

# Open Schools: Reform or Transformation



**NAZIR CARRIM and YUSUF SAYED** of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) critically examine the 'opening' of white schools to all school students and argue that, while the government proposals are highly inadequate, the space opened up by the proposals can be used creatively in the struggle for a single non-racial education system

**S**ince the announcement by the Minister of Education, Piet Clase, in August 1990 of the 'opening' of white schools to all South Africans, the issue of 'open schools' has attracted intense public concern and debate in the media, school staffrooms and parent-school meetings. For some the 'opening' of white schools has created a meaningful space, while others view it as a non-issue. Schools that adopt an 'open' admissions policy offer better facilities and better qualified teachers to black parents whose children are being taught under appalling conditions.

For these parents the 'opening' of white schools is a way out of years of oppressive schooling for their children. For others, there is no way out. It is also the first opportunity for many white teachers and students to encounter black people as equal counterparts. In the wake of this 'open' schools issue, there has been very

little debate within the progressive educational movement about whether black parents should be sending their children to 'open' schools, or how to understand the issue.

## **Clase's proposals should be rejected**

If the progressive education movement is to formulate a response to Clase's proposals, the issue of 'open' schools needs to be placed in the context of the crisis in education and the crisis throughout South African society.

Prior to the Clase proposals, 'open' schools referred to those schools that had an 'open' admissions policy and which were private and/or independent of the state. This status they were able to enjoy through years of struggle against the state (see Christie, P, 1989 and 1991). However, these 'open' schools were peripheralised from the mainstream of South African education, both black and white,

since they catered for a minority of students. The issue of 'open' schools was then clearly not an issue of public debate, and neither was it general educational policy.

The Clase proposals are significant because Clase's three-model proposal to white schools created the space for the issue of 'open' schools to be publicly debated (There has, incidentally, also been an almost silent 'opening' of schools in 'indian' and 'coloured' schools since 1985, which has been boosted by the Clase proposals).

However, the proposals fail to go far enough both at the level of public debate and of policy. Because Clase's proposals reflect the reluctant reformism of the apartheid state and fail to seriously address, let alone resolve, the current educational crisis, they should be rejected.

Nevertheless, they do afford the progressive educational movement the space to meaningfully intervene in the white schooling process, and provides the opportunity to further the struggle for a single, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic education department. The 'open' schools issue calls for critique, protest and transformation, in keeping with the current overall political climate of the nation.

### The Education Crisis

There is no doubt that the crisis in South African education is a direct result of the apartheid system. The historical inequalities black South Africans have suffered because of apartheid have seriously affected their education. There is no need to recount here the specific details of the damages and inequalities caused by apartheid education, save to say that black education is marked by high teacher-pupil ratios, low teacher qualifications, overcrowded conditions, inadequate facilities, shortage of textbooks, high failure and drop-out rates and insufficient schools.

Of course, this is in the context of those black South Africans who have had some schooling. The reality for many black South Africans has been a protracted disruption of normal schooling, to the point of no schooling at all. White education, on the other hand, has been historically characterised by better facilities, better provisions and better teacher qualifications.

Recently, however, white education has also increasingly become characterised by a considerable decline in pupil numbers, wastage of facilities and build-

ings, and the closure of white schools.

Clase's proposals emerge out of this context. Clase responds not to the chronic and massive education crisis but primarily to the dwindling numbers at white schools and the threat of their closure. Clase reasons that in order to save this situation, one has to somehow allow these white schools to enroll an 'x' amount of black pupils. This would save the school from closing down by providing it with the requisite number of pupils to keep it going. Furthermore, Clase hoped that the proposals would be interpreted as a positive step towards removing racial discrimination in education and be seen as being in keeping with the spirit of De Klerk's reforms.

### Pandering to white racists

Pandering to white racists, Clase also reasoned that enrolling black pupils into white schools needed to be done under certain conditions; conditions that placate white fears of being 'swamped' and ensure that they do not lose their privileges and position of domination. As such, Clase has been able to make provision within the existing apartheid constitution, without enacting any changes in laws controlling education. At the same time he has managed to keep white education, in the main, still separate from black education.

Clase's proposals are more telling in their silences than their utterances. At best they are an attempt at reform, at worst they are administrative changes aimed at excluding the possibility of a single education department being established and ensuring that most of apartheid education remains unchanged.

Clase's proposals do not:

- challenge the foundations of apartheid education;
- address the black education crisis at all;
- respond to the demand for a single education department;
- respond to the demand for a 'people's education';
- respond to the backlogs caused by apartheid education even for those white schools that do go open;
- problematise the nature of white education itself.

Clase's proposals offer white parents the opportunity to decide whether the schools should go 'open'. Thus the future of the white school is left to the white community only. The voting procedures that Clase set out in his provisions in the event of a particular school opting to go 'open' are absurd. An 80% poll, and a

72% majority, is required. By only allowing whites to vote, Clase further disenfranchises the already disenfranchised.

White parents have the right to vote for one of three models offered by Clase. **Model A** allows the school to close down as a state school and to reopen as a private school. **Model B** allows the school to remain as a state school but with an 'open' admissions policy. **Model C** allows the school to be a state-aided semi-private school.

All of these models are subject to the same conditions:

- all schools must maintain a 51% white majority in its population;
- the christian, national cultural ethos of the school should be kept intact;
- the management of the school is to determine the selection procedures;
- no school is necessarily bound to consider curriculum changes;
- the 'opening' of schools does not necessarily mean the employment of black teachers on the staff of those schools which do 'open';
- the financing of black pupils at these white 'open' schools is the responsibility of the black parent and pupil.

### The Wider South African Crisis

Since February 2, 1990 the political scenario of South Africa dramatically changed, enacting a necessary shift from the politics of protest to the politics of transformation. Whilst this is the shift that takes place from the side of the people, the state shifts from outright repression to reformism. The difference in shifts is crucial, since it embodies the difference between transformation and reformism.

Reformism refers to the strategy of the apartheid state to incorporate the black population into government without fundamentally restructuring the system as a whole. It also is an overt acknowledgement that the state can no longer continue to stifle the demands of the black population through force and brutality.

Transformation, refers to a position that argues for a restructuring of the apartheid system itself, particularly with regard to the legacies of oppression, racism, sexism and exploitation. It regards an accommodation within the apartheid system as fundamentally inadequate primarily because historical inequalities are not effectively redressed.

Among the responses of the state in this context, has been the drive to place provision of social services on the doorsteps of local communities. This is verified with regard to recreational facilities,



health services and now also education. Another response has been to allow for privatisation. This is evident in sectors of the economy, health services, housing, recreational facilities and now also education. In putting the responsibility of white education at the doorsteps of the white community itself, along with privatisation, Clase's proposals are in keeping with these processes.

**Privileged education**

The Clase proposals simply amount to this: if you want education, and a non-racial education at that, you have to pay for it. Black parents, already seriously disadvantaged, are now burdened with the responsibility of financing their children at 'open' schools. This severely limits

**• A protest against the opening of schools in Vereeniging last year**

the number of black people able to attend these 'open' schools.

More fundamentally, Clase projects education as a privilege and not as a right. As a result only the privileged benefit. *This is typically symptomatic of privatisation.*

Strangely enough, this would be the case for all of the Clase models. Thus even if a school votes for Model B, the effect on a black pupil that is admitted to a Model B school would still be the same as if that pupil had gone to a private school anyway. (There is already an emerging pattern of black private school

pupils moving into these 'open' white state schools. For the black pupils these white state schools are cheaper options. For the white state schools, these black pupils from private schools tend to meet the 'standards' requirements of selection criteria and suit the schools perfectly).

The Clase proposals set in place the move towards privatisation in education, thus widening the already existing divisions in South African society.

In keeping with the state trends of deregulation and decentralisation, the Clase proposals' insistence on the school communities taking on the responsibility of the future of their schools, denationalises education and rids the state of most of their responsibility - as they have done in the economy, housing, on regional and local council levels, and in health services.

However, the community's involvement in the affairs of the school is also a feature of 'people's education'. Is this possibly one of the progressive elements of Clase's proposals? Before exploring this question, and the possibilities for progressive action that Clase's proposals open up, we need to consider the following:

- The schools that have voted to open have very few vacancies. Furthermore the number of vacancies in white schools, which the state estimates at 300 000, are too few to accommodate the number of black students who have no access to schooling, further highlighting the reformist nature of the proposals. At present, it is estimated that there are about three million black students who have no access to schooling.

- White communities are caught in a Catch 22 situation. If white schools do not vote to 'open', they will be forced to close down because of the lack of requisite pupil numbers. If they vote to 'open', they will have to substantially increase black student enrolment to justify their continued existence. Yet, they are unable to do this because they have to maintain a 51% white majority in their schools.

- White schools in the rural areas have not as yet voted. Rural areas in particular are the areas where the most marginalised and vulnerable sectors of the population are.

**Possibilities offered by the Clase proposals**

For the first time in South African educational history white state schools are going to experience the presence of black pupils. White state schools will also have to

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consider black South Africans as part of their constituency.

In opting to 'open', white schools are having to face the educational effects of apartheid on South African education. This is manifest in white schools' anxiety around the issues of 'standards', English as a second language, different cultural backgrounds of pupils, age in pupils, lack of exposure to the conceptual schemes of a particular subject discipline and the nature of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relations.

This affords the progressive education movement the opportunity to intervene in this experience and share with these schools the lessons they have learnt (there already is a growing demand from teachers for teacher workshops that will look at such issues). Such contact has tremendous political and other potential, and if co-ordinated well enough, can aid in involving these schools in the demand for a single education department.

In 'opening', white pupils will have the opportunity to make contact with black student movements and to benefit from the lessons they have learnt. This opens the way for conscientising white pupils as to the nature of the South African reality.

On a general level, white schools can now be pressured to become part of na-

tional campaigns to demand a single school calendar, a single education department, etc. Schools that have gone 'open' may also be pressured to reject the conditions of the Clase models. Black parents on school management committees can use this position to move school communities to changes not only in school affairs but also around national concerns.

### Dangers

These possibilities must be seen in the context of the minimal numbers of black students who have been admitted to white schools. While no accurate figures are available, an estimated 5 000 students have been admitted to white schools nationally. The number of black pupils at most schools is, therefore, insignificant.

The danger exists that, instead of changing the school, black pupils will be changed by the school. Students and parents may be incorporated into the values and cultural ethos of the white schools, and become alienated from their own communities. This is more reason for the progressive education movement to intervene in this process.

The Clase proposals are also part of the continuing process of closing down white schools and/or selling facilities to the private sector. As part of a strategy around

the 'open' schools issue, the progressive education movement needs to seriously consider opposing these moves. It needs to demand that these facilities be made available for black schooling.

The 'open' schools issue demands that the progressive education movement formulates a coherent vision of what it considers 'open' schools to be. In this regard, it must move from the politics of protest to the politics of transformation, by beginning to define how the 'open' schools issues can contribute to the struggle for a single non-racial education system, without demobilising the mass-based educational organisations.

This struggle needs to be considered as part of the process of fundamentally restructuring the education system. The task is urgent if we are not to lose the space the Clase proposals have opened.

### References

Christie, P (1991) *Open Schools* Raven Press, Braamfontein. Christie, P (1989) 'Desegregating Schools in South Africa: the case of the Catholic "open" school' in *Discourse* 10 (1).

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