

# Education for liberation or domestication

## Learning from Emerging Voices

Around the world, education is said to be the solution to the triple challenge of poverty, inequality and job creation. Yet, despite significant growth in educational attainment globally, unemployment remains high, and poverty and inequality persist, write **David Balwanz, Sandile Zwane and Itumeleng Moabi.**

**W**e are told of ‘skills gaps’, but then the jobs people train for are shipped overseas to sweatshops. We are told of ‘skills mismatches’. And, while there are some industries with worker shortages, no serious economist can argue that the South African labour market stands ready to absorb the over five million unemployed and underemployed workers. We also promote ‘skills for employability’ and entrepreneurship programmes. However, both types of programmes are ‘supply side’ answers to a demand side problem: a high rate of structural unemployment.

In its recent White Paper, the Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) follows this same formula, arguing that the main purpose of Further Education and Training (FET) colleges is ‘to train young school leavers, providing them with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for employment in the labour market’. For workers, the ‘skills for jobs’ discourse suffers from a flawed, and even tragic, logic. In fact, increasing the supply of ‘qualified’ or ‘productive’ workers will not, in and of itself, increase demand for workers, or job creation.

Instead increases in worker supply may instead place downward pressure on wages and worsen unemployment.

### EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION OR DOMESTICATION?

We are on the horns of a dilemma: each horn sticking us with uncomfortable truths. The first horn is government policy which states that the purpose of education is to produce human capital (i.e. skilled workers). It is argued that higher levels of human capital will promote economic growth and job creation.

*Education, Economy and Society*, a recently published book edited by Salim Vally and Enver Motala, exposes the shaky empirical grounds of the human capital theory. In addition to resting on contested empirical evidence, human capital theory views education and labour as instruments serving the needs of capital, and according to Vally and Motala, is dehumanising and environmentally destructive. The horn of government policy will not address the triple challenge, rather it will reproduce existing class and social inequality into the next generation. The

second horn of the dilemma is our task: creating an alternative. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, sums up our choice by asking whether we want education for *liberation or domestication*. What type of post-school education will better meet the needs and interests of poor and working-class communities?

### WHAT IS EMERGING VOICES?

The goal of the Emerging Voices 2 (EV2) project is to re-imagine post-school education so that it better meets the needs and interests of poor and working-class communities. EV2 research is overseen by the Education Policy Consortium, funded by DHET and is taking place in three sites: Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Gauteng. Implementing EV2 research are teams from the University of Johannesburg (UJ (CERT)), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU (CIPSET)), the University of Fort Hare (NMI) and CEPD. The Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (UJ) is implementing research in collaboration with community institutions and researchers in Sedibeng.

We chose Sedibeng because the Vaal triangle is the site of recent, and ongoing, de-industrialisation, high unemployment and a large number of post-school institutions, including the Vaal University of Technology (VUT), Sedibeng FET College, several public adult learning centres and many informal places of learning. EV2 activities include community dialogues, interviews and seminars and advocacy activities where community members discuss the current reality of post-schooling, discuss issues of youth development, community development and skills development. This article shares some of our preliminary findings. These include information on the lived experiences of poor and working-class youth, critiques and new directions for post-schooling.

### LIVED EXPERIENCES

In terms of lived experiences, at the top of the list was the influence of high levels of poverty, inequality and lack of decent jobs on youth lives and education. One participant noted the following situation which led him to put off education and focus on supporting his family. 'My dad was working for this big company, they call it ISCOR, you know. My dad was one of those people who had to be put off their duties you know... my mom was the bread winner currently for the past many years. My dad didn't have work, but he had plenty of small businesses, those who can provide maybe bread or millet, samp for the evening... but never did much.' This individual has juggled small-scale work and education activities for over five years while trying to support his family.

A second research participant stressed that education institutions in Sebokeng are not responding to the needs of the township and its people. He noted that the situation of unemployable graduates is a sign that the institutional curriculum is

irrelevant to the community. He is particularly pained by the fact that his uneducated father worked hard as a mechanic to send him to school only for him to be unemployed.

Both experiences show the pressure of poverty on youth as they make decisions about education, work and supporting their families. The linear path: from education, to employment and then to a bright future and family well-being does not explain the character of the complicated lives of many poor and working-class youth. Instead, these youth follow a disrupted and non-linear path where immediate needs impact their participation in education, informal work and family support. We find that many young males feel 'stuck' and find it challenging to maintain hope. They are often berated by family members and friends for having a qualification, but no job.

### CRITIQUE OF POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Learners and educators agree on a general critique of post-school education: it focuses on a narrow set of formal qualifications, is rigidly conceived and focuses on 'working for somebody.' This type of education is not relevant to many local and informal economies, does not align with alternative visions of community and social development and does not promote exposure to alternative forms of knowledge, including self-knowledge. Our interviewees were critical of government and business: both promise 'partnership' and resources, but fail to provide either, and then blame institutions of education. Of course there were exceptions. Note that we are not making a blanket critique of professors, lecturers or post-school institutions (most of which struggle against great odds). Rather we are questioning the paradigm of education perpetuated through history and existing institutional policies, structures and practices.

One of our participants states that at school 'they give you the ideal picture: that success at school can get you to the good life. But that's the ideal, not the reality. You aren't anticipating the challenges, they come and you get anxiety.'

One instructor of adult basic education and training argues for more political education. 'You know for you to understand where you are heading to you must know where you come from. On 21 March it will be Sharpeville Day. You go outside and ask a learner what s/he knows about the 21st March, what transpired [and] s/he does not know. That day brought change to the South African political situation because it is after 21 March the African National Congress (ANC); the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) felt negotiations are useless. They started embarking on the armed struggle which led to this democracy of today. It is not just the freedom which fell from heaven. It came about as a result of a struggle, a long struggle... political education helps to teach a person to debate issues because it is not that things can be achieved without negotiation, without debating. People should have the attitude of expressing their own view.'

### NEW DIRECTIONS

Several participants identified new directions for post-school education. As a first step, we found out that debates and dialogues play an important role in questioning dominant models of post-school education and re-conceptualising the relationship between post-school institutions and poor and working-class communities. We also found examples of solidarity. Too often, education is valued in terms of promoting 'individual successes, as opposed to being a 'public good' and supporting community upliftment and change.



Reading time: Learners go through their lessons.

The founder of an informal youth development organisation said: 'After two years [of working elsewhere] we came to a conclusion: Guys we have to create our own non-governmental organisation (NGO); we have to create our own skills; we have to do our own things... we went to the health and social development [office]. They contacted us after 10 days. Guys we have a constitution for Rakeofela... We are all in this thing together. [Now] others would say, "wow, I like this place more than my home because of the respect that I gain here..." They see young people as leaders; they see what we have done from nothing to where we are today... If ever we hold hands to fight this poverty we can do a lot.' This experience shows how alternative forms of education can support community development. Many staff from formal post-school institutions are interested in learning from these examples as they consider how to improve community engagement and outreach.

### WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

In Sedibeng, we learned four things. Firstly, our current 'model' for post-school education is part of the problem. In large part, our model for post-schooling does not reflect the interests of poor and working-class communities. Neither is it as responsive as it could be to the lived experiences of youth and displaced adult workers or in supporting holistic development of people and communities. Secondly, a different model of education is possible. The way forward is unclear, but a starting point is inclusion of communities in discussions about education. Post-school institutions should also engage on local issues affecting local economies and community development. It is also important to increasingly come from a pedagogy of liberation perspective, and resist top-down and prescriptive approaches. The VUT Science and Technology Park in Sebokeng is initiating a multi-

year effort to more effectively engage the local community on skills development.

Thirdly, we have to be comfortable with tensions and contradictions. The dominant framework is that everyone must be an engineer and that South Africa must compete globally. These are not bad aspirations. However, what is missing in this framework is that we must at the same time work to provide decent jobs, respond to community needs and support holistic human development - for all people. In addition, we have to be mindful of the contradictions of development and growth. For example, we want more jobs and more electricity, but we also want clean jobs which don't harm workers or create sickness in our communities.

A revitalised post-school education can play an important role in supporting democratic debates about the inevitable trade-offs and challenges we face. Finally, we see education as a political struggle. If we let powerful interests, rather than people define the purpose of education, then education will serve their interests, not those of the community. Educators are willing allies in this struggle which has not one, but many answers, and which we hope to continue to discover in our work in Sedibeng schools and communities. <sup>LE</sup>

*David Balwanz, Sandile Zwane and Itumeleng Moabi are researchers at the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation at the University of Johannesburg.*

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