at some external purpose, possibly relating to what John Dewey refers to as enabling "... him to control his environment and fulfil his responsibilities" (Nguru, 1995:60; *cf*. Department of Education, 2000b: 3). This line of thought is also emphasised by Fafumwa (Nguru, 1995:61) who regards education in the school as "a process for transmitting culture (democratic culture) in terms of continuity and growth and for transmitting knowledge either to ensure social control or to guarantee rational direction of the society or both". Badenhorst

(1989:413) also views the task of the school as preparing the child to fulfil his/her (cultural) mandate in life. It seems thus that education is not merely viewed as the acquisition of subject competence or skills for professional preparedness, but primarily with "a competence for life in the individual person's experience of existence in relation to other persons" (Higgs, 1997:6).

The implication here is that the learner should be empowered by the school to enable him/her to master and control reality, ultimately leading to (self)empowerment in order to "participate effectively in all the processes of democratic society, economic activity, cultural expression and community life" (Department of Education, 1995:17). From the above the following important observation can be made: the school has to fulfil its primary or structural task within a specific life-world. Meaning that the (normative) disclosure of the learner should take place within a particular context. Badenhorst (1989:416) asserts that if the school does not relate to the life-world for which the child is prepared, it would "merely become an 'ageing vat' in which the child is kept until such time as he is released into life". At this point however it seems that an understanding of a specific life-world should includes two issues: a primary focus on local context (preparing the child to master the South African reality), as well as the broader global context within which the child should be empowered to function.

This part of our argument also relates to the idea that apart from the universal structure of a school that distinguishes it from other (non-school) relationships (schools in Europe exhibit the same universal characteristics as schools elsewhere), schools also exhibit an *individuality* which refers to the *interpretation of its primary task (or general principle)* within a particular context, and thus *distinguishes one school from another school*. This means that although all schools have a universal and typical character that determines its primary or structural task (in terms of which a school can be distinguished from other relationships such as the church or the state), one school can be distinguished from another school as a result of its particular inter-pretation of the primary task (general principle) of the school. Apart from other distinguishing features (such as the particular way in which the primary task of a school is interpreted) this distinction can also be made in terms of the context within which the particular school func-tions.

The following appear to be important aspects derived from our argument:
- The school as an institution came into being with a (universal) unique nature and task that distinguishes it from other societal relationships, such as the state or the church;
- the primary task (general principle) of the school is directly related to this inherent nature;
- although teaching is a logically qualified activity, this task of the school is also educative, which relates to a normative dimension; and
- which in turn cannot be separated from the purpose that the child should be self-empowered within a particular context (local and global).

It seems therefore that we can add onto our initial definition of the primary or general task of the school: Initiating the learner into an inherited tradition of knowledge and normative empowerment — a competence for life — *within a particular context*.

Defining a quality school
If we return to our initial argument that quality education directly relates to the essential character of the school, it can be concluded that a *quality school is an institution of education that fulfils its primary task* (relating to: Initiating the learner into an inherited tradition of knowledge and normative empowerment — a competence for life), *within a particular context*.

From this a number of observations can be made:
- A school that is not sensitive to the social realities of its environ-ment cannot claim to be a quality school — even if it fulfils its

primary or structural task. One could thus argue that a South African school that over-emphasises western values and culture (as in the previous dispensation) and does not relate to the South African context could not be defined as a *quality* school. It seems therefore that relevance is an essential ingredient of a quality school.
- A contextually sensitive and relevant definition of quality educa-tion should however also not be out of step with international trends, strategies, procedures and educational practices (*cf.* Mul-ler 1997:57). This implies that a South African school should however not over-emphasise the local context within which it functions, but should take cognizance of the global context within which the child is supposed to control reality. Steyn (2000:48) emphasises that quality education depends on inter-nationally accepted factors such as the resources available, quality of teachers, a relevant curriculum, the effectiveness of the learning material, restoration of the learning environment and a sound philosophy of education.

Quality education can therefore also be defined as relevant edu-cation that endeavours to address the unique and changing needs, demands, possibilities and problems within the total context of a country while offering equal opportunity for (normative) self-em-powerment of its citizens to enable them to live a meaningful life within society at large.

Fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose?
The National Policy on Whole School Evaluation (Department of Education, 2000b:4-5) states as its main objective: "to assess the ef-fectiveness of the entire system and the extent to which the vision and goals of the education system are being achieved". From this mission it seems that the system of quality assurance in the school is primarily designed to ascertain whether the system of school education, and schools in particular, function in accordance with its vision and aims — thus determining the degree to which a school is *fit for its purpose*. Does this mean that if a school or education system functions in accordance with this vision (as stated in its policy and not necessarily in accordance with its primary and structural task), and is conse-quently declared *fit for its purpose*, that it can be regarded as a school of quality? This seems problematic, especially when viewed against the background of our exposition of a quality school. To clarify this point it seems applicable to introduce the term *fitness of purpose*.

When the purpose, goal or vision of an education system or a school (as stated in a policy) accords with the primary task or purpose of the school (derived from its inherent nature), then we can say that the school (or system) exhibits *fitness of purpose*. This means that the particular vision and goals of an education system (determined and formulated in its policy) would have to be measured against the uni-versal purpose of a school to determine its *fitness of purpose*. *Fitness of purpose* thus gives an indication of the degree to which the stated goal of an education policy accords with the universal task or purpose of the school.

The implication is that an education system could be *fit for its purpose* when it functions in accordance with its nationally stated goal and vision, but this does not automatically mean that it complies with the requirement of *fitness of purpose*. An example might clarify this point. Education during the previous South African dispensation was an affirmation of the national policy of separate development. Al-though the notion of *separate but equal* was put forward, the issue of equality was soon to be relativised when Verwoerd (1954:23-24) clai-med that there is no place for the Bantu in "the European community above the level of certain forms of labour". Proceeding from the assumption that different cultural groups require different "types" of education, it was accepted that education policies and planning are specialised functions that should be left to "experts" within the state bureaucracy. The implication was that the construction of education policies and the allocation of powers, rights and functions to different layers of systems of educational governance were entrusted to Euro-

pean "experts" with so-called specialised knowledge of white life and education, but also of Bantu life and education (*cf*. Fleisch 1998: 58-59,61). The latter resulted in education for subordination and servility versus education for domination and subjugation (*cf*. Bantu Education versus Christian National Education). Since the purpose of South African schools complied with the national separatist policy, it can be argued that education in South Africa (during the previous dispensation) was *fit for its* then *stated purpose*. When this particular purpose or mission is however measured against the primary task of the school (Initiating the learner into an inherited tradition of know-ledge and normative empowerment — a competence for life — *within a particular context*), we can indeed seriously question the previous education dispensation's *fitness of purpose*. It appears therefore that quality education or a quality school should both comply with the requirements of *fitness for purpose* and *fitness of purpose*. Back to our example: Although being fit for its purpose, strictly speaking, edu-cation during the previous dispensation cannot be regarded as quality education since it did not comply with the requirement of *fitness of purpose*.

One would also have to take a closer look at the mission of the new education system in terms of fitness of purpose. Does the national goal of education of progressively high quality for all learners (Re-public of South Africa, 1996:5) comply with the primary task of the school? This is not an easy task, since the specific interpretation of quality is not clear from these documents. The SA Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996:5) however states that the provision of high quality education for all learners "... would lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities ...". Although emphasis is placed upon the redress of past injustices and the fundamental role of education in the democratic transformation of society, the issue of relevance is touched upon by referring to the protection and advancement of "our diverse cultures and languages" (Republic of South Africa, 1996:5). These goals might seem narrow when compared to the primary (general or structural) task of the school, and one could be confused into thinking that equality and redress of inequalities receive precedence over quality education, a number of other official documents however appear to put the picture straight. Among these are the Norms and Standards for Educators (1998) that specifically address the issue of quality educa-tion and quality assurance — essentially linking education, training and development, and focusing "on the whole learner — on their knowledge, skills, understanding, dispositions, attitudes and values" (Department of Education, 1998:26). The roles and competences of teachers as defined in the National Education Policy Act (Department of Education, 1996:13-22), also seem to accord with the primary task of the school. In the same way the statement of purpose that education should "empower people to participate effectively in all the process of democratic society, economic activity, cultural expression and com-munity life" (Department of Education, 1995:17; *cf.* also Department of Education, 2000b:3), appear to be in line with the structural pur-pose of the school. Against this background it seems that the goals and mission of the new education dispensation exhibit a fitness of purpose.

Whether the functioning of the new system of schooling would indeed prove to be fit for its purpose, however, remains to be seen.

Standards of education

The issue of quality education also raises the question of education standards. If quality education is defined as the degree to which an institution is fit for its purpose within a particular context, and it complies with the requirement of fitness of purpose with regard to its national objectives, then what do we understand when we refer to standards of education?

Although there seems to be a considerable overlap between qua-lity and standards in education, there appears to be a distinction. According to Lategan (1997:90) "standards" are "specified and usually measured outcome indicators which are used for comparative pur-

poses", also distinguishing between academic standards, standards of competence and service standards (*cf*. also Makgoba, 1998:54). Lategan (1997:93) however argues that the relationship between quality and standards depends on the approach to quality. When one applies our notion of quality education to standards, the following seems to be applicable: If quality is defined in terms of *fitness for purpose* and *fitness of purpose* within a particular context, standards seem to indicate specified purpose-related objectives. Standards could then be described as benchmarks against which particular aspects that contribute towards the fulfilling of the primary task of the school, would be measured. The role of a system of quality assurance in the school would thus be to identify whether the school is achieving its purpose in terms of national standards. A problem here is that a sys-tem of quality assurance would not necessarily assess the fitness of purpose of these national goals.

Standards nevertheless have to be measurable and comparable outcomes that contribute to the functioning of a school in accordance with its primary (and universal) function within a particular context. Like quality, standards cannot be separated from the context within which they function.

Although educational standards are the outcome of a complex formulation of historic, socio-political and cultural factors, they rarely acquire precision since they lose their meaning if the socio-political relationship has changed. The implication is that standards accepted during the apartheid dispensation bear very little resemblance (re-levance) to the current South African reality and its unique problems. To regard a particular (Western) interpretation of a standard as a ma-nifest truth and a universal norm, relativises its dynamic and flexible nature.

Thus, in order to improve the quality of education, standards must not be the mere copying of so-called universally accepted benchmarks that have little relevance for the South African reality (Makgoba, 1998:57-58; Le Roux, 2000:250). The issue of standards should therefore be liberated from race, exclusion and discrimination — it should rather be formulated by South Africans, taking into account the unique South African reality, with due cognizance of glo-bal policy trends.

Areas for evaluation through the envisioned system of school quality assurance (Department of Education, 2000b:7) have been stated as: the basic functionality of the school; leadership, manage-ment and communication; governance and relationships; teaching and educator development; curriculum provision and resources; learner achievement; school safety, security and discipline; school infra-structure, as well as parents and the community. These areas will be assessed in terms of input, process and output indicators, with the purpose of maintaining and controlling standards, evaluating the performance of a school, "as well as to advise and support schools in their continual efforts to improve their effectiveness" (Department of Education, 2000b:4). Although these objectives indicate a certain *fitness of purpose* in terms of its focus on the attainment of quality education, the process of quality assurance is no simple task, and the danger exists that priority would once again be given to those aspects of the schooling process that can be measured easily.

Concluding remarks

When viewing quality education against our exposition of the primary task or purpose for which a school came into existence, it was con-cluded that a school could only be viewed as an institution of quality when it complied with *fitness of purpose* and *fitness for purpose*. This also revealed that education should be contextually sensitive, both in a local and global sense to qualify as quality education.

When viewed against this background it seemed that the mission of the new education system complies with the primary task of the school and therefore exhibits a *fitness of purpose*. However positive this may be, the implementation of policy has yet to be successfully accomplished. Since only experience will tell whether schools in the new dispensation will function according to these goals and mission

(and thus become *fit for its purpose*), we cannot yet ascertain whether these schools offer quality education.

Uncertainties with regard to the implementation of Curriculum 2005 and the question whether the new curriculum would be able to serve the primary purpose of the school, pose only one of a number of problems that South African education would have to overcome on the road to quality education.

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