J. EDUCATION POLICY, 1995, VOL. 10, NO. 1, 45-55


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Political transition in South Africa has proved to be a contradictory, contested and faltering process. One of the sites of greatest social conflict and breakdown since the mid-1970s has been the apartheid education system. Yet, during the three years following de Klerk’s historic moves towards a “new South Africa”, there were no fundamental attempts to address the overall education crisis through policy change. A key issue in the educational dispensation is the future of the comparatively small number of well-resourced, well-functioning historically white schools. This article analyses the desegregation of these schools to illustrate trends in state policy which are likely to influence the future educational settlement. It argues that the de Klerk government’s policies around school desegregation exhibit a complex mix of privatization and devolution as part of a strategy to protect vested interests in the historically privileged sector of white education. The policy shift towards desegregation itself reflects the contradictions of the transition as well as the resourcefulness of the apartheid state in sustaining patterns of privilege at a time of political transition.

Introduction

At the start of 1991, historically whites-only state schools in South Africa were legally permitted to admit black students for the first time since the introduction of apartheid in 1948. This represented a change in policy from the strict logic of apartheid segregation; yet, as this article will illustrate, desegregation was coupled with moves towards devolution and privatization in a complex package of school reform, rather than being a straightforward endorsement of principles of racially mixed schooling. The reasons for this policy shift as well as its interpretation are the subject of this article. The article begins by outlining the context of state reform in South Africa; it then provides a brief narrative of school desegregation; and finally, it analyses desegregation policies in terms of privatization and devolution in South Africa during this period of political transition from 1990 to 1994.

The state in transition

The move towards school desegregation needs to be viewed in the context of significant political changes in South Africa. At the start of 1990, State President F. W. de Klerk and the National Party (NP) announced changes which launched a new era in South African history. The unbanning of political organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) opened new possibilities for legal political activity, including the prospect of changes in state power. The repeal of ‘cornerstone’ apartheid legislation such as the Population Registration Act, the Land Acts and the Group Areas Act gave substance to government claims that apartheid was dead. The
negotiation process brought prospects for a new constitution based on principles of equal rights for all in a democratic state. At the same time, a failing economy and unprecedented violence in parts of the country provided additional complexities to the new transition politics. In April 1994, after a faltering process of negotiation, South Africa's first democratic elections brought a government of national unity into power under ANC leadership, ending over 300 years of overt racial domination.

That changes in education would need to occur as part of the post-1990 political transition was clear. Segregated schools could not continue in the long term without the undermining of apartheid legislation, which classified children according to race and separated them residentially and in terms of facilities. In black schools, decades of protest pointed to a breakdown of the system and a profound loss of legitimacy which could not continue into a post-apartheid period. The massively unequal budgetary allocations to schooling for different races could also not continue; already, white education budgets were being reduced in favour of black education. And the long-standing demand by opposition groups for a single education department to replace the racially fragmented system could not be ignored.

In spite of the obvious need for changes in education, the NP government was slow to respond in terms of overall education policies. In 1991, more than a year after De Klerk’s historic announcements, it launched two discussion documents on education: the Education Renewal Strategy (ERS) and A Curriculum Model for Education in South Africa (CMSA). Both of these documents were schematic in approach, containing policy orientations rather than specific recommendations for overall education policy. Most significantly, they introduced a new discourse and a new set of concerns into state education policies. The ERS’s principle that ‘race should not feature in structuring the provision of education in a future education system in South Africa’ provided no suggestions as to how this might be implemented. Its suggestion that powers be devolved to the level of school management councils highlighted a significant new policy emphasis.

At the same time as this broad policy positioning, the government also maintained the racially separate education structures characteristic of apartheid, and embarked on a faltering policy of school desegregation. In the case of white schools in particular, this was accompanied by measures to strengthen parent influence over schooling as well as a measure of privatization. These are outlined in the following section which examines the process of school desegregation.

The desegregation of white state schools

A characteristic feature of apartheid education was its strict segregation on grounds of racial classification. Separate education departments for different races entrenched different patterns of spending, different patterns of provision, and different classroom experiences for children of different races. Inequalities of gender and urban/rural location accompanied racial inequalities. In 1984, racially separate departments were entrenched in an education act based on a new constitution introduced the year before.

The move towards school desegregation began on a small scale in the mid-1970s, when religious and other private schools illegally began to admit students of all races to previously whites-only schools. Ten years later, the Private Schools Act sanctioned the operation of these ‘open’ private schools; in keeping with the 1983 constitution, they would be classified with the white Department of Education and Culture and could ‘render services’ to other racial groups. In the mid-1980s, Indian and Coloured schools also began to admit students of other races, generally in limited numbers. However, official schooling policy remained one of strict segregation. In the words of F. W. De Klerk, then Minister of National Education: ‘As long as the National Party has a say, we will favour and stand by the basic approach of “own” education in government schools.’ In tracing the changes in government policy away from segregation, two broad influences are evident. The first was the manifestation of contradictions within the apartheid education system, resulting in problems of over-provision of schooling for whites together with under-provision for blacks. The second was the pressure of popular demands for changes in education policy, including school integration. These will be considered in turn.

Historically, white schooling consumed the lion’s share of the education budget even prior to the introduction of apartheid. Though constituting less than 20% of the population, whites absorbed around half of the education budget into the 1980s; better qualified staff in better resourced schools with lower teacher–pupil ratios largely accounted for this expenditure. For Africans, whose education was neither free nor compulsory, there were insufficient schools and classrooms. In the mid-1980s, about one million black children of school-going age were not in school.

By 1989, a declining white population together with demographic shifts brought white education to a crisis point. As apartheid crumbled, the movement of white families out of inner-city areas was accompanied by the movement of blacks into residential areas from which they had previously been excluded. Shifting patterns of population were also occurring in rural areas. In the ten years from 1979, dwindling enrolments had resulted in the closure of about 200 white schools, mainly in inner-city and rural areas. This meant the loss of thousands of school places, at a time when the government had acknowledged shortages of over 150,000 classroom places in black schools. In 1989, 26% of white school places were empty and there was every indication that demographic trends of white over-provision and black under-provision would continue. Coupled with this were budgetary cuts to white education in attempts to shift more money to black education. This produced a crisis which could no longer be ignored by the white department.

By 1989, the closure of white schools had come to public attention and was the focus of political pressure from a wide range of groupings. These included the influential extra-parliamentary National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC), the parliamentary opposition Democratic Party, and a range of pressure groups such as the Open Schools Association (OSA) in the Cape and All Schools for All People (ASAP) in Johannesburg. A number of liberal white teacher organizations also supported opening, and over 20 individual schools acting on their own initiative requested permission from the government to admit students of all races. However, the government refused all of these requests. Government policy was that white schools should close rather than fill their empty places with students of other races.

Eventually, faced with problems of provision in both white and black schooling and with political pressure for changes in education, the government began to explore possibilities for limited school desegregation. In early 1990, the ‘white’ education minister, Piet Claas, announced that the government would in principle permit white schools to accommodate pupils, on the same time that in terms of the principle of devolution of authority, parent communities would be given a greater degree of choice about student admissions. In September 1990, the three so-called ‘Claas Models’ were finally announced, laying down strict conditions under which schools could vote to desegregate. Under Model A, a school could become fully private, with buildings and equipment leased or sold (at market value or less) to the new school. The school would
then receive the same state subsidies as other private schools, then 45% of operating costs. Under Model B, a school could remain a state school, but its management council would have control over its admissions policy. Under Model C, a school would become state-aided (or semi-private). It would be run by a management council which could appoint staff, determine fees and be responsible for the maintenance of facilities. Such schools would receive a state subsidy to cover salaries of staff appointed within state-prescribed norms, usually amounting to about 80% of the operating expenses of schools. The management councils of schools would be responsible for raising remaining funds. School buildings and grounds would be legally transferred to the management council free of charge, with a reversionary clause should the school cease to operate.

In all cases, schools would need to comply with strict guidelines set out by the government. Schools would need to remain majority white and to give preference to white children in feeder areas. They would have to continue to uphold principles of Christian National Education and mother-tongue instruction and maintain their ‘traditional values and ethos’. In short, white schools would remain constitutionally bound to white education departments and would ‘render service’ to other of race groups provided that the schools remained fundamentally unchanged in the process.

Clase also stipulated that schools which did not wish to change their status need not vote. As well as defining the criteria for opening, the government also outlined detailed and rigorous voting procedures. Irrespective of the outcome of the poll, the final decision on whether or not a school would be permitted to change status rested with the minister.

By the start of the 1991 school year, 205 out of a total of 2130 historically white schools had voted to become Model B. Almost all of these schools were English medium; the majority were metropolitan; and there were more primary than secondary schools. By the end of 1991, 667 schools had transferred to Model B, 43 to Model C and one to Model A, while 35 empty white schools were transferred to other education departments. These figures illustrate that most schools did not avail themselves of the opportunity to desegregate; in effect, the majority chose to remain with the status quo of segregation.

Motives of schools which did open varied, ranging from supplementing their declining white enrolments to moral or political support for desegregated schooling. While many English-medium schools viewed opening as a fashionable move, strict entry requirements screened black students for academic and personal suitability, resulting in the admission of an elite group only. Those who had already attended private white schools were at a distinct advantage. Numbers of black students admitted varied from school to school, but were well within the stipulated quota for most schools. Overall, enrolments of black students were well below 10% of Model B and C enrolments, and less than 1% of total enrolments in historically white schools.

The Clase Models were criticized across the ideological spectrum. For those demanding that the education system be fundamentally restructured, the measures did not go far enough. For those demanding the maintenance of segregated education, the measures threatened cultural identity. Even those schools supportive of the models expressed fears about the importation of the lower standards and politicization of black schools into their own. For its part, the ANC praised parents who acted to open their schools, but criticized the models as slowing down the progress towards schools desegregation.

Against the background of deep crisis in black education, the Clase Models were more politically significant for white schools than for their black counterparts. It is obvious that the limited desegregation they introduced could not address the crisis of under-provision in black schools. Moreover, they also did not resolve the crisis of over-provision in white schools. Many schools continued to be under-enrolled, while others fell below viable enrolment levels and were faced with closure. The Clase Model’s stipulated limit of ‘50% + 1’ white enrolment meant that even if schools with low white enrolments were prepared to take larger numbers of black students, they were formally prevented from doing so. In 1990, 46 schools were closed, with every indication that this would continue. At the start of 1991, there were still 164,000 vacant places in white schools.

At the same time, however, the strict voting procedures and poll requirements continued to act as a brake on school desegregation. A number of comments can be made at this stage about the form of school desegregation introduced by the models. First, desegregation did not stem from a positive vision of change from the government itself. Rather, it was adopted in the face of a growingly untenable segregation policy and as a response to pressure particularly from certain English-medium schools and political groups. Indeed, the emphasis of the models was on the preservation of the ‘traditional values and ethos’ of white schools, rather than their transformation. Moreover, the passage towards actual desegregation was made complex and arduous for individual schools, suggesting a certain reluctance on the government’s part. Second, a significant policy shift in the new models was the emphasis on parent participation and the devolution of certain authority to school level. In effect, this meant that existing (white) parent bodies would be empowered to manage any changes towards desegregation – and also to prevent change. Through this measure, white constituencies favouring segregated schooling were empowered to maintain the status quo, with full government support. Third, the majority of schools chose not to exercise their option to desegregate; of those who did, the majority chose to remain as state schools (Model B), rather than change to semi-private schools (Model C).

In mid-1991, the politically conservative Clase resigned and was replaced by Piet Marais, a known reformist. This signalled a turn in desegregation policies. Shortly after taking office, Marais indicated that the government was investigating means of broadening choices and simplifying voting procedures for schools. At the same time, he introduced a new model, Model D, which would remove racial quotas from certain schools while allowing them to continue under the white education department. Four schools were almost immediately transferred to Model D, becoming in effect black schools operating within the white education department, subsidized at the higher level of white schools.

In June 1991 the government had introduced the first draft of the Education Renewal Strategy, followed in November by the Curriculum Model for Education in South Africa. The 1995 advocated the systematic establishment of management councils at all schools with increasingly devolved authority over matters of provision, finance, and the appointment and payment of teachers. While it would be state policy that ‘race should not feature in the provision of education, freedom of association’ and rights to ‘own culture, language and religion’ should be cornerstones of the new model. A strong interpretation of this certainly allowed for separate schooling, which the government termed ‘autogenous education’. As Marais stated at a later point:

The Government is committed… to working for a non-discriminatory education system, but on the clear understanding that those communities which prefer to have community-based autogenous education for their children should still be entitled to such education on the basis of equal state spending.

The start of 1992 saw further unexpected developments in the government’s desegregation policies. Amidst stringency measures to cut white education expenditure and fear of white teacher redundancies, Marais declared that all schools under the white
education department would be transferred to Model C, unless they voted (by a two-thirds majority) to maintain their existing status. Marais posed the benefits of the new arrangements in terms of saving money and thereby teachers' jobs, and in terms of the devolution of wide-ranging powers to local communities. To assist white parents who were unable to pay the new level of fees, the government set aside a sum of R70 million.24

In planning the new dispensation, Marais had met behind closed doors with a task group of major players in white education.25 As with earlier moves towards desegregation, the government was careful to assure the existing white constituencies who enjoyed privileged schooling that control would not pass out of their hands. Faced with criticism of his hasty move, Marais pointed out that it was consistent with the policy proposals of the ERS, although he conceded that the announcement of Model C had been made before full details were available.26 None the less, the change in policy direction could not be denied. After the complicated and delaying procedures for voting under the Clase Models, the new measures in fact imposed an option which a minority of schools had chosen for themselves. Even so, 96% of schools (2044) accepted Model C status, with only 90 schools refusing. These schools, made up of Models B and D and status quo schools which had never voted, were known as Model Q.

The financial options for schools were as follows: all schools would receive what amounted to about 80% of costs, which would pay for teachers' salaries. The management councils of Model C schools would then be responsible for financing additional capital and running costs, and for employing additional teachers if they chose to. Model Q schools would have to spread their funding over teachers' salaries and other costs; this would result in their being able to employ fewer teachers, thus pushing up teacher–pupil ratios.

Though the start of the school year in 1993 brought a rash of media attention to Model C schools, much of the day-to-day running of the schools took place out of public scrutiny.27 The need to 'run schools as businesses', responsible for their own financial management and fund raising, and competing for students, brought market relations to the core of historically white state schools.28 Differential access to parent resources, both in terms of money and expertise, intensified the axis of class inequality within the historically white system. Widely ranging fees marked the new inequalities. Faced with financial hardship and lack of resources, some schools in poorer communities applied to change their status to Model D. Other schools, unable to maintain their numbers of white students, closed down.29 In many cases, parents were unable or unwilling to pay fees. In a test case, the Supreme Court found that a school could not bar or deny learning materials to a white student (over the compulsory school attendance age) who had not paid school fees.30

Speculation that the system of models would be overtaken within months by large-scale policy changes in early 1993 did not prove accurate.31 In April, amidst indications that a single education system would soon be set up, the government established an Education Co-ordinating Service to investigate legal and bureaucratic procedures for combining the separate departments, thereby providing a technical response to a major political issue.

After the elections in April 1994, one of the first tasks facing the new government was to bring the racially segregated departments under the new authority of provincial governments, a task of some complexity. ANC pre-election statements had called for a review of the Model C system, whose privatization dimensions cut across ANC policy proposals for ten years of free, compulsory education for all children. However, during negotiations for the interim constitution, the status of Model C schools was given a measure of protection. The interim constitution stipulates that there may be no changes to educational institutions without bona fide negotiations with their management committees. This confirms the autonomous status of Model C schools, at least in the short term. In any event, it is likely that the tripartite classification of schools into state, state-aided and private appears set to remain, even if the classification of individual schools, including Model C schools, changes. Though the interim constitution enshrines equality, non-discrimination and equal access to schooling, it also protects cultural, language and religious rights as a basis for school ownership. In this context, the financial levers offered by state subsidisation are a potentially important source of pressure on Model C schools to change exclusivist admission practices.

Before concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that both the Indian and Coloured education departments refused to accept Model C provisions with their attendant rationales of cost-cutting. In both departments, teachers faced redundancies caused by financial cut-backs, and during 1993 thousands of teachers in black departments went on strike, with a halt to retrenchments being a major demand.

**Interpreting the models**

In the context of political transition in South Africa, the Clase and subsequent models involved a policy shift of some magnitude. They represented a break with apartheid traditions in a number of significant respects: they permitted racially mixed state schools; they introduced school fees into the white state sector; and they gave important new powers to school management councils. Yet it would be mistaken to interpret the models as straightforward expressions of desegregation, privatization and devolution, as this article will now argue.

In terms of desegregation, it would be difficult to argue that the new policies provided a vision of racially mixed schooling as a desirable goal for South Africa. Though they certainly opened the way for individual schools to change their traditional racial exclusivity, they did not break with racial categorizations. The policies enabled, but did not advocate, racially mixed schooling. Clase's stipulations that schools would continue to operate within racially based departments, that quotas would be monitored, and that the 'ethos' of schools should remain unaltered are evidence of a reformulation of racial ideologies, rather than their abandonment. Though the less conservative Marais endorsed the ERS's principle that 'race should not feature' in a future education system, the 'non-discriminatory education system' that he envisaged was also one which would allow culture to replace race as a basis for separation. In his words, 'race and colour, quite simply have no educational relevance' but 'Christian, culturally based education and mother-tongue education must still be able to enjoy its rightful place'.

The models enabled the government to set the terms for reformulating racial principles in schooling. Race as a principle of selection could safely give way to two other principles: devolution of responsibilities to school community level, and assimilationism. Importantly, white parent communities were entrusted with monitoring the pace of change - within clearly demarcated limits. At the same time, white schools had the right to remain segregated with full state support. Stipulating that the 'ethos' of schools was not to change set the terms of assimilationism to ensure that the 'norms and standards' of white schools would change as little as possible. The models brought significant changes in the discourse and terms of reference of education, as race subsided in prominence without major changes to the structures of provision and access.
instance of 'new right' privatization without addressing the complexities of their racial capitalist context.

Interpreting the models in terms of devolution is similarly complex. As mentioned earlier, the NP government consistently pointed to devolution, rather than racial mixing, as the major benefit offered by the new system. Having achieved a high degree of centralized control and a plethora of white education departments in the heyday of apartheid, the government was now able to say that ‘As unwieldy, centralised, bureaucratic control with its concomitantly impersonal style and educational management which is remote from the points where education is provided, must at all costs be avoided’.39 Instead, the approach of Model C meant that, if (white) communities wished to accept responsibility for managing their schools, ‘a devolution of wide-ranging powers to local communities, shared authority and community involvement’ would now occur to a greater degree than ever before.40 Devolution would take place within a central education department which would set ‘common norms for the provision of education’ and promote ‘equal treatment’.41 Importantly, the new policies would only apply to the white education department, which catered for a minority of the country’s schools.

How is this turn-around in policy to be explained? In a powerful argument on educational decentralization, Wellar points to ‘a basic tension between decentralization on one hand and the tendency of the modern state to assert or reassert centralised control over the education system on the other’.42 He suggests two reasons why modern states opt for strategies of decentralization: compensatory legitimation and conflict resolution. Both of these reinterpretations apply in the case of the models. Given the contradictory demands on the apartheid education system by its supporters and opponents, decentralization was both a means of making the state appear more responsive to various constituencies and a means of displacing conflict to the level of the white schools themselves. Devolution enabled the government to secure state funding for segregated schools and at the same time appear responsive to pressures for desegregation. It enabled local variation in response to the policy change and in policy implementation.

What the system of models achieved was the removal of the best resourced, best functioning schools from the common public pool at the moment of political transition. The legal transfer of the title deeds of schools free of charge to their management councils gave formal expression to what one senior education bureaucrat termed ‘giving away the family silver’.43 By allowing management councils to have limited discretion over admissions policies, the government allowed white communities to choose whether or not to desegregate and to control the pace of change. Policy space was provided for schools to be ‘exclusive in terms of culture and language medium (in effect, race) and still be funded largely by the state. Thus, devolution was used as a means of protecting privilege. At the same time, the state retained important controls over the school curriculum (which remained highly centralized) and over the conditions of service of teachers (though not their upper salary scales). Teachers who are appointed and paid for by management councils are inspected alongside other state-employed teachers.

Conclusion

In terms of policy analysis generally, this article points to the importance of context in understanding policy concepts. With commonly used concepts – desegregation, privatization, devolution, and even the state – it may be tempting to assume universal meanings. Yet, as this article has shown, these concepts take specific meanings in specific
contexts, and may not be as transparent in explanation as they appear to be. In this case, though school desegregation was given substantial media prominence, closer contextual analysis suggests that this was not the primary feature of the models, and that the form of desegregation they entailed was limited. Though the models introduced a measure of privatization, this was not the same as 'new right' privatization in other countries. Devolution, a long-standing demand of the democratic movement under apartheid, was used as a means to protect privilege, rather than to open up participation. Similarly, though the education policy process under the apartheid state shares features in common with the policy process in other capitalist states, there are also significant local features. The narrative of the models provides a clear illustration of a familiar style of education policy formulation and implementation under the apartheid state: secretive and non-participative, top-down and coercive, and unashamedly serving particular interests. This analysis highlights the need to address the complex relationship between global trends and concepts, and the diversity of local contexts, in understanding education policy.

Political transition in South Africa has proved to be a contradictory, contested and faltering process. One of the sites of greatest social conflict and breakdown since the mid-1970s was the apartheid education system. Yet, during the four years following De Klerk's historic moves towards a 'new South Africa', there were no fundamental attempts to address the overall education crisis through policy change. One of the most significant policy shifts was the introduction of the models into historically white-only schools. This article has attempted to show that this policy shift itself reflects the complexities and contradictions of its time. The models may be interpreted as an illustration of the resourcefulness of the apartheid state in securing patterns of privilege at the time of political transition.

Acknowledgement

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development in funding this research is hereby acknowledged.

Notes

2. Both of these documents were produced and published by the Department of National Education.
6. 21 SA schools apply for non-racial policy, Evening Post, 10 March 1990.
11. See, for example, 205 schools open doors to all races, The Star, 8 January 1991.
27. See, eg., Model C schools muddle through. Weekly Mail, supplement, April 1993.
38. Both ANC policies and the BBC envisaged nine to ten years of free compulsory education for all, a move which would entail a reduction of funding for white education overall.
43. Personal communication, August 1992.
44. See the Reports of the National Education Policy Investigation (1992) (Cape Town: Oxford, NIEC).