

“I used to think ... and now I think!”: Notes from a South African teacher educator

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Abstract

What is the role of the school and the teacher in the context of democratic social transformation? How has it changed globally and in the South African context during the past fifty years? Is there room for optimism among teacher educators in the 21st century? I offer some modest reflections on my own career in the hope of provoking some debate from colleagues.

“A life history is a life story located within its historical context.” (Ivor Goodson)¹

“I used to think that public school were vehicles for reforming society. And now I think that while good teachers and schools can promote positive intellectual, behavioral and social change in individual children and youth, [American] schools are (and have been) ineffectual in altering social inequalities.” (Larry Cuban)²

“Nearly half century of experience in schools and the sustained research I have done have made me allergic to utopian rhetoric.” (Larry Cuban)³

Keywords: History of Education; Autobiography; South Africa; Teacher education; History education; Educational policy; Apartheid; Historiography.

1 I Goodson, *Studying Teachers' Lives*, (London, Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

2 L Cuban, “What Schools Can Do in a Democratic Society”, R.F. Elmore, *I Used to Think ... And Now I Think* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard, 2012) p. 25.

3 Elmore (2012) p. 28.

Introduction

Writers like I Goodson have emphasized the significance of biography in the study of education for its inherent value but more specifically for the light it might throw on the broad project of democratic public education. All educators know that systems of public education operate on the good will and commitment of those personnel who go beyond the everyday necessities of school life to explore the broader implications of their *calling*. This is no longer a term that teachers feel comfortable with—but anyone who spends their daily life in a school knows that it does capture an important reality. I have been fortunate to work with many such dedicated educators in the course of my career—in schools, colleges of education, universities, bureaucracies, and a variety of other networks. This reflection on my own career and my own professional journey represents a challenge to others to share similar perspectives with colleagues in order to harvest this rich professional knowledge that has often been ignored by the planners and bureaucrats of the new education in South Africa and elsewhere—to the detriment of our children and our education system. In order to frame my story, I have used the format of Richard Elmore’s recent collection drawing on the experience of American colleagues under the title of *I Used to Think... and Now I Think!*⁴

As a teacher and teacher educator from the mid-1960s to the first decade of the 21st century, with a commitment to anti-apartheid education, I shared the belief of many educators nurtured in the progressive climate of the 1960s, that committed and effective educational practices provided the platform for an equal, fair, and just society. A classroom practice which demonstrated a democratic ethos would inevitably deliver a more just society—whether the enemy was racism, capitalism, sexism, or classism. In the South African case the enemy was apartheid and apartheid education and the broad platform for change in the 1980s was “People’s Education”. Thirty years after the transition to a democratic state, and the transformation of the education system, many of the ideals that we fought for are far from being achieved. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of democratic commitment and equity, there is considerable evidence of the failure of education as a tool for transforming society—in part because the schooling system itself does not work effectively. Despite relatively high levels of funding by international norms for public schools, the bureaucracy

4 RF Elmore (2012).

is inadequate, many teachers are unmotivated, the results are poor, and the levels of student preparedness for the job-market are inadequate.

But the problem is not just about the effectiveness of the education system itself. It is equally a problem concerning the burden of transformation that was placed on the schools—the unrealistic expectations of the capacity of education systems as tools for transforming society. There is increasing evidence globally that schools are not on their own capable of transforming society towards greater equality. With major shifts in the nature of political ideolog towards contemporary free market norms, the capacity of the schools to deliver a more just society in social and economic terms is fundamentally limited.

However, I continue to think that schools have a powerful role to play in society, and that the role of teachers is of supreme importance in creating critical and compassionate individuals and citizens who will be able to make an important contribution to a democratic society and to the economy, but I do not think that schools on their own can change the nature of social inequality in meaningful ways—either in the USA or in South Africa. Indeed, over time I have come to recognise that schools and schooling do not represent an unqualified or unrestricted “good” for all members of society; instead they represent a major site of contestation for individuals or groups to obtain an advantaged place in the labour market and social order. If we place unrealistic expectations on the public schools and expect them to CONTRIBUTE to a socially equal society—as was the case in South Africa after 1994—we simply set them up to fail and then blame the institutions and the teachers for this failure.⁵

I was committed, with so many post-World War II educators, to the political importance of schools for shaping a just society. What journey is necessary in order to place these beliefs in a realistic context, and what consequences does this have for the role of the public schools and of teachers in society? What do we say to young teachers entering the profession in the 2020s?

What did I think THEN... and what do I think NOW? And why? I will attempt to tackle these issues via a chronological review of my career as a teacher, as a postgraduate student, as a university-based history teacher trainer, as a comparative educationalist/policy analyst, and an educational historian at various stages of my career.

5 D Labaree, *Education, Markets and the Public Good: The selected readings of David Labaree* (London, Routledge, 2007).

What I thought as a teacher

It is difficult to reach back into the past and reimagine one's own frame of mind/assumptions/ambitions as a teacher in late 1960s, white schools in South Africa. As a product of a Cape Education Department school in the small village in the Eastern Cape, with a brief stay at a Catholic Boy's School in East London for matric, I was deeply a product of the century-old system that I was joining as a teacher. I was a graduate of Rhodes University (BA Honours) in History [1961-64] and the University of Cape Town (Secondary Teachers Diploma [STD][1965]). I was dimly aware of a policy that favoured me as a white student and as a holder of a Joint Matriculation Board matric certificate from a private school which allowed me to enter university despite my relatively poor matric results. As a young teacher I was conscious of the fact that my background was different from most of my white colleagues as a result of my home background with a father who was schooled in early socialist London politics who had come to South Africa prior to World War I as one of the first generation of motor mechanics.

At university my experience of excellent teachers such as Prof. Winifred Maxwell and Mike Nuttall (subsequently Bishop of Natal) in the Rhodes History Department make it clear that there was important political work to be done in the history class even if my understanding of what that work might be or how to accomplish it was extremely vague.⁶ An additional aspect of my life as a student in the Eastern Cape was the impact of meeting African students for the first time through student politics, many of them in the ANC Youth League, at the Federal Theological Seminary and the University of Fort Hare, something that fundamentally shaped the way in which I would thenceforth see the world. Through my experience in the Student Christian Association (SCA)⁷ and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)⁸, I became ever more aware that I lived in a politically divided society and that we were incredibly privileged to be in a place where we could associate with black students who came from a very different tradition but who were

6 It is probably significant to note that many of my lecturers at Rhodes went into voluntary or forced exile soon after this time—these included Norman Bromberger, Eric Harber, Cedric Evans, Peter Rhodda, and Clem Goodfellow.

7 See JW de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1979), pp. 154–5, 167–8.

8 For an imaginative reconstruction of the student politics of this time see CJ Driver, *Elegy for a Revolutionary* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969). Many of the students I met at this time either went to jail or to exile or both. Also see Martin Legassick in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra, 2004>>) Vol I: Ch 12; Vol II 857-880.

open to embracing us as whites in a spirit of non-racialism and opposition to apartheid. In retrospect it is important to recognise that all of this was taking place against the background of civil rights politics in the global context of the Kennedy era in the USA. Joan Baez's "*We Shall Overcome*" seemed to apply to our world just as much as America. I came to realise through these experiences how impossible it was to support apartheid and how it might be possible to contribute as a teacher to the great task of change! It was clear that school history was an ideologically contested terrain (I would not have known these words at the time) and that the political implications of my career were potentially significant.

The Secondary Teachers Diploma (STD) (1965) at the University of Cape Town was entirely unhelpful in regard to a preparation for these roles. At a time when apartheid education was engulfing and reforming the entire system of education and when my student friends from Fort Hare were in jail for being members of banned organisations, apartheid and race in education were never mentioned in our lectures. The course on history teaching entirely ignored the political context we were entering. While at UCT I gave lectures in the CAFDA Night School programme to assist adults to obtain a matric qualification, which gave me a glimpse of what could be achieved outside the formal schooling system and on the margins of the apartheid laws which prohibited whites from teaching blacks in non-formal contexts.⁹

I stayed on in Cape Town as a young teacher. Once in the classroom, first at Simonstown High School (a working-class white school at the naval base near Cape Town) and then at Wynberg Boys High School (1966–1969), I had to learn on the hoof what my profession entailed. Wynberg was one of the key white boys' schools in Cape Town which competed for supremacy in rugby competitions, and this sporting ethos seemed to dominate the school. In the case of Wynberg (where in due course I became head of the history department) successful history teaching was about getting boys to memorize "charts" which summarised historical events and then to reproduce this information in factual tests. These were all part of a process of preparing teenagers for the all-important matriculation examination which was the driving rationale of the entire system. Whatever else there was to learn about being a teacher, it was clear that successful matric results were the prime currency of success for schools and for teachers. But while I was learning these things I was enjoying the experience of total involvement with a school and the fulfilment that this can bring, even in a context that I felt was rather hostile to my beliefs.

9 DM Wilson, *Against the Odds: The Struggle of the Cape African Night Schools, 1945-1967*, (Cape Town, Centre for African Studies, 1991).

What I am aware of is that *what I used to think* at that time was that despite the need to play the game and please the authorities (and the parents), the reach of my position as a history teacher had far greater potential than this. It was not the teaching and testing of student knowledge of the content of the “charts” that challenged me but rather the potential for stimulating the boys to a critical appraisal of what we were engaging with. In the era of the Beatles, studying the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the Origins of World War I, Europe in the twentieth century, or South African history with all the bias of the textbooks, all provided a framework to challenge the assumptions of the students about democracy, liberalism, socialism—all the big ideas and movements of the century, Best of all it provided me with a means of testing their ideas about the dramatic political context in which we were living (Verwoerd’s assassination was reported to us while I was teaching one of these classes.) What surprises me when I think back on these years is that there were no complaints about my teaching from parents or students—to *the best of my knowledge*.¹⁰ My attempts to encourage critical thinking in the history class led to stimulating debates at times, but I have no way of knowing to what extent my efforts to achieve some kind of anti-apartheid political awareness were successful. I thought I was doing well, but I imagine that all young teachers flatter themselves with such thoughts.

Whatever I did on that front, I was careful to protect myself to ensure that my learners’ exam results were acceptable. In the higher classes we would cover the syllabus between January of Std. 9 and March of Std. 10—during this time the critical/analytical method would be used as far as I was able and to the extent that it was possible. For the rest of the final year students would concentrate on perfecting examination techniques and writing model answers drawn from previous examination papers in order to be ready by November for the public examinations. In retrospect I like to think that they were learning historiography without being fully conscious of it—that all knowledge is suspect and that some interpretations of history are more valid than others—and that evidence counts in evaluating these issues. I am not at all sure how conscious I was of these aspects of my work. I was a young teacher trying to work out who I was and what I thought in an extremely complex world, and my teaching must have reflected all those confusions. In other words, I used to think that teaching my subject, history, in an “unbiased manner”, which stimulated critical thinking amongst students, was the objective of my teaching in the context of the apartheid classroom. All my energy was engaged with the practices of the classroom and the

10 One thing I did learn in this extremely ridged traditional boys’ school environment was the value of a headmaster who protects his staff against interfering parents.

school and in the complex processes of getting young people to acquire academic literacy.

Looking back, I realise that a key feature of this time was that I was working in complete isolation. There was no guidance from my educational lecturers, from the school inspectors, from the white teacher organizations, from a network of like-minded history teachers, or from my colleagues in the school context. There were no structures to assist either black or white teachers with these challenges.¹¹ Essentially, I was just thinking about doing a good job as a teacher—maybe *surviving* as a teacher—and trying to work out what it meant to succeed at the task, without too much reference to any formal understanding of educational contest. ‘Policy’ whatever that was, just seemed to be the normal state of things!

As a postgraduate student in London

Between 1969 and 1972 I was fortunate enough to study at London University. First, at the Institute of Education, and then at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). This gave me the opportunity to consider the broader question of the relationship between educational policy, politics, economics, and history at a time when the great Progressive Education revival was taking place in the USA with figures like I Illich,¹² J Holt,¹³ P Goodman,¹⁴ E Reimer,¹⁵ and P Freire¹⁶ opening new and radical perspectives on the role of school in society, and B Bernstein¹⁷ and M Young¹⁸ active in the field in the UK. All this in the context of the 1960s cultural revolution and the revival of progressivism in education, the anti-war movement—and more broadly, the Cultural Revolution in China and Education for Self Reliance in Tanzania.

The first thing that needs to be said is that the courses I took at the Institute of Education, London University, entirely ignored these revolutionary developments—Philosophy of Education was buried in the archane world of linguistic philosophy and

11 In subsequent years I became aware of the Teachers League of South Africa (TLSA) and the South Peninsula Education Fellowship (SPEF) as forums for radical debate, but as a white teacher in Cape Town I was not even aware of the existence of these groups.

12 I Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London, Calder & Boyars, 1971)

13 J Holt, *The Underachieving School* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972).

14 P Goodman, *Compulsory Miseducation* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964)

15 E Reimer, *School is Dead*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971)

16 P Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972)

17 B Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control* (London, Routledge, 1971).

18 MFD Young, *Knowledge and Control* (London, Collier-Macmillan, 1971)

eschewed any engagement with real world problems in favour of “second order thinking”.¹⁹ Psychology of Education, as far as I remember it, seems to have been largely confined to a consideration of learning theories. In retrospect it is difficult to understand how any of this contributed to students’ understanding of the turbulent contemporary politics of education or to a critical interpretation of educational policy. The learning that I did acquire at this time came from my experience of London Schools—a Secondary Modern in North/East London and a Boys’ Preparatory School in St. John Wood, which was a gateway to City of London, Westminster, Harrow, and other public schools. In short, my experience of English education gave me a very clear picture of how class operated in an industrial society at the end of the golden era of post-war social welfarism, and how, despite the rhetoric of socialism and comprehensive schooling, great challenges still remained in terms of redefining opportunities for working class children. It was clear to me—naïve as I was—that working class, mostly black and Pakistani, kids that I taught in the East End would gain little from their experience of schooling. Entertaining them was the most one could hope for.

The School of Oriental and African Studies (where I did an MA in African History) presented a different picture of the Institute of Education. I was a student there for a year at a time when the great revisionist era was dawning with the application of neo-Marxist theory to an understanding of South African history. I was fortunate enough to be exposed to the heated seminars, presided over by my tutor Shula Marks, at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, where the new knowledge was being explored and contested. Key participants in those weekly seminars included exiles like Harole Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Stanley Trapido, Baruch Hiron, and many others, opening up new perspectives for me on the historiography of South Africa by placing class instead of race at the center of analysis and challenging many of the ideas that I had taught as “the truth” in my classes at Wynberg Boys High. But my background in traditional history gave me a useful perspective on the new debates. It confused me but did not overwhelm me. The other great advantage of these experiences, looking back, is that in tune with the general spirit of the times there was a focus on academic interdisciplinarity. Sociology, labour studies, economics, and anthropology all provided a network for committed scholars who passionately shared the new interpretations of an analysis of the anti-apartheid struggle—which provided an

¹⁹ The bible was RS Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1966); see also D Adelstein, “The Philosophy of Education’: Or the wit and wisdom of RS Peters”, Trevor Pateman (ed.), *Counter Course* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972), pp. 115–139.

excellent bridgehead for beginning to understand the role of education in the social order. That background was to form a fundamental base to the rest of my academic career and assist me to interpret historical and contemporary events as I moved into the next phase of my life in 1973 as a lecturer in the History/Education Departments at the University of the Witwatersrand where my brief was to mentor postgraduate secondary school history teachers. These were heady times and enabled me to begin to connect my academic interests to the great political realities which were enfolding around us at the time.

What did I think? That the ferment of academic critique was assisting us to understand what had gone wrong to create the apartheid education system and how we might engage with critique. The educational future was vague and not often directly discussed, but it seemed to assume something like the path of Labour Party/Welfarist policy in post-war Britain—characterised by a strong emphasis on equality and redress which we somehow thought, in the era prior to Thatcherism, would provide the inevitable path to a more just world. The great Comprehensive School experiment in Britain which aimed at a more equitable distribution of educational goods—as far as I understood it—seemed to provide the template.²⁰

As a university History teacher - trainer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) (1972–1982)

Teacher training at Wits in the 1970s was as full of drama as academic work can be, as the university was at a crossroads for local and international scholars, as well as researchers, community activists, and trade unionists of all kinds who were engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle. Although we were initially only allowed to accept white students for teacher education, as the decade proceeded considerable numbers of Indian, Coloured, and African students arrived along with a dribble of international students. In the heated context of the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF)²¹, the Black trade union movement (FOSATU/COSATU) and the student resistance that culminated from the SOWETO riots of 1976,²² education came to receive more attention from government, business, community organizations, and NGOs than has been the case before or since. The Wits Faculty of Education, located only a few kilometers from the townships of the

20 R Pedley, *The Comprehensive School* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1963)

21 J Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2000).

22 B Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash, The SOWETO Revolt: Roots of a Revolution* (London, Zed Press, 1979).

Witwatersrand, where the core of resistance to apartheid education was to unfold, was drawn into these events. Or it should be said that a few of the politically conscious members of the Faculty were so drawn. For the rest it was just business as usual.

It is nevertheless true that these were extremely intense times for all those who were concerned with the future of education and its relation to the political struggles that engulfed the country. The global academic debates of the time associating *Schooling and Capitalism*²³ provided a measuring stick for research enquiry into the situation unfolding around us. Much of that research was more characterised by heat than depth, and theory rather than empirical investigation, but it was extremely influential in drawing increasing numbers of university education faculty into serious debate and analysis of the present situation and the future policy implications for a changing South Africa. These debates were aired at the annual Kenton Education Conferences which gradually drew more women, Black and Afrikaans academics to supplement the original white male, English speaking line-up.²⁴ The radical nature of the debates—the robust and heated nature of the exchanges emulating the style of radical exile politics—had the effect of intimidating many would-be participants.

Into the *melee* I brought the background I had acquired in London and the political economy approach to education that was familiar internationally at the time. This mirrored many of the trends that are reflected in Elmore's collection. Much of the debate reflected theoretical debates going on in the arena of global analysis—which ignored specificities of the SA situation. This was in part because it was almost impossible to do on-the-ground research in communities or schools given the tumultuous state of affairs in the country after the SOWETO uprising and the effective ban on entering African schools for research purposes. In part the paucity of empirical research reflected the limitations of those of us who populated the academic policy terrain. We only had the vaguest of ideas about the nature of what relevant or engaged research might mean. In Johannesburg I was privileged to have frequent access to schools across the social and race spectrum to supervise students, but in retrospect I had neither the skill nor the focus to capitalise on this access for research purposes.

What we *did* probably had more effect on teachers than our research. I inherited the

23 R Dale et. al. (eds.), *Schooling and Capitalism*, (London, Open University Press, 1976); S Bowles & H Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).

24 Many of these papers appeared in *Perspective in Education*. Also see W Flanagan, C Hemson, J Muller & N Taylor (eds.), *Vintage Kenton*, (Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1994).

chairmanship of the History Workshop,²⁵ and we established a lively non-racial community of history teachers across the Witwatersrand who were concerned to expand their knowledge of the new history research on South Africa, and engage with the New History for schools that was being developed at the time in the UK and elsewhere—with a focus on discovery methods and interactive teaching methodologies. Large Friday evening meetings drew these teachers together in an exciting new network of professional exchanges. A collective to produce new school textbooks which would reflect the new historiography was one of our achievements.²⁶ Together with student history teachers we were also involved in large scale Saturday schools and vacation courses set up by the South African Institute of Race Relations to provide supplementary coaching for black matric students whose education had been disrupted by the township strife.

The second field of engagement in the early 1980s when there were ongoing crises in the schools of the Witwatersrand was our initiative to launch a new teachers union that was not tied like the established unions to historical links with the state. This was to be a non-racial teachers union that cut across the barriers of professionalism imposed by the apartheid government. The National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA) was the modest outcome of that initiative and it did provide one of the building blocks for the new South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) in the early 1990s.²⁷

I thought that I was engaged in changing classrooms and promoting a new kind of education in schools that highlighted critical thinking and enquiry. That seemed to be about as much as could be expected in the conditions under which we were working. On the whole, as far as we thought about it, we were simply committed to the delivery of equal education to all South Africans. There were few questions about what that meant, barring that black schools needed to have more of what white schools had. Few of our black colleagues in the schools would have differed with us. There was never any hint of a call for a different curriculum for black schools—for a curriculum *relevant to black children*—as that was precisely what the apartheid education project had proposed. Even in the field of

25 This was the History Workshop for school teachers that had its origins in a network set up in the 1960s by Prof. Napier Boyce, rector of the Johannesburg College of Education. This History Workshop needs to be distinguished from a social history group of the same name set up by Dr Belinda Bozzoli based on the model of the British History Workshop.

26 The *History Alive* series were the outcome of these efforts. See for example, P Kallaway (ed.) *History Alive 9*, and *History Alive 10* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter, 1984–5).

27 I was also involved in the establishment of a similar initiative in Cape Town, Western Cape Teachers Union (WECTU)—see P Kihn, "Comrades and Professionals: Teacher Ideology and Practice in the Western Cape, 1985-1990", in P Kallaway, *The History of Education under Apartheid* (New York, Peter Lang, 2002) pp. 325–336.

history education I can never remember any serious critique of the curriculum other than that it needed to be less biased toward an Afrikaner nationalist viewpoint. (By the 1980s that bias was in any case less clear than it had been in the early years of apartheid.)

In retrospect we probably had a rather romantic view of what our students could achieve in the schools. We were very optimistic about what was possible even if we were aware that the teachers in the schools often thought that we were unrealistic in our expectations.

The University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape—1982 to 2008

By the time I moved to the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1982 and later to the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1993, my focus had shifted, as part of the Kenton process, away for the training of history teachers to the field of educational policy development, education and development, comparative education, and history of education. The immediate task in the early 1980s was to critically appraise the new government reform initiative (the so-called De Lange Report)²⁸ that sought to modernise apartheid education by shifting the focus away from racial identity to the language of the market that was now very familiar to World Bank planning documents. At the same time many of us were involved in a variety of ways in the processes surrounding the People's Education Movement which sought to redefine education under the umbrella of the UDF and liberation politics.

Aside from developing courses for PGCE, B. Ed and MA students in key aspects of the history of South African education, this work embraced an attempt to link local educational policy to the great issues of educational change in the Third World, with specific attention to the role of education in development studies. There was a focus on colonial education and its implications for postcolonial development. The influential work of structuralists like AG Frank, I Wallerstein, and J Saul²⁹ initially provided a window for understanding radical critiques of neoclassical economics and the assumptions of trickle-down economics. This gave us the tools to think about the negative influences of growth economics, though it

28 HSRC, *Provision of Education in the RSA: Report of the Main Committee* (the De Lange report) (Pretoria, HSRC, 1981).

29 AG Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969); I Wallerstein, *The Age of Transition: Transition of the World System 1945-2025* (Atlantic Heights NJ, Zed, 1996); J Saul, *Decolonization and Empire*, (Johannesburg, Wits Press, 2008).

only provided partial answers to how to address these assumptions as few economists in South Africa applied themselves to the implications for educational policy. Exposure to these debates at international conferences (Comparative and International Education Society [CIES], World Council of Comparative Education Societies [WCCES], and the Oxford Education Conferences gave us the confidence to challenge World Bank dogma on educational policy, but it did not provide us with the tools or the power to challenge policy changes in the new political environment that was unfolding by the late 1980s.

Above all I think I gradually came to realise how ill-prepared we were for the dramatic changes that were taking place around us. We had no idea what policy development was all about, as none of us had ever had access to the policy-making circles in apartheid South Africa. In retrospect I realise that there were many officials who had knowledge that was essential to the policy development process, but for political reasons they were not available to the new generation who were trying to develop education for the future. Hardly any of the Young Turks who had a lot to say about alternative education/radical education/popular education had any experience—professional, bureaucratic, or research—to bring to the table when the first National Education Policy Investigations (NEPI) consultations began in the early 1990s.³⁰

In that context it became very clear that the ANC in exile had not given much thought to educational policy. Where there had been some effort in this direction by Research on Education in South Africa (RESA)³¹ or SOMAFCO,³² it seemed to have little direct relevance to the nuts and bolts of policy development in the new context. Despite the establishment of Educational Policy Units (EPUs) at a number of universities with the assistance of international aid the whole process of educational reform was largely taken out of the hands of local practitioners and academics and placed in the hands of international consultants who “understood” the nature of World Bank and IMF policies and how educational governance worked in the climate of global discourse in the 1990s—structured as it was by neoliberal discourses.³³

30 For a summary of this see National Education Policy Investigation, *The Framework Report* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1993).

31 See E Unterhalter, H Wolpe & T Botha (eds.), *Education in a Future South Africa* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1991).

32 S Morrow, *Education in Exile: SOMAFCO, the African National Congress school in Tanzania, 1978 to 1992* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2004); R Govender, “The Contestation, Ambiguities and Dilemmas of Curriculum Development at the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College 1978-1992” (Ph.D, UWC, 2011).

33 L Chisholm, *Changing Class: Education and Social Change in post-apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2004); EB Fiske & HF Ladd, *Elusive Equity: Education Reform in post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2005).

In that context the policies that had been taking shape in the trade unions around National Qualifications Frameworks (SAQA) came to dominate a debate about the need to collapse the boundaries between training and education supposedly in line with radical notions of emancipatory pedagogy. This discourse came to dominate discussions about educational change, nudging aside the work of the National Education Policy Investigation.³⁴

As the social democratic vision of the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) was displaced by the Growth, Employment, and Distribution Plan (GEAR) during the 1990s, plans for radical educational change were suspended in favour of a narrower range of reforms that focused on three areas: (a) governance; (b) curriculum; and (c) teacher education. These reforms reflected changes in British education at the time which were outlined by K Jones in *Right Turn: The Conservative Revolution in Education*.³⁵ The new forms of school governance embodied in the South African Schools Act (1996) introduced notions of school governing bodies that had been piloted in New Zealand and Australia in the context of New Right policy reform. These innovations were linked to notions of democratic participation in schooling in keeping with the ethos of People's Education in the 1980s where parents and communities had demanded greater participation in school's affairs. What was not sufficiently understood at the time was that these policies simply consolidated educational privilege around communities (now increasingly non-racial) which had access to the former white elite schools (the so - called Model C schools). Colour privilege was replaced by class privilege, and the mass of township and rural schools were not sufficiently transformed to ensure that equality was prioritised.³⁶

The second major field of reform lay in the area of curriculum, where the recommendations of the American educationalist W Spady were embraced with a view to radically reforming curriculum and pedagogy from a discipline-based to something called an outcomes-based learning approach. This had the merit of matching the goals of Curriculum 2005 with the National Qualifications Framework that had come to dominate planning in the field of vocational education and training with the goal of collapsing the boundaries between academic and professional knowledge. Many of us opposed these

34 A Fataar, *Education Policy Development in South Africa's Democratic Transition 1994-1997* (Stellenbosch, SUN Media, 2010); S Allais, *Selling Out Education: National Qualifications Frameworks and the Neglect of Knowledge* (Rotterdam, Sense, 2014).

35 K Jones, (London, Hutchinson Radius, 1989); P Kallaway, *Education after Apartheid* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 1997).

36 Fiske & Ladd (2005). Also see M Hunter, *Race for Education: Gender, White tone and Schooling in South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

changes but were brushed aside in the enthusiasm for what were thought to be progressive and radical innovations that would benefit the mass of school children and remove the legacy of apartheid education. It took nearly ten years to undo the damage that this caused and to return to a more conventional approach with the CAPS curriculum of 2010.

A third major area of reform was teacher education. Colleges of Education, which had been responsible for the training of primary school teachers, were closed, and all teacher education was henceforth based in universities on the argument that there was a need for a coherent national system to ensure professionalisation and quality control. In effect, in keeping with such reforms elsewhere, these changes were driven by the need to cut expenditure on education in keeping with World Bank norms and standards for teacher education. What in effect followed was a massive loss of institutional capacity and expertise in this crucial field just at a time when there was a powerful need for new teachers who were motivated with the professional attitudes that had been the hallmark of the best of the Colleges.³⁷

Many teacher educators, including me, were strongly opposed to many of these reforms but found it very difficult in the climate of the times to be able to voice these critiques in any influential way outside of the walls of academic and research circles. The climate that was created by these events led to a more cautious approach to innovation and the development of a more nuanced research community.

Conclusions

It is easier to formulate what one thought in retrospect and with the advantage of hindsight than it is to make sense of what one thinks at the present time. This is perhaps in part because one has limited perspective on the present, but it is also without doubt because the nature of ideology and politics is much more opaque/confusing in a neoliberal age in 2023 in contrast to 1964.

It is harder to identify clearcut ground rules of ideology and to disentangle the bluster of political programmes from the ethical need to resolve problems of policy in relation to issues like poverty alleviation, work creation, development—and education. To be honest, I am no longer sure what policies would be best to ensure the “empowerment” of our young people. But looking back I am confident that what was needed was not the new

37 Y Sayed, “The case of teacher education in post-apartheid South Africa: Politics and priorities”, in Chisholm, (2004), pp. 247–266.

smart solutions that were brought by consultants with World Bank formulas in their hands, as these seldom yielded their promise. What was needed at the time of political transition was a careful consideration of past experience and context and its applicability to present challenges. Many of the major solutions to these issues that have dominated the history of twentieth-century education hold the possibility of solutions for the present South African situation.

I was extremely impressed at the extent to which the De Lors report of the *Commission on Education in the 21st Century* was able to highlight the shortcomings of the educational reform processes across the globe in recent years and its relevance for an understanding of the South African experience. It pointed out in 1996 that educational reform is a delicate matter.

“While neither underestimating the need to manage short-term constraints nor disregard the need to adapt existing systems, the Commission wishes to emphasize the necessity of a more long-term approach if reforms are to succeed. By the same token, it stresses the fact that too many reforms one after another can be the death of reform, since they do not allow the system, the time needed to absorb change or get the parties concerned involved in the process. Furthermore, past failures show that many reformers adopt an approach that is either too radical or too theoretical, ignoring what can be learned from experience or rejecting past achievements. As a result, teachers, parents, and pupils are disorientated and less than willing to accept and implement reform.

Attempts to impose educational reforms from the top down, or from outside, have obviously failed. The countries where the process has been relatively successful are those that obtained a determined commitment from local communities, parents and teachers, backed up by continuous dialogue and various forms of outside assistance. It is obvious that the local community plays a paramount role in any successful reform strategy.”³⁸

This could have been written with specific reference to a critique of the South African situation.

I still think that social democracy is the way to a just society for a multitude of reasons that cannot be addressed here—but I have to admit that since the 1990s this does not seem to feature as a viable political ideology. It is essential to admit that the programme

38 UNESCO, *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report of the Commission on Education in the 21st Century* (Paris, UNESCO, 1996), pp. 28–29.

of social welfare reform cannot be applied in South Africa as it was in post-war Europe, as leaders like Nelson Mandela and many of his generation imagined would be possible. Equally, we cannot apply the solutions of post-war Asian Tigers to SA development (the "*wirtschaftswunder*") as in the case of post-war Germany or Japan as these were the product of special times and conditions which cannot be recreated in South Africa in this new century. Their policy experiments in education are therefore only of limited value and need to be handled with extreme care in different contexts.

None of this detracts for the immense need for research and debate on the fundamental issues facing state education policy in the 21st century. All our beliefs and hopes are much more modest in 2023. Most significantly, we need to recruit a new generation of young people into the teaching profession who will bring renewed commitment to the struggle for education—both in the classroom and the schools, the universities, and places of teacher education. Without the commitment of that new generation of educators our dreams from the time of the anti-apartheid struggle will not be realised.

We cannot, in all honesty, tell students that teaching will transform society as we were able to confidently assume in the optimistic days of the 1960s. We can only offer a much more modest proposal—that teaching is one of the most satisfying careers available to young people as it is our investment in the new generation, and that working with young people is always a joy. We cannot offer young teachers and educational researchers the promise of dramatic social transformation as a result of pedagogical transformation, but we can offer them the unique opportunity to promote positive intellectual, behavioural and social change in individual children and youth which might provide some of the building blocks to a better society.

I thought in the early 1990s that the new democratic order would bring empowerment to teachers and allow them to control their own lives in ways that had not been possible under apartheid. I assumed that this would be a benefit to all. The hard reality was that the vast majority of teachers had not been prepared for the kind of freedom that the planners envisaged. In addition, the major African teacher union—SADTU—that had been crafted from the UDF affiliated unions with their origins in the 1980s, was soon absorbed into the ANC/COSATU/SACP Alliance and became tied by the Alliance to policy decisions of the government that were often at variance with the common sense of teachers in the field/ the interests of a real democratic teacher's ethos. The major representative of the voice of African teachers therefore failed to provide a critique for educational policy and a space for the voices of teachers. At no point in the construction of the new system of education

after 1994 did SADTU provide the space for teachers to air their views on the new policies. Teachers were once again silenced by the new order which was in many ways as directive and controlled as the previous system, though the new “norms and standards” were at their best about standards of efficiency and delivery. In both cases conformity was the central issue and in both cases the voices of teachers were largely silenced.

I do not have a naive belief in the virtue of teachers’ voices, but I do think that we would be much more likely to succeed in our educational endeavours if we had a greater commitment to listening to what they were saying. If modern methods of surveillance had existed in the 1960s my career could never have taken the shape that it did. What are the implications for a new generation of talented and motivated young teachers?

Overall I think that I learned a great deal more from my engagement with agencies outside of the university than I did from my studies on education or even my association over many years with professional educational research associations—local and international. My association with the SCA, NUSAS, the History Workshop, the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB), NEUSA, Kenton and the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES) was fundamental to my experience and ability to contribute to my profession. All this presents academics in the field of educational studies with a set of formidable challenges if they are to inspire a new generation of educational activists.

What do I think now? I still think of the state as the guardian of ‘education for all’ because only the state has the resources to ensure equity in education. But if we are realistic in the early years of the twenty-first century we have to accept that state policy is trapped in a political set that does not support such a dedication to equality in education, no matter how policies are dressed up to give this impression.³⁹

Looking back I have often been challenged by friends and parents who asked whether their children should take up teaching as a career. Few of my children’s friends took this option as they made their way to university and into the job market. Working at the University of the Western Cape for nearly two decades after 1994 exposed me to all the immense challenges that the new educational system was facing. Our teacher trainees, often from backgrounds in dysfunctional schools in township or rural black areas, had often not seen a fully functional school with the resources that we took for granted in the background that I experienced at Wits or UCT. When I first arrived at UWC in 1992 there were nearly a thousand students in the PGCE class who had to be taught in relays as there were no venues

³⁹ Programmes like UNICEF’s “Education for All” or the US government programme on “No Child Left Behind” are typical of such visions.

large enough to admit the whole class at one time. We did our best in the circumstances in a Faculty of Education that attracted a number of extremely talented and committed lecturers under the inspired leadership of Prof. Wally Morrow. But we all realised that the challenges were immense and were often sobered by the lack of support our students found in the schools where they did practice teaching.

It is without doubt a tough world out there in the schools that lie outside of the privileged circle of former privileged white schools. But we did our best to provide teachers with the tools to take on that challenge and were proud of the work that we did. We thought that we were providing the foundations for a new and better system of education to what had gone before, but we gradually came to realise that much of what we thought was not reflected in the policy developments that are described above.

Yet, along with Elmore and Cuban I retain my belief in fundamental the role of teachers and schools in the construction of a just society in which dedicated teachers strive to assist their students to build a better world. Yet, I also desire to underscore L Cuban's cautionary comment: "Nearly half century of experience in schools and the sustained research I have done have made me allergic to utopian rhetoric."⁴⁰

40 Elmore (2012):28.