

Vision precedes education system

Many agree that our education and skills training systems are in crisis. But says **Enver Motala** what can you expect if our systems are based on the needs of a greedy few? We need to redefine our vision if we want quality education that serves a just economy and a cooperative and humane society.

Let's first look at the nature of society that was envisaged at the end of apartheid, where a society based on shared experiences of struggle and collective solidarity existed.

It was taken for granted that education, health and other social rights could only be met in a society which represented the hopes and voices of the majority of South Africans. The black working class made up the most racially oppressed and economically exploited members of society, but also the most militant and committed opponents in the struggle for freedom and justice.

It was this urban and rural poor and working class, as well as the unemployed who bore the brunt of the brutalities of centuries of colonialism and apartheid. They were dispossessed of their right to land and property and forced into types of labour that gave rise to capitalism in Southern Africa. This exploitative system gave rise to the barbarous system of education and training in South Africa.

Any transformation at the end of apartheid could not be separated from a discussion about the kind of society that would express the

rights and aspirations of a democratic society.

The end of colonialism and apartheid was not only about establishing a democratically elected government. It was about providing the foundations for transformation in South Africa which put in place policies, practices, institutions and strategies that contributed towards a society based on social justice, human rights and freedom. This essential discussion was about a vision for a post-apartheid society which would define our social systems.

But today discussions about education and training are paralysed because in the rush to design laws, policies and strategies, little thought was devoted to the larger question of the nature of the society they should serve. Transformation of apartheid's social relations and practices and their outcomes are not discussed in any meaningful way.

Because we have an expansive Constitution, people expect that education and other systems will meet the requirements of the working class and poor. But the Constitution is the subject of contestation and conflicting interpretations and the Constitutional

Court has to frequently rule on its meanings and purposes.

In reality, the failure to confront questions about the type of society that best serves the interests of the majority, leaves the most important decisions in the hands of those who have the power to organise for their own interests. These interests are those of powerful private and public lobbies who influence officialdom, and dominate through the power of the media.

This entrenchment of corporate power is ideological and advances a particular view of the world and of the systems necessary to it. Education is, therefore, left largely to the mechanisms of the market, whose influence has grown enormously in developed and developing societies.

Democratic organisations have not been able to assert the right to a socially directed education and training system, but the market has been able to penetrate everywhere. Any attempt at placing these issues in the public realm are met by the argument that those against the freedom of the market are in favour of state rule (statists).

Unless there is open debate about the goals of a democratic society in

education, discussions that serve the interests of privileged minorities will dominate. The responsibility for taking forward discussion lies with democratic organisations and those who are committed to genuine democracy in South Africa.

IDEAS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

The second issue concerns the dominance of conceptions about skills, competencies, and knowledge.

The media shows how powerful a particular way of thinking about skills and knowledge has become.

The media's main idea is that there is a great shortage of skills in our economy and this means that advancement in sectors of the economy is unimaginable. It promotes the idea that the education and training system is out of sync with the demands of the economy and that the lack of skills is the greatest obstacle to high levels of growth. It is the primary cause for low levels of productivity, and so the country cannot compete internationally and will fall further behind developed and other developing economies of the world.

Of course knowledge and skills are important for all societies. But to reduce the discussion to its use for employment in a capitalist system is a serious limitation on how the question of skills can be understood.

No capitalist economy has been able to provide full employment. The reality for most developing countries is high levels of unemployment as a structural condition of the economy. In South Africa unemployment has hovered around 28-30% even after apartheid. If we include those who have given up looking for work, it's much higher.

Knowledge is essential to the development of citizens and for the fullest expression of civic rights and responsibilities. It involves understanding the many cultures, values and belief systems in society, the ability to evaluate ideas and systems critically, to communicate socially, and to work for oneself and

for society. Reducing the role of knowledge production to serving the interests of business alone is shortsighted.

Limiting the discussion to skills for the economy is also problematic because it blames the lack of skills on the poor for a situation they did not create. These views are held by those who supported apartheid and are fearful of discussing what makes the acquisition of knowledge and skills difficult for the poor.

For workers and the poor barriers include access and cost. Learners have no educational resources, and face the absence of local educational infrastructure. Blaming government is not helpful since business was complicit in erecting barriers to quality education. Capitalists implied that black people were only good as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'.

The expectation that government will resolve the skills crisis re-enforces the idea that supply-side interventions are adequate. This idea masks the blame on capitalists for low levels of employment creation and inadequate investment in jobs.

Demand-side factors such as the ability of multinational corporations to relocate to centres of cheaper labour; the replacement of workers by technologies; the privatisation of parastatals; the low levels of training investment in occupational skills; and the absence of a protective environment for workers, affect the level of jobs in the labour market. The reality is that low paid and insecure jobs, low levels of investment in skills acquisition, unsatisfactory conditions of work and the spectre of unemployment are integral to the capitalist system of production.

Another issue is the idea that the working class should only access technical knowledge. This, some argue, is because they do not have the conceptual grasp required for higher learning.

Yet the history of human civilisation shows that knowledge

evolves through the collective contributions of all humanity. Knowledge and skills are indispensable human elements and not the preserve of special classes in society. This is what makes us human and makes possible the progress of society. That some individuals have made outstanding contributions to human knowledge is due to their collective social origins and that they could rely on pre-existing knowledge from previous generations.

Human civilisation is dependent on cooperative forms of social labour as its building block. Without socially connected cooperation, humanity would not have survived. Cooperation has provided a framework for the allocation of resources and for how the necessities of life are distributed.

CONCLUSION

After thousands of years of collective behaviour, societies are now torn apart by intense competition between private and social interests and individualism threatens the foundations of civilised behaviour. The present is an unparalleled epoch of greed, which has caused continuous conflict since the Second World War. The paradox is that it comes when humanity is able to produce goods in greater abundance than at any other time.

Against these realities, what kind of society best serves humanity needs to be re-asserted more forcefully than before. Only then can societies answer questions about the importance of education, knowledge and skills to society. It places a grave responsibility on democratic organisations to strongly assert their right to represent the poor, working class and unemployed. These organisations must demand fuller discussion about the future of humanity. LB

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