

Schools as (Dis)Organisations: the 'breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching' in South African schools

PAM CHRISTIE

Faculty of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT *A prominent and problematical legacy of apartheid education, which requires transformation, is the poor functioning of a large number of previously black schools (commonly termed 'the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning'). While the causes of breakdown may be traced back to the years of opposition to apartheid and the resistance struggle waged within schooling from 1976 onwards, it is less clear what may be done to remedy the situation. This article explores particular organisational dimensions of school failure with a view to understanding how they have affected the operation of schools, why schools have broken down and what interventions may remedy this breakdown. It moves beyond rational theories of organisation to argue that perspectives derived from psychoanalytical approaches to organisation may be useful in planning strategies for intervention to transform teaching and learning in these schools.*

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses a prominent and problematical legacy of apartheid education in South Africa, which is commonly termed the 'breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning'. What this refers to is the poor functioning of a large number of previously black schools in South Africa. These schools, generally secondary schools located in the poor and disrupted communities spawned by apartheid, share a number of common features. These include: disputed and disrupted authority relations between principals, teachers and students; sporadic and broken attendance by students and often teachers; general demotivation and low morale of students and teachers; poor school results; conflict and often violence in and around schools; vandalism, criminality, gangsterism, rape, and substance abuse; school facilities in a generally poor state of repair. Listed in this way, these features seem to be an inverse of the 'lists' of features so popular in effective schools research (see for example

Hopkins, 1987; Reynolds *et al.*, 1993; Levin & Lockheed, 1994; Jansen, 1995; Heneveld & Craig, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996).

On one level, the reasons for the breakdown of black schooling are not hard to find. They may be traced back to the years of opposition to apartheid and the resistance struggle waged within schooling from 1976 onwards. The rejection of Bantu Education through protests and boycotts (often violent) and the unsuccessful attempts to forge an alternative People's Education have brought a legacy of contestation of authority. Alongside this are the poor material provisioning of apartheid black schools and the conditions of poverty and disruption in black communities, which have contributed to the low value placed on schooling. These conditions—both the tradition of opposition and disruption in schooling and the deprivation of schools and communities—have not simply disappeared with the replacement of the apartheid government with a new government. Accounted for in this way, the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching is understandable. What is less clear, however, is what may be done about it, particularly given the continuing shortage of resources for schooling. Thus the transformation of these schools is a major challenge facing the post-apartheid national and provincial governments.

This article stems from my involvement in the Committee on the Culture of Learning and Teaching (CCOLT), a project established in the province of Gauteng by the Minister of Education in early 1995. In this project, small teams of educationists visited a selection of poorly functioning schools with a view to developing strategies for intervention. The features of breakdown encountered in CCOLT visits were not particularly surprising, though the visits did bring out a greater site-specific and textured encounter. What was clear, however, was that the breakdown of schools involved a complex set of dynamics, far easier to describe than to correct. Like the 'list approach' to school effectiveness, the litany approach to the breakdown of teaching and learning is misleadingly simple. Both miss the dynamics of schools as social institutions, with complex relationships shaped by conscious and unconscious processes, rational and irrational. While respecting the confidentiality of unpublished CCOLT findings, this paper draws to some extent on my CCOLT experiences (De Clercq *et al.*, 1995; Chisholm & Vally, 1996).

The article starts from the assumption that schools together with families are the major social institutions for children and youth in modern societies. Schools have been variously analysed and explained in relation to the broader society, for example in terms of socialisation (Parsons, 1961), reproduction (Althusser, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), resistance (Willis, 1977), normalisation and subjectification (Foucault, 1977) and pastoral-bureaucratic genealogy (Hunter, 1994). This article draws on the school-society relationships variously explained in these works, but extends the analysis over the boundaries of sociology of education. Within sociological theory, it assumes that alongside the forces of social structure are the possibilities of human agency, of acting within structures in ways that are not simply determined by them. The article argues that, like all institutions, schools may be

analysed in terms of patterned social behaviour and the breakdown of teaching and learning may be usefully analysed and understood as organisational failure. However, to interpret and explain the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching it is necessary to go beyond rationalist approaches to organisations. The article suggests that perspectives derived from psychoanalysis may well cast light on some of the complex dynamics of school failure as a basis for considering ways of intervening to improve the quality of these schools.

The article begins by commenting briefly on the concept of culture; it then provides an analysis of schools as institutions; outlines some of the dimensions of organisational failure in dysfunctional South African schools; interprets these within a framework informed by psychoanalysis; suggests principles for intervention based on the analysis.

CULTURE

The term 'culture of learning and teaching' has entered South African popular discourse with an ease that belies its theoretical complexity. It accords well with commonsense about what is going wrong in dysfunctional schools, perhaps because its meanings are so malleable. However, if the term is to be properly explanatory, it needs clarification and delineation.

Following Geertz (1973), I would argue firstly that cultural analysis is primarily an interpretive activity best approached through 'thick description'. Its subject matter is social discourse and 'the informal logic of actual life' (p. 17) and its principal task is 'gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live' (p. 24). Secondly, as Geertz argues, culture itself is not a social force with causal attributes:

... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described. (p. 14)

One of the strengths of examining 'the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching' in this approach is that attention is drawn to the complex texture of daily life in schools. To analyse this means to go beyond the general descriptors of the 'list approach' to school failure. It means to work towards an account of the symbols and actions—the social discourse and 'informal logic'—that constitute school breakdown and their meanings for those involved in the collective life of schools. Importantly, it is to recognise that culture is not the *cause* of the problems inherent in dysfunctional schools; rather, it is the lived experience of them. Talking of the 'breakdown' of the culture of learning and teaching should not in any sense be taken to mean the 'absence' of a culture of learning and teaching in these schools; what is implied, rather, is the development of a school culture which is inimical to learning and teaching. It is also necessary to recognise that learning and teaching were of doubtful quality, particularly in black schools, under apartheid, well before the notion of a

breakdown emerged (see Kallaway, 1984); thus the 'restoration' of a culture of learning and teaching, means, in fact, its transformation.

That said, this article does not attempt to give an account of cultural practices in dysfunctional schools, which were addressed in the CCOLT reports [1]. Rather, its task is to explore particular organisational dimensions of school failure with a view to understanding how they have affected the operation of schools, why schools have broken down and what interventions may remedy this breakdown. It is to the analysis of schools as organisations that the article now turns.

SCHOOLS AS ORGANISATIONS

As institutions, schools may be understood minimally in terms of regularised and sanctioned social practices which persist and change through human activity. More precisely, schools provide the organisational environment for systematic, formalised learning and teaching (see for example Rosenholtz, 1991; Aspin & Chapman, 1994; Morrow, 1995). A broad statement that 'social organization may be defined as a structure which relates people to each other in the general process of managing nature and themselves' (Cooper, 1990, p. 172) applies also to schools, and concepts of formal organisation, division of labour, administrative forms, forms of standardisation and so on may usefully be worked with in understanding why schools as organisations succeed or fail. Whereas classical functionalist organisation theory stresses that organisations 'operate to maintain their boundaries and to maintain their equilibrium' (Gouldner, 1959, quoted in Cooper, 1990, p. 167), post-modern organisation theorists treat boundaries as permeable and uncertain (see Power, 1990, p. 121).

Schools as organisations show a remarkable degree of similarity globally in late modernity (see Fuller, 1991; Meyer *et al.*, 1992). There are general social agreements on the nature of what a school is that embrace considerable variation across individual institutions (see Meyer & Scott, 1992). In South Africa there are state controls over crucial structural forms of schools, such as school registration, teacher registration, categories of teacher remuneration and responsibility, age regulations for students, student-teacher ratios, curriculum at each level, certification at formal exit points and so on [2]. In effect, there are controls over what counts as a school, who may teach and at what level, who is to be taught, how and what and how formal learning is verified. Within this broad and pervasive stability in the structural features of schools, schools as individual institutions vary widely. However, it would be rare to come upon a school and not know it as such.

Like other organisations, schools both differentiate between people and tasks and integrate across differences, as is well captured by Bernstein's (1975) classic account of ritual in education. As Bernstein argues, introducing the concept of ritual:

Ritual in humans generally refers to a relatively rigid pattern of acts, specific to a situation, which construct a framework of meaning over and beyond the specific situational meanings. Here, the symbolic function of ritual is to relate the individual through ritualistic acts to a social order, to heighten respect for that order, to revivify that order within the individual and, in particular, to deepen acceptance of the procedures which are used to maintain continuity, order and boundary and which control ambivalence towards the social order. (p. 54)

Consensual rituals such as assemblies, ceremonies, uniforms and badges bind members of the school together as a moral community; differentiating rituals such as age and sex groupings reinforce and deepen the authority relations of the school and contribute towards order and control.

Schools as formal organisations relate people to each other in specific ways both within and outside their boundaries, as, for example, students, teachers, principals, parents and inspectors. Schools tend to be hierarchical, with ranked levels of authority. Whether schools are structured as bureaucracies (applying Weber's classic formulation) or as loosely coupled systems (following Weick, 1976) or institutions of a different type (following Meyer & Scott, 1992) has been the subject of debate (see Ingersoll, 1993). Within these different analyses, however, there is some agreement that schools demonstrate different forms and levels of control. Whereas the state may apply tight regulations and teachers be graded and paid in bureaucratic formulations, the 'closed door' of the classroom always brings at least a degree of autonomy to teachers' work (see Lortie, 1975). Whether this degree of autonomy, or the level of specialised knowledge teachers use in their classrooms, amounts to professionalism may be debated. However, as Ingersoll (1993) points out, teachers are subject to a range of formal and unobtrusive controls. They commonly have no discretion over the subjects they teach (a notable complaint of black teachers in South Africa); they rely on the school hierarchy to 'back them up' in disciplinary matters, since they have limited authority; and they are often subject to the personal controls of principals over issues which affect the quality of their daily work, such as the rooms they are assigned, the classes they are allocated to teach, their timetable schedule and the distribution of non-teaching duties.

Teachers are responsible for engaging students in formal curriculum activity (see Rosenholtz, 1991), as well as policing morals and values (Ingersoll, 1993, p. 99). In doing this, they depend heavily on organisational support and, in particular, the predictability of ritual, the disciplinary sanctions of a set of structural authority relations and the security—material and symbolic—provided by school boundaries.

As organisations, schools are structured around axes of time and space, which constitute significant boundaries for learning and teaching. They are symbolic as well as material boundaries and they are predicates for school discipline. Schools run in terms of a set of chronological codes that are uniformly imposed. Clock time provides a basic organising framework allowing

activities to be synchronised and controlled (see Gurvich, 1964; Clark, 1985). It is a way of allocating work and of separating school from non-school (such as 'after school' and holidays). Given the plurality of time systems that people move within (for example, individual time, family time, religious time, etc.), schools use a collective time frame to schedule events relative to each other and to control movements and activities of different groups of people (see Hargreaves, 1994). Schools span a particular number of years; years are divided into terms, terms into weeks, weeks into school days, days into starting and finishing times and, within this, into periods. The timetable frames learning and teaching activities by distributing them according to strict allocations of time periods. Hours of learning are one of the bases of organising the curriculum; even in modular, credit based systems, learning time is a constitutive element of the curriculum [3]. The school bell punctuates the day, separating the start and finish of school time from non-school time, lessons from break time, one subject from another. This division of time is normative within the organisational form of schooling and schools that organise time differently are exceptions. Foucault (1977) notes the significance of time in the discipline of the school when he writes that the school is:

... subject to a whole micro-penalty of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect attitudes', irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency). (p. 178)

What is noteworthy here is that most of these micropenalties apply within the time boundaries of the school; outside of the formal school day, they may not serve as normalising judgements of discipline at all. In short, maintenance of time codes and the boundaries they provide is a central premise of school discipline.

If time provides one constitutive framework for institutional schooling, space provides another. Schools are places specifically assigned for the institutional, formalised learning of children and youth. Many schools are used for nothing else and, consequently, are empty for large blocks of time. Again, if schools are not tied to spatial locations, this itself provides a defining characteristic, such as 'schools without walls' or 'schools of the air'. Schools are demarcated from surrounding space, often by fences, and within schools, classrooms separate space for teaching and learning activities. Gordon's work on South African farm schools shows that space is a determinant in school failure rates; school principals may fail and exclude students in order to use space for higher classes (Gordon, 1991; Christie & Gordon, 1992). As well as demarcating space for specific pedagogic functions, schools provide for the physical care and safety of their participants. Arrangements of space are symbolic as well as material—and sometimes the demarcation of space is only symbolic. Even when schools have no fences demarcating their boundaries or when lessons take place under trees, boundaries are symbolically drawn and abided by or transgressed

[4]. Authority is bolstered spatially, for example in terms of who may be where during the school day. As with time, transgressions of space warrant disciplinary action in the codes of schools.

In stressing the importance of regularised common norms and practices in the organisational operation of schools, it needs to be pointed out that authority need not necessary be strictly hierarchical, ritual need not be empty, routine need not be mindless, shared values need not be conservative and disciplinary power may be generative. To talk of these dimensions is to open possibilities for considering organisational operations, not to foreclose them. That said, however, the analysis does suggest that there may be real limits to the possibilities of fundamentally transforming schools—an issue which this article recognises but does not develop.

What, then, does this analysis contribute to an understanding of the 'breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching'? The following section argues that, in the failing township schools in South Africa, organisational environments do not support the substantive work of systematised learning. One of the meanings of the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching is a breakdown of rhythmical, disciplined learning and teaching, formally structured in time and space.

TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES

In the CCOLT study of dysfunctional schools, we identified four categories of problems: poor physical and social facilities; organisational problems; poor school/community relationships; poor relationships between the education department and the schools (de Clercq *et al.*, 1995) [5]. Many of these aspects of the breakdown of teaching and learning were clearly observable, well-documented and seemingly self-explanatory.

Certainly, the schools we visited showed clear signs of organisational breakdown in both structures and processes. There were problems with management and administration, including weak and unaccountable authority structures. For example, in one of the schools, the principal had not attended regularly for the past 18 months and the school was run by a deputy who was reluctant to take full authority. In another school, the principal, who portrayed himself to us as a dynamic leader, was resented by staff for his lack of accountability. In most of the schools in the CCOLT studies, information was poorly communicated, disciplinary and grievance procedures were vague or non-existent, staff meetings were not held regularly and there was evidence that meetings procedures, record keeping and general administration were poor. Furthermore, in the CCOLT schools, time boundaries were not maintained. Schools were unable to enforce a full working day or week for students and staff, and students, staff and principals themselves often came late to school and left early. A common practice was for numbers of students to leave school premises at lunch break and not return for the rest of the day. Whole school days were cancelled for sporting activities and schools readily closed early for sporting

events. Unnecessary timetable confusions accentuated the sense of unpredictability about the school day. Difficulties in scheduling and keeping appointments with us as researchers provided further evidence of the haphazard timetabling and cancellation of classes in these schools. In short, boundaries of time no longer acted as stable predictors for school activities or reliable predicates for discipline. Space boundaries were also transgressed. Problems from local communities spilt over into schools; violence of all sorts threatened the safety of students, teachers and principals, alcohol and drugs were peddled through fences and the authority of the principal and staff did not prevail over the symbolic or material space of the school. In short, organisational rituals, discipline and boundaries were simply not working and their dysfunction was part of the culture—the ‘informal logic’ of daily life—of these schools.

Other evidence of more complex organisational breakdown was the breakdown of formal relationships within schools. For example, interviews with stakeholders told of: the absence of school vision and purpose; demotivation of students and their lack of interest in their studies; demotivation of teachers who felt underpaid, blamed for the problems and disempowered; demotivation and lack of professional skills of management figures, who felt disempowered and unable to perform competently. All the interviews with the various stakeholder groups revealed the conflictual nature of relationships between management, teachers, students and parents and the negative effects this had on the school. They pointed to lack of respect, trust or cooperation among the different stakeholders, with each group complaining about the others’ lack of motivation, commitment and discipline.

However, the problems went further than this. What compounded them was what we identified as the reluctance of most school stakeholders to acknowledge their respective roles, responsibilities and agency in dealing with their institutional and structural problems. In a range of ways, schools seemed to have habituated to their conditions and done little about tackling problems that they could have addressed. For instance, schools did not undertake small repairs, such as fixing plugs on stoves in the home economics room; instead, they waited (in vain) for the department to arrive. Broken windows, chairs, desks and electrical appliances were part of the everyday reality of these schools. Schools were sometimes unfenced in spite of complaints about intruders. Facilities such as libraries (however meagre) were often not used; in two of the schools the reason given for this was that the library was a lockable, secure room that needed to be used as a storeroom. Litter often lay about in the school grounds and classrooms and there were few attempts to cultivate gardens or playing fields around the school buildings. Most of those interviewed mentioned that they were victims of an oppressive system which paralysed them and made them indifferent and dependent. Feeling unfairly treated by the system and unable to perform their tasks, they masked their anxieties, fears and dissatisfaction by blaming others and performing their tasks at a minimum level. They showed no interest or initiative in breaking out of these demoralising patterns.

There were almost no exceptions to this, and schools seemed to stifle what few proactive opportunities there were.

It seems clear that the breakdown of management and leadership within schools is an important part of their dysfunction. For a culture of teaching and learning to operate, it will be necessary to establish proper and effective management systems and structures with clear procedures and clear lines of authority, powers, responsibility and accountability. It is also clear that many problems stem from the general environment and cannot be resolved at the level of the single school. What is less clear, however, is how to explain and remedy the pervading negativity and apathy, the seeming lack of agency or will to tackle those problems that school participants could address for themselves, and the tendency to blame others for the problems. These problems go beyond the explanatory powers of rational theories of organisation. To understand and remedy problems of this nature, perspectives derived from psychoanalytical approaches to organisations may be more useful than conventional sociological theories. Particularly useful here is the work of Isabel Menzies Lyth, which draws on Bion's (1971) theories of groups [6].

In her classic study of nurses in a large teaching hospital, Menzies Lyth (1960) used the term 'social defence' to explain how nurses dealt with the powerful anxieties evoked by their work with ill, injured, dying and dead people. She writes:

Very striking ... was ... loss of individuality or depersonalization, affecting both nurses and patients. There was a marked tendency, for example, to refer to patients not by their names, which contained their individuality, but by a bed number, an illness or a damaged part of the body [for example, "the kidney in ward 2"]. This implied that the patient was no longer a whole person who needed care, but a part-object only.... The dynamic seemed a massive protection for the nurses against the pain, anxiety and responsibility of confronting the totality of the patient, his [sic] emotional distress as well as his physical condition. (Menzies Lyth, 1989, p. 16)

Menzies Lyth argues that there are dynamic processes operating consciously and unconsciously in institutions and that members of institutions build social defence systems into institutions as a way of dealing with anxieties stemming from within themselves and evoked by the institution. Drawing on Bion's work on groups, she notes:

Of particular significance are the defences developed to deal with anxiety provoking content and the difficulties in collaborating to accomplish the common task. These defences appear in the structure of the institution itself and permeate its whole way of functioning. (p. 28)

Within this framework of analysis, social defences are integral to the structures and processes of institutions. Schools as organisations need to contain the anxieties associated with learning and teaching (see Salzberger-Wittenberg *et*

al., 1981; Jaques, 1990). Rituals, school rules, formalised social relations and adherence to the boundaries of time and space provide a form of containment for learners and teachers. However, when the organisation itself is collapsing—when authority structures have broken down and the boundaries of time and space are transgressed—social defences no longer operate to contain the conscious or unconscious anxieties of its members. As Jaques asserts strongly:

...the existence of hopelessly badly organized managerial institutions...not only allows for the acting out of these deeper lying psychotic anxieties, but leaves people involved with no choice but to do so. (Jaques, 1995b, p. 362)

A related dynamic is that the substantive work of the organisation may be overshadowed by powerful but unconscious group processes. Bion's analysis of groups is illuminative in this regard (see Jaques, 1955, 1995a; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; de Board, 1985; Pines, 1985; Sutherland, 1985; Krantz & Gilmour, 1990; Kets de Vries & Associates, 1991; Long, 1992; Chapman, 1993; Straker, 1994). Bion argues that people struggle to relate to each other on joint tasks, yet at the same time need to be part of groups. He suggests that when people relate on a joint task in a work group, they may at the same time become engaged in largely unspoken and unrecognised group processes which stem from members' primitive phantasies and anxieties. Bion terms this 'basic assumption' group activity, since in this activity, members act as if they share a basic assumption about how their goals may be achieved. The work group focusses on the chosen, conscious task and is more oriented towards reality. In contrast, the basic assumption group operates at a largely unconscious level. As Straker (1994) points out, it interprets reality according to certain preconceptions and it provides a containing structure for group members. Bion identified three basic assumption groups: dependency, fight/flight and pairing. These three groups have in common:

...massive splitting and projective identification, loss of individual distinctiveness or depersonalization, diminution of effective contact with reality, lack of belief in progress and development through work and suffering. (Menzies Lyth, 1989, p. 21)

While this unconscious group activity may give energy to work group activity around which an organisation is formed, it may also make it difficult for the work group to be mobilised around its specialist task. It may prevent understanding and development. In the case of schools as work groups, the main task is to address the substantive work of learning and teaching. However, when the organisational context of schools breaks down, teaching and learning are impeded as unconscious (basic assumption) group activity predominates over specialist tasks and overshadows them.

In a similar analysis, Zaleznik (1989) suggests that 'real work' in organisations may easily be subordinated to the 'psychopolitics' of balancing the rational

and irrational expectations of members. In this process, social relations and office politics get more attention than substantive work. He writes:

This complexity in human nature—especially our conflicting tendencies to cooperate and to go it alone—leads managers to spend their time smoothing over conflict, greasing the wheels of human interaction, and unconsciously avoiding aggression, especially aggression that centres on them and their role. ...[P]sychopolitics drives out real work. People can focus their attention on only so many things. The more it lands on politics, the less energy—emotional and intellectual—is available to attend to the problems that fall under the heading of real work. (1989, p. 60)

Instead of being able to focus on their substantive task of learning and teaching, schools have become caught up in forms of conflict, aggression and uncertainty that cannot be contained within a weak organisational structure. Principals, teachers and students have lost focus and have directed their energies towards the malfunctioning of the institution, at the expense of substantive learning and teaching. The breakdown in schools is in part at least a breakdown of rhythmical, disciplined learning and teaching—the ostensible, conscious goal of the work group.

These theories—of the breakdown of social defences and the predominance of unconscious group activity over substantive task activity in schools—go some way towards explaining the apathy, depression, impotence, anxiety about physical safety, lack of agency, disempowerment and projection of blame onto others that we encountered among stakeholders (particularly teachers) in the dysfunctional schools we visited.

TOWARDS PRINCIPLES FOR INTERVENTION

What does this analysis suggest for ameliorative interventions, particularly by government education departments, in dysfunctional schools?

Using the analysis of this article, what is loosely termed 'the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching' in these schools may be understood in part at least in terms of organisational breakdown. This manifests itself in the collapse of social relations of authority in schools, the disruption of rituals and boundaries such as those of time and space, the malfunctioning of day-to-day administration and, ultimately, the disruption of rhythmical, disciplined learning and teaching. The accompanying emotions of apathy, depression, anxiety, disempowerment and projection are intimately related to this organisational breakdown. And all of this makes up the complex texture, social discourse and 'informal logic' of everyday life in these schools, i.e. the culture of learning and teaching.

Any attempts to change this situation need to take account of the dynamics of schools as social institutions, with complex relationships shaped by conscious and unconscious processes, rational and irrational. Changing these patterns in

schools cannot be mandated by top-down policies but needs to be addressed by stakeholders in participative approaches. It is likely to meet anxiety, conflict and resistance, and it will take time. What, then, should be the guiding principles for intervention?

As a first step, government education departments need to recognise the complex group and organisational dynamics crippling the work of these schools, as a basis for working with them. Ignoring these dynamics or assuming that introducing new policies will straightforwardly remedy them is not likely to improve conditions in dysfunctional schools. In addressing the manifestations of these problems, departments need to work from an understanding of the dynamics producing them.

Secondly, in line with this, departments need to view as their major task the regeneration of these schools as functioning organisations. This involves a range of inter-related areas: administration and leadership; social and authority relations; predictable day-to-day practices (such as those of time and space) to frame learning and teaching; the substantive task of learning and teaching itself. These issues need to be addressed not simply as regulatory practices, but with an understanding of their importance in relation to the school's real work of teaching and learning. Crucially, stakeholders in schools need a sense of continuity and purpose; they need clarification on roles and responsibilities; and they need to recognise that they are not completely without resources in tackling their problems. In the words of Menzies Lyth, they need to grow in 'belief in progress and development through work and suffering' (1989, p. 21).

To achieve this and to address the complex dynamics within dysfunctional schools, it is important for departments to work towards providing clear, consistent, dependable containing structures for these schools to enable them to work on changes. This may be difficult for departments, who are themselves preoccupied with internal restructuring and change processes. Nonetheless, departments need to openly acknowledge the plight of these schools, who feel overlooked and unsupported, without blaming the schools and they need to be aware of the importance of dependability, consistency and containment in dealing with them. Departments need to be seen to be moving away from the authoritarianism of their apartheid predecessors towards the democracy, transparency and accountability which are catchwords of the new government. An example of unhelpful policy action was the introduction of a new policy forbidding corporal punishment in schools. While this policy is in line with new principles of human rights, it was introduced in a top-down manner, with no support to already collapsing schools and with no alternatives being suggested. Not surprisingly, this policy caused a lot of anger in the schools we visited and principals and teachers felt that their position had been weakened by the policy and the way it was introduced. Certainly, the new departments gave little thought to the plight of these particular schools in introducing the policy in this way. In a similar vein, the subsequent introduction and reversal of a continuous assessment policy was arguably more harmful to schools like these than developing no new policies at all.

In line with an orientation towards consistency and containment, an important task for new departments is to negotiate legitimate authority relations within the education system at a policy level (recently negotiated codes of conduct for students and teachers are good examples of this). If there are clear, system-level agreements, individual schools are more likely to be able to negotiate, build and bolster their own legitimate authority relations. Departments need to recognise that rituals and regularities of time and space operate as forms of social defence which need to be supported to facilitate systematic and regular learning and teaching. These rituals and regularities should hopefully, again, embody values espoused by the new political order, such as democracy, transparency, accountability and mutual respect, thus breaking with the authoritarianism of apartheid.

In a similar vein, a clear policy framework needs to be developed and communicated to schools on: grievance and disciplinary procedures; minimum hours of duty for staff as well as minimum school hours per day; protection of school space; basic roles, responsibilities and powers of different role players. Interventions of this nature are necessary for guiding the actions of schools, but equally importantly, they are necessary for building up the social defences necessary for schools to operate. Much of this would need to be done in interactive ways, for example by workshops with clusters of schools or by school visits.

A clear guideline in providing containment to struggling schools is for departments to work as close to the school level as possible. For example, district officials should be in close personal contact with schools so that they are able to identify appropriate specific points of pressure and support in working with schools for change.

Yet another dimension of containment is for education departments to do all they can towards creating a safer environment for township schools. In particular, they need to work together with police and community leaders to address the violence, vandalism, sexual abuse and substance abuse that seep from communities into schools.

A third principle for intervening in these schools is that the importance of the substantive task of learning and teaching needs to be bolstered, so that schools are encouraged to engage with 'real work' rather than 'psychopolitics'. Departments need to ensure that they are providing leadership in the areas of learning and teaching and that they keep this as an important focus of their own 'real work'. Given that learning and teaching in black schools was of questionable quality during the apartheid years, what is required is the transformation rather than restoration of the culture of learning and teaching (see Gauteng Department of Education and Culture, 1996). While extensive changes are needed in education departments, it is important that a focus is maintained on the substantive educative work of schools.

Fourthly, organisational failure needs to be recognised and remedied in terms of school management and leadership. Organisational weaknesses impede the day-to-day running of the schools. In addition, weak organisational struc-

tures cannot contain the forms of anxiety, conflict, aggression and uncertainty experienced in these schools. Under apartheid, appointments of school principals and senior staff were often politically influenced, and the rejection of authority in the post-1976 period was often politically based. Building leadership effectiveness and participatory management teams needs to be a priority and leadership potential needs to be an important criterion in appointing new principals. At the same time, departments need to build organisational capacity at the school level by assisting schools with tasks such as timetabling, meetings procedures, budgetting and record keeping. Workshops involving school management and leadership teams could be run at district level or with clusters of schools. Addressing these formal organisational problems would be a step towards helping schools to function as work groups.

Fifthly, our research suggests that it is important to build a sense of agency and responsibility at the school level. While there are important steps for departments to take, it is crucial for interventions to work from the basis that schools themselves need to take at least partial ownership of problems and work towards their resolution. At the same time as recognising that certain problems cannot be resolved at the individual school level, it is nonetheless important to challenge assumptions that schools can do little for themselves and that interventions from outside—particularly the government—will rescue them. Any interventions by departments need to be premised on the assumption that each school has skills, experience and potential that can be identified and developed. Participative approaches need to be developed, such as conflict resolution and team building workshops where stakeholders could be encouraged to work together in examining their divisiveness and problems, as well as tackling issues. Experience locally and internationally suggests that school development planning could be used to build participation and cooperation in formulating a school vision, goals and plans of action (see Marsh, 1988; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991; Hopkins, 1991; Fullan, 1993; Whittaker, 1993; Dalin & Associates, 1994; Davidoff *et al.*, 1995; Dimmock, 1995; Education Support Project, 1995). Here again, experience in school development suggests that uncertainty, anxiety, hostility and resistance need to be anticipated and worked with.

There may, however, be cases where the breakdown of schools cannot be addressed by the relatively unobtrusive measures suggested thus far. It may be necessary for education departments to intervene more directly to change school personnel and particularly school leadership. Departments may need to provide skilled group facilitators to work with a school's staff, students, parents and community members in group dynamics, conflict resolution and team building so that the school is able to reassert the key activities of teaching and learning. Again, intervention should not be to 'rescue' schools, but to assist them in tackling their problems and in redirecting their activities. In extreme cases, departments may need to shut schools down and possibly re-open them with a different staffing configuration, as both a symbolic and a material gesture of change.

In conclusion, to return more centrally to sociological approaches, it is necessary to recognise that the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching in these black, secondary township schools is intimately related to the policies and practices of apartheid. These schools are part of communities suffering from poverty, unemployment and violence, and these conditions show few signs of change under the new government. But at the same time as recognising the power of social context, it is also important to recognise the importance of human agency. Social context is not all-determining, and building agency and responsibility at the school level is an important dimension of changing these schools.

In a climate of fiscal restraint, resources for remedying the plight of disadvantaged schools are in short supply. As departments struggle with restructuring, crisis management is often the order of the day. Given these circumstances, it is important for the government to keep a focus on the most disadvantaged schools as an articulated policy principle. Development of new policies needs to be based on the important moral imperative of redress in the process of building a more equitable schooling system for a non-racial and democratic society.

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Correspondence: Pam Christie, Faculty of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, PO WITS 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa.

E-mail: 022pam@mentor.edcm.wits.ac.za

NOTES

- [1] For an account of the analysis on which this article draws, see De Clercq *et al.* (1995) and Chisholm & Vally, (1996). An excellent ethnographic study of the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching in a township school is provided by Maja (1995).
- [2] For a clear account of the organizational dimensions of schooling in South Africa, see Davidoff *et al.* (1995).
- [3] Lynne Slonimsky has usefully pointed out the importance of time in learning (personal communication).
- [4] Heather Jacklin has observed students going through the motions of knocking on the door when 'entering' a class under a tree (personal communication).

- [5] The description given here draws heavily on our CCOLT report (de Clercq *et al.*, 1995) Any similarities between this and the overall CCOLT Report (Chisholm & Vally, 1996) stem from the heavy dependence of the overall report on our group's report.
- [6] See Appel (1995), who argues that disciplines like education 'seem determined to fight with one hand tied behind their backs' (p. 642) by not exploring the irrationality of human social behaviour through psychoanalytical concepts of the unconscious.

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