



Political cannibalism: The state of basic education in the Eastern Cape province

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Introduction

The right to basic education is enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa, provisioned in the Bill of Rights. However, the reality in terms of basic education in South Africa does not equate to a democratic state, which upholds the right to basic education. The right to basic education is fundamentally recognised in the Constitution of South Africa, as the foundation of attaining socio-economic rights (Republic of South Africa 1996).

This commentary explores the constitutional right to basic education in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The case of basic education is of principal significance, considering the promises by the state to improve the lived realities of citizens through advancing a transformative constitution. This 'egalitarian society founded on values of human dignity, equality, and freedom for all, remains elusive' (Dass, Mhlahlo & Moroeng 2021).¹ Now that we have obtained democracy, what progress has the state made to address the inequalities in education? The concept of political cannibalism in this article reflects a form of governance which seeks political power at all costs, even if it means violating the constitutional right to basic education. Eastern Cape has been chosen as the case study for this article because of its poor state of basic education, which has been referenced as an 'education crisis'; as a result of chronic leadership instability and politicization (Equal Education 2016; Kota, Hendricks, Matambo & Naidoo 2018).

The death sentence: pit latrine toilets

It is unimaginable that we are now approaching three decades of democracy in South Africa but children in schools in rural communities are exposed to health and safety hazards from pit latrine toilets. Amnesty International (2020), records that approximately

¹ Raduvha v Minister of Safety and Security and Another [2016] ZACC 24; 2016 (10) BCLR 1326 (CC); 2016 (2) SACR 540 (CC) at para 55

1585 pit latrine toilets are in current use in primary schools across the Eastern Cape province. Furthermore, the report from Amnesty International demonstrates the extent of inequalities in urban provinces; for example, Gauteng, Northern Cape and Western Cape do not have a single school with a pit latrine toilet as of the year 2020. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) suggest that the government in South Africa finds it more difficult to provide education services in the rural areas, but there is no justification for 1585 pit latrine toilets. Equal Education (2016) reports that there are serious concerns in the Eastern Cape province, as students are exposed to poor hygiene and sanitation.

Poor infrastructure at schools

The issues relating to poor infrastructure at schools are paramount, as the quality of education is an important component of the right to education. Hall (2019) reveals infrastructural inequalities in rural schools in South Africa. The South African Schools Act regulates that all schools built from asbestos, wood or metal should be upgraded in accordance with the National Building Regulations (Department of Basic Education 2013). Where then is democracy when the majority of the schools in the areas of the Eastern Cape province are still built with improper infrastructure, poor quality materials, zinc and asbestos? The post-democracy era in South Africa has been undermined by poor policy implementation. Ali (2006) debates that policy implementation may be unsuccessful if there is a lack of political will; weak governance and exploitation of power.

The forgotten category: children with special needs

In South Africa, up to 70% of children of school-going age with disabilities are out of school (Department of Education 2001; Donohue & Bornman 2014). If ever there should be a reflection of the democratic era in South Africa, it should entail transformation in education to promote access to basic education for learners with special needs (Engelbrecht 2006). However, researchers argue that the current state of basic education in the Eastern Cape province reflects challenges for children with special needs; such as a few specialised schools, limited resources and specialists trained in teaching children with special needs (Frankel, Gold & Ajodhia-Andrews 2010; Wildeman & Nomdo 2007; Mitchell 2005).

The Department of Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education and Inclusive Education Policy provides frameworks that were designed to transform the education system in South Africa to support all learners; especially, those with special needs (Muthukrishna & Schoeman 2000; Donohue & Bornman 2014; Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde 2012). These were aimed to establish a principle of education supporting human

rights for all (Pivik, McComas & Laflamme 2002). These have not reaped much fruit as argued by Wilderman and Nomdo (2007), who state that the inclusive education policies in South Africa are characterised by ambiguity; often 'symbolic' or 'dazzling' in nature; attracting attention when formulated but lack implementation (Sayed & Jansen 2001; Heap, Lorenzo & Thomas 2009). Thereby, resulting in discrepancies and misrepresentation of data on disability prevalence (Loeb & Eide 2004). The learners with special needs are a segregated minority as policies do not translate into action.

Conclusion

The right to basic education is the constitutional right of all children in South Africa, and political power should not be abused at the expense of children. This article reflected on the case of the Eastern Cape province, where there is a lack of political will to address the challenges in basic education. There is no justification for hazardous pit latrine toilets, poor infrastructure and limited access to basic education for learners with special needs. It is unfortunate but becoming a slow reality of a government which focuses on political power but remains ignorant about providing basic education for all children.

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