Towards an explanation of the functionality of South Africa’s ‘dysfunctional’ schools

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Introduction

It is common cause that South Africa is in the midst of a schooling crisis (e.g. Bloch, 2009). Furthermore, there is general consensus amongst academics and commentators alike about the dimensions and causes of the deep-seated and wide-ranging problems besetting the schooling system. This consensus view suggests that the system comprises two sub-systems, one of which is deemed to be dysfunctional (e.g. Taylor, 2011). The vast majority of the country’s school fall into this sub-system, resulting in overall systemic crisis. In this paper, I suggest that the Achilles Heel of this dysfunctionality thesis is that it cannot account for the durability of the problems. If schooling was merely ‘in crisis’ and the reasons for the dysfunctionality were understood, then there would be no conceivable reason for the durability of the problems. Yet, they persist, and show no sign of reversal. On the contrary, there is evidence that they are worsening even further. The purpose of this paper then, is to put together a feasible and sustainable argument that explains the durability of the South African schooling crisis. My starting point is simple: systems are reproduced not because of what they fail to do, but because of what they produce, because of what they achieve. In this case, that approach requires a willingness to explore and understand the functional value of schools that are pigeonholed as ‘dysfunctional’. To kick-start this exploration, I present Bourdieu’s analysis of schooling in France, to illustrate the usefulness of the functionality or productiveness lens. I then develop a characterisation of the post-1994 South African state, drawing attention to the importance of patronage and welfare as techniques of power. This is the contextual basis upon which I make suggestions about the functional value and significance of so-called dysfunctional schools. In particular, I outline their material and socio-political value. It is this functionality, this productive contribution (rather than dysfunction) that accounts for the durability of the schooling crisis.

Establishing the limitation of the ‘dysfunctionality’ thesis

Any informed perspective on South African schooling and all data sets on the topic, point to the same conclusion, namely that it produces very poor educational outcomes. For example, South Africa performs very poorly in international studies\(^1\) assessing numeracy and literacy competence, and data generated through domestic examination processes (principally the Grade 12 ‘matric’ examinations and the Annual National Assessments or ANAs) indicates generally weak and highly differentiated educational performance across the system. More specifically, only about 20% of South African public schools produce acceptable educational outcomes. This 20% is made up of former white schools (10%) and exceptional township and village schools (the other 10%). That is, only about one in nine township and village schools actually deliver their stated educational

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\(^1\) Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) and The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ)
purpose. Whether or not South Africa’s public schooling system is the very worst in the world or not is a moot point; that it is amongst the worst is not contested.

The response of the academy and education commentators to the schooling situation is remarkably uniform. They agree that the system is in a state of crisis or, in the words of Bloch, “a national disaster” (2009: 58). Furthermore, they agree that one of its most important characteristics is deep division, fashioned along the lines of race and class. Fleisch dubs the system ‘bi-modal’, whereas others such as Taylor refer to it as comprising “two school sub-systems: one which is functional, wealthy and able to educate students; the other being poor, dysfunctional and unable to equip students with the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they should be acquiring” (2011: 11). The term dysfunction is telling; analysts agree that schools that are not producing acceptable education outcomes are defined by what they are doing wrong and by what they lack. Weak management, ill-equipped teachers, inadequate teaching and under-utilisation of textbooks are some of the factors deemed to produce overall dysfunctionality. Herein lies the rub, these technical issues have been identified not only in academic work but also government policy documents such as the National Development Plan and they should therefore be relatively easy to work on and resolve over time.

Yet there is no indication at all that the downward trend has been arrested never mind reversed. On the contrary, data released during recent months (in 2014) indicates that the trajectory may be worsening further. First, in October Statistics South Africa put out a report entitled ‘Youth employment, unemployment, skills and economic growth, 1994 – 2014’. The report showed that proportion of young black Africans (aged between 25 and 34 years of age) in skilled employment actually dropped between 1994 and 2014 (Statistics South Africa, 2014: 5). A cruel irony here is that whereas Bantu Education was explicit in wanting to reduce black Africans to ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’, it actually did a better job (proportionally) in educating this grouping for skilled employment than the supposedly equal education regime of the democratic government. Second, in response to a question posed in the National Assembly, the Department of Basic Education conceded that the country’s already high drop-out/ push-out rates in the final three years of high school worsened markedly from 2013 to 2014. Whereas the retention rate in 2013 was 53,2%, in 2014 it is as low as 49,2%. In a single year therefore, the national retention rate has dropped a full 4%, tipping below the 50% mark. The meaning of this is that less than one out every two learners who enrolled for Grade 10 in 2012 wrote the Grade 12 examinations in 2014. In total, in 2014 there were a massive 540000 young people who entered Grade 10 two years ago who did not make it to Grade 12 this year. The vast majority of these people will already have joined the ranks of the unemployed youth.

If the South African schooling system was a neutral space characterised by lack and malfunction, and devoid of power relations, then its technical problems could readily be solved by technical solutions. But it is not – it is part of and derives from a context that is teeming with power relations which produce a host of effects and outcomes. The dysfunctionality thesis analyses South African schooling from the fanciful perspective of what it should do (the liberating school), rather than what it does do. I suggest that what schools do, militates against them doing what they supposedly should do. Furthermore, in order to understand what they do – their functional raison d’être – one needs to be willing to engage with underlying structural realities. From here the paper attempts to understand precisely these issues, namely the functional productivity of schools dismissed as dysfunctional and the context from which these schools emerge and are sustained.
Bourdieu’s France

Michel Foucault commented extensively on power. One of his key assertions in this regard was that instead of expecting the exercise of power to always suppress or oppress, one should rather understand that it generally produces and enables effects. “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses”, it “censors”, it “abstracts”, it “masks”, it “conceals”. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (1977: 194). I think that this insight is particularly useful in arriving at an understanding of why the educational system in South Africa is reproduced relentlessly, year-in and year-out. To smooth the way for my elaboration of the South African education system, I first present Bourdieu’s broadly Foucauldian analysis of the role of education in contemporary French society. His starting point is that the structure of social space is the product of economic capital and cultural capital. He goes on to assert that the educational system “plays a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social space” (2008: 33). More specifically, the system functions to conserve and legitimise inequalities. It performs this role very effectively because it is technically accessible to all and treats everyone equally (2008: 36).

The formal equality that the education system practises amounts to a promotion of the values and culture of ‘the most favoured’. Because children of the rich are imbued with these values and culture from birth they thrive in the system, whilst children of the poor flounder. For this reason Bourdieu reasons that “the formal equity that governs the entire educational system is actually unjust, and, in any society that proclaims democratic ideals, it protects privileges all the better than would be their open and obvious transmission” (2008: 36). Bourdieu asserts that justice in the system would necessarily involve giving “the disinherited the real means for acquiring what others have inherited” (2008: 36).

According to Bourdieu, the “ideology of ‘gifts’ is... the cornerstone of the whole system” because it enables competences that have been acquired socially to be regarded as personal aptitudes, and on the other end of the spectrum it excuses teachers from giving the disfavoured the means of acquiring these competences (2008:37). In this way, the school “transforms inequalities of fact into inequalities of merit” (2008: 38).

The operation of the schooling system gives rise to considerable “mystification”. That is, it persuades those who it excludes that their social destiny is due to their own lack (of gifts), and thereby prevents them from understanding the structural mechanisms at play. The exceptional success of a handful of individuals who escape this destiny (who Bourdieu calls “the miraculously saved”) both feeds into the ideology of gifts and accredits “the myth of the liberating school” (2008: 38). The system similarly allows the privileged to perceive their success as a product of their own capability and application rather than as a predetermined outcome. In summary, “The educational system thus contributes to legitimizing economic and social inequalities by giving a social order based on the transmission of economic and –still more so – cultural capital the appearance of an order based on merit and individual gifts” (2008: 38).

In contemporary society, jobs and positions are increasingly tied to qualifications. As outlined above, educational qualifications are the preserve of the elite classes. Thus the educational system “makes a very major contribution to the rigidity of social structure” (2008: 39).
Finally, Bourdieu is critical of those who assess the educational system in relation to an aspired equalising function rather than in relation to what it actually does. These opinions have the effect of entrenching the myth that the system does offer equal opportunities to all, and in this way “they are complicit with the system that they denounce” (2008: 34).

A Characterisation of the South African State

A necessary condition for developing an incisive understanding of the productive and functional value of education in South Africa circa 2015 is to accurately characterise the contemporary state specifically and the political economy more broadly.

Arguably, one of the greatest successes of the apartheid state was its ability in the late 80s and early 90s to co-opt the elite leadership of the ANC to agree to a process of transition that left the economic and social structure of South Africa largely intact (Westaway 2009, 61). The 1994 transition held massive advantages for a minority of black people, but unsurprisingly left the vast majority as poor, exploited and excluded as before. I refer to this as ‘the Deracialisation Question’ because I agree with Mamdani’s assertion that what happened in South Africa in 1994 is more accurately described as deracialisation than as democratisation. What exactly is this question? Its essence is the challenge of a minority (the black political elite, ie black citizens) governing a majority (the mass of the black population that is effectively excluded from meaningful participation in post-1994 South Africa). How does the minority then govern the majority? In the terminology of Agamben, how do the included govern the excluded (quoted in Baucom, 2005:187). Elsewhere I have argued (Westaway, 2012) that a contemporary form of segregationism (comprising tradition, culture, and welfare, amongst other things) has been a crucial and overarching strategy of power, especially as far as the vast rural areas of the country falling within the former Bantustan areas are concerned. In this regard it is no coincidence (for reasons that will become clear as the argument develops) that the educational outcomes produced in the former Bantustans are the worst in the country.¹

The aspect of contemporary segregationism that requires elaboration and further development here is the nature of the state, and in particular the role played by welfare and patronage in its recent development. In my earlier work, I had narrowed the lens to welfare transfer to the poor (in the form of old age pensions, disability grants and child-support grants). For purposes of this work, it is necessary to widen the lens to include financial transfer to state employees. South Africa is currently under the management of its third president, Jacob Zuma. His predecessors were Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. Mandela’s presidency was characterised by reconciliation and nation building, whilst Mbeki was a technocratic centralist who sought to spearhead an African Renaissance. To date Zuma’s presidency has been so mired in controversy and alleged corruption (most infamously related to his private residence at Nkandla) that it is tempting to suggest that its hallmark has been an unscrupulous determination to protect him from legal scrutiny in a court of law. However, with Zuma moving into his second term of office, it is now becoming clear that the size of the state has grown rapidly and significantly under his presidency, to the extent that this may, in due course, come to be regarded as the defining feature of his presidency. A major task faced by the Mandela government was to integrate the South African state. Principally, this involved amalgamating the erstwhile white apartheid bureaucracy with myriad Bantustan bureaucracies. For example, in the
Eastern Cape Province, the former Cape Provincial Administration (CPA) was amalgamated with the Ciskei and Transkei bureaucracies. Because of the duplication of government functions that was an inevitable characteristic of apartheid, the amalgamated bureaucracy of the ‘new South Africa’ was necessarily bloated. In the late 1990s, the government adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Programme as its macro-economic framework. This entailed a restrictive fiscal regime, and hence the Mbeki years did not see any increase in size of civil service. Jacob Zuma stormed to power in 2009, having blind-sided Thabo Mbeki at the ANC’s elective conference in Polokwane in 2007. One of the policy priorities determined at Polokwane was an ANC commitment to maximising ‘decent work’. The domestic context within which the ANC took this resolution was a stubbornly high unemployment rate, coupled with modest economic growth. By the time that Zuma was sworn in as president – eighteen months later – the challenge to create decent work had been exacerbated by the Global financial crisis of 2008. To date, Zuma’s two main efforts in this regard have been to expand public works programmes and to increase the size of the bureaucracy. The former entailed enlarging both the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and the Community Works Programme (CWP). Because these programmes offer only poorly paid part-time labour, the ANC and Zuma now refer to ‘job opportunities’, rather than ‘decent jobs’. (Dicks et al, 2011) Based on my experience with the programme, I hold that they are little more than welfare jobs; they hold limited economic or productive value. Instead their main role is to justify the payment of welfare transfers to people between the ages of 15 and 64 and therefore potentially economically active. (The best known welfare transfers, namely the grants, are targeted at economically inactive people, specifically children, the disabled and the elderly.) For purposes of this paper, Zuma’s increase of the bureaucracy is significant. Both the number of employees and the level of remuneration to public sector employees have increased significantly in recent years. The civil service is now 25% larger than it was in 1994, as bloated as it was then. Most of that growth has occurred in the last few years, since 2008 (van Rensburg, 5 October 2014). Moreover, public sector salaries and wages have increased tremendously in real terms since 1998; specifically, 110% for the lowest salary levels and 159% for the highest levels (ibid). Public sector wages are now considerably higher than private sector wages; specifically on average, “civil servants get paid 121% more than private-sector workers.” (Schussler, Oct 26 2014) The significance and consequences of these two factors (bigger work force, increased salaries) are clearly reflected across a range of economic data. Consider the following facts:

- The public sector labour force now costs R440bn annually – 35% of the entire budget (van Rensburg, 5 October 2014).
- For the first time in South Africa’s history, civil service pay makes up over 30% of the non-farm wage bill; this is from around 20% in 2008 (Schussler, Oct 26 2014).
- Government services has overtaken retail, trade and manufacturing, and is now second biggest sector in the South African economy, behind only finance, real estate and business (Isa, 29 November 2014).

Economist Elna Moolman has commented that if the larger government sector had improved the level of service delivery and expanded/ consolidated infrastructure, then it would not be too grave a concern. “The problem is that service delivery has deteriorated in the past five to 10 years” (quoted in Isa, 29 November 2014). Indeed, South Africa’s public sector wage bill is nearly 14% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This is double the percentage of Germany and Japan, and it is higher than
other developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The only block of countries with a higher percentage than South Africa is the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Whereas Scandinavia is characterised by excellent public facilities, amenities and services, the massive South African public service fails, consistently and dramatically in fundamental sectors such as education (as elaborated above) and health. Furthermore, widespread corruption and declines in municipal services and infrastructure have given rise to an ever-increasing spate of local protests (generally referred to as service delivery protests in the media). Indeed, South Africa is popularly and commonly dubbed ‘the protest capital of the world’ (e.g. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_in_South_Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_in_South_Africa)). One of the key reasons that public services are of a poor standard is that a key mechanism used by the ANC government to fill the thousands of new public sector jobs in the recent period has been so-called ‘cadre deployment’. This is a euphemism for appointing people into positions based on party political affiliation rather than aptitude. In the age of cadre deployment, (factional) allegiance can trump skill and factional loyalty often outweighs competence (Twala, 2014).

The Zuma trajectory (towards a bloated patronage state) is unsustainable, both financially and politically. Here I outline the political dimension. Ever since the 1994 elections, South Africa has been managed politically by the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). During the Mandela era, of reconciliation and inclusion, the Alliance played a key role in balancing various competing interests: capital and labour, rural and urban, nationalists and socialists, public sector and private sector. Significantly, in 1991 only 7% of COSATU members were in public sector unions in 1991. However, because of growth of the public sector (as described above) and a stalling private sector (as implied by the moderate economic growth mentioned above) by 2010 public sector unionists made up 39% of COSATU (Paton, 10 March 2014). With the expulsion of the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) from COSATU in November 2014, public sector unionists are now – for the first time – in the majority in the federation. COSATU is thus no longer in the hands of poorly paid factory-floor members, as it was around 1994; on the contrary, twenty years later it is dominated by mainly white collar and middle management state bureaucrats, the new labour aristocracy. For its part, the SACP has in recent years declined in many respects (incl. its ‘vanguard’ role in relation to the working class, its advocacy of working class interests through its Red October and other campaigns, etc.). The fall of the Soviet Union and collapse of global communism in the late 1980s undoubtedly set back the SACP. However, a domestic factor that seems to have played an equally important role in the abandonment of the SACP of the ‘political high ground’ is the ‘deployment’ of its influential members into government. This process took on a particular form and was heightened in the aftermath of the SACP’s conspicuous role in the ousting of Thabo Mbeki and the elevation of Jacob Zuma. The past five years have seen the party morph from watchdog to lap-dog. This is starkly illustrated through its defence of Zuma in relation to Nkandla and its apparent celebration at the expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU. The point is that, because of these changes within COSATU and the SACP, the Alliance no longer checks against excess nor does it balance competing interests. It is now essentially one monolithic whole – the preserve of those who directly derive income from the state, in one way or another. That is to say, the ANC specifically or the Alliance more broadly is less and less the ‘broad church’ that it once was. It was this characteristic (more than any other) that accounted for the ANC winning overwhelming electoral victories in 1999 and 2004. As it has become more sectarian (in this case, increasingly hostile to working class interests) its support has declined,
especially in the cities. And there is scope for further losses. Indeed, in the 2016 municipal elections there is a real chance that it may lose significant metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth, hence my assertion that the Zuma trajectory is politically unsustainable.

The demise of Zuma’s rendition of the ANC government lies in the future. At present, however, it is intact. Arguably, it is in its most advanced state yet and therefore its workings, functionings and productions are relatively straightforward to decipher and understand. Undoubtedly, its two key strategies are patronage and welfare. I use the term patronage to refer to the practices of cadre deployment (jobs for comrades) and ‘tenderpreneurship’ (tenders for comrades). The beneficiaries of these processes (politicians, traditional leaders, bureaucrats and business people) make up what can be called the inner core of Zuma’s ANC. This is a large grouping of people, considering that there are almost two million people employed across the three spheres of the South African state, and that hundreds of thousands of comrades in business benefit from state tenders, ranging from the supply of textbooks and desks to the building of infrastructure and RDP houses. There is often an overlap between state employees and those awarded business contracts, especially in the Eastern Cape Province (for example http://www.enca.com/r843m-municipal-contracts-government-staff-families). The households of this grouping of people depend directly on Zuma’s largesse for their survival and for their progress. Above we saw that the vast majority of South Africa’s teachers are not teaching effectively. Based on media reports about state clinics, hospitals, police stations, and so on (not to forget the myriad parastatals in various stages of decline) one could similarly surmise that most nurses are not nursing effectively, most policemen and policewomen are not policing effectively, and so on. Similarly one can argue that the primary purpose of state tenders is to benefit the tenderpreneur beneficiaries (for example, see http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2010-04-12-shoot-the-tenderpreneur/#.VNjHFSzsSjg).

Hence I conclude that service delivery is not the primary concern, and argue rather that the primary concern is for the inner core of the ANC to benefit financially from the state.

Whilst there are some two and half million South Africans who benefit from state patronage, at least twelve times that number (thirty million) benefit from state welfare of one description or another. Here I go beyond the child support grants, disability grants and pensions to include EPWP and CWP ‘wages’, RDP houses, and other forms of state assistance. Free schooling and the school feeding schemes are also forms of welfare, as discussed below. In the Mbeki years, most welfare spending was directed to rural areas, but this has changed in the most recent period. It is now commonplace to see EPWP and CWP overalled ‘workers’ in cities, the take-up of welfare benefits has increased in urban areas, and so on. These thirty million people can be thought of as comprising the ANC’s outer core. (This does not imply that all of these people support the ANC, but rather that the party specifically targets them and communicates with them, in a bid to win their votes.) The expansion of the scope and reach of welfare has played a significant role in reducing chronic poverty in South Africa, yet there are question-marks over the extent to which welfare alone will suffice in sustaining the loyalty of its beneficiaries to the ANC. In this regard, the key interaction is between the beneficiaries of patronage (the ‘inner core’) and the beneficiaries of welfare (the ‘outer core’). My basic suggestion in this regard is that whereas the role of the former is not to deliver services to the latter, it is to orient them (through a variety of means) to support the ANC. That is, ANC members are paid by the state to keep the ANC in power. Clearly, it is in their interest to do what they must, in classrooms, in community meetings, at funerals, in stokvels, at the Great Places, to convince the beneficiaries of state welfare to return the ANC to power. I will now go on to elucidate the detail of
how teachers and bureaucrats urge this loyalty from learners and their parents in the context of South Africa schools.

A characterisation of the functionality of so-called ‘dysfunctional’ schools.

Having established the problem (the weakness of the ‘dysfunctionality’ argument to explain the persistence of the schooling system in South Africa, as is), summarised an alternative argument constructed to explain inertia in the French education system, and outlined significant and framing contextual developments in the country’s body politic over recent years, I am now in a position to suggest an alternative to the dysfunctionality argument. For purposes of contrast, we can posit this as a ‘functional’ explanation of the persistence of South Africa’s schooling crisis, as outlined above. The argument that follows pertains specifically to those schools that are characterised by educationists and the media alike as ‘dysfunctional’. Two of the common features of these schools are that they accommodate black children (exclusively) and that the vast majority of their teachers are members of SADTU. That is to say, the people under consideration, both the teachers and the families of the taught are within the ANC fold. The former are part of the inner core and the latter occupy the more peripheral outer core. Put another way, the former are beneficiaries of ANC government patronage and the latter are beneficiaries of its welfare. In order to build the argument, I first consider the schooling system’s material and financial (economic) functionality and then postulate about its social functionality.

A useful starting pointing in understanding the system’s economic functionality is the ANC’s ‘Good Story’ election propaganda from the pre-election period in 2014. Some of the main assertions made by the ANC about its achievements in education over the past twenty years were as follows:

- It has improved access to schooling, to the extent that there is now almost 100% access at Grade 1 level.
- It has introduced and rolled out no-fee schooling, such that many parents do not have to pay for the basic education of their children.
- It has introduced and rolled out a feeding scheme at no-fee schools. All children at these schools received one free meal a day.
- Increasingly, it provides free school uniforms to learners at no-fee schools.

Significantly, all these claims were targeted at the beneficiaries of school-based welfare, namely learners and their families, rather than at the beneficiaries of school-based patronage, namely bureaucrats and teachers. With regard to the latter, it is no surprise that the ANC’s Good News Story did not draw attention to the fact that it had significantly improved their terms of employment in 2008 (Paton, 10 March 2014). Given that SADTU has a membership of approximately 250 000 people, this is obviously a large group of people; indeed, they make up about 10% of the ANC’s inner core of operatives. The reason that this element of delivery (the pay rise that is) was left unsaid is the beneficiaries’ loyalty was guaranteed, whereas general public sympathy with SADTU and its members is low. To have drawn attention to the fact that public employees are now better paid than their private sector counterparts could only have alienated certain existing voters without securing any new voters. Yet, the delivery of patronage to teachers and education bureaucrats is certainly a key element of what the contemporary schooling system in South Africa does do. Not only have
teachers’ remuneration packages increased, so too has their job security. SADTU’s grip on ‘dyfunctional’ schooling is so vice-like that it is virtually impossible to fire any of its members, whether for absence from work, non-performance or sexual harassment of children. Hence Jansen refers to the teaching profession as “the biggest job protection racket in South Africa” (Another brick in the wall, Jonathan Jansen, 20 June, 2014)

When one considers the above-mentioned achievements and deliverables together, one can start to understand the material functionality of the education system. Jonathan Jansen recently referred to public schools as “those buildings called schools” (http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2013/06/20/left-by-the-wayside). This is correct insofar as it questions the extent to which schooling takes place in these locales. However, its usefulness stops there; it does not enable one to understand their functionality. South African schools deemed to be dysfunctional, are best understood as daytime repositories or storehouses for working class black children. The fact that the massification of black education that began under apartheid (during the era of ‘Bantu’ education) has now been completed – resulting in universal access to schooling – means that all working class children can be accommodated in these repositories. Furthermore, they are by no means empty repositories; on the contrary they are places where services are delivered and goods are dispensed. First, employees called ‘teachers’ offer child care or child-minding services. Levels of oversight are low and the actual amount of care that the professionals show for the children is negligible. Nevertheless, the children are kept behind lock and key (schools are generally fenced and gates are kept locked during school hours), and they are supervised by adults. The supervision responsibility shifts, according to a timetable, from employee to employee. Children move from room to room during between allocated time slots called ‘periods’. The significance of this day care service for the children’s parents should not be undermined. Because the parents are correctly classified as working class, they are very busy trying to make household ends meet. Either they spend their entire day in a menial job, or they are very busy in other ways trying to put a plate of food on the family table each night. So for the state to take their children off their hands for almost the entire day, in a relatively safe environment, is undoubtedly beneficial and valuable for them. And, lest we forget, with the significant recent expansion in the number of no-fee schools, this is (in most cases) a free service. Second, the state clothes children for school (through the provision of uniforms) and it provides them with a free meal daily. Because money is scarce in many black working class families, the importance of these welfare benefits of schooling should not be down-played. The ANC government is doing what many fathers and mothers would not easily otherwise be able to do for their sons and daughters – namely clothe them and feed them. (By way of contrast, it should be noted that the welfare processes outlined above do not pertain in former Model C schools: there, the middle class parents are required to pay fees, buy their children’s uniforms and feed them.)

In summary the, so-called dysfunctional schools actually function very effectively as sites both where ANC state patronage is dispensed (to teachers) and where welfare is doled out en mass to working class black learners and their parents.

The material functions of the schooling system are empirically clear, much more so than its socio-political functions. This does not make the latter any less important. On the contrary, whilst the former are a key part of contemporary class formation in South Africa, the latter are important pieces of the puzzle that explain the reproduction of social structure and political stability in the
There are two related social functions of South Africa’s so-called dysfunctional schools that I will explain, namely maintaining the myth of universal epistemological access to education and the what is commonly termed ‘the hidden curriculum’. I deal with these in turn.

As noted earlier in this paper, there is now almost universal physical access to schooling for South Africa’s children. However, the quality of the schools differs fundamentally, to the extent that whilst some children do develop intellectually and educationally as they should, the vast majority of school children do not. Morrow described the latter condition as a lack of epistemological access to education (2007). Yet it is obviously not in the interest of the ruling ANC to inform the beneficiaries of educational welfare (as described above) about the differentiated performance of the system. The schooling system is administered by a large army of bureaucrats stationed at various levels (i.e. district, provincial, national). The core job of these officials is to sustain the operation of the schooling system such that it appears to be an undifferentiated education system, where there is equal opportunity for all children. Appearances are sustained by setting up and sustaining an intricate web of regulatory requirements. Countless documents are completed and a myriad of forms are submitted to the officials. The purpose of these processes is not to support the delivery of good quality education, but rather to build up a bank of bureaucratic evidence in this regard. If ever there was a case showing that what is evident is sometimes more valid than evidence, then this is it. Education Minister Motshega can produce reams and reams of evidence indicating that there is epistemological access to education, whereas it is patently obvious (starkly evident) that the opposite is true.

If Motshega’s version of the education system was valid, then there would be a need to explain why so few black children utilise the access afforded to them whilst virtually all white children manage to do this. In fact, this explanation is presented, relentlessly and pervasively, not in the public domain but in all so-called dysfunctional schools. I refer to this explanation as the hidden curriculum. To introduce the argument, I reflect briefly on an experience that I had at the beginning of 2014. As the Manager of Gadra Education, holder of a well-known and successful ‘second chance’ school in Grahamstown (Eastern Cape) called the Gadra Matric School (GMS), one of my main responsibilities each January is to assess and process applications to the school. In January 2014 there were an inordinate number of applications from young people who had attended the largest township school in the city, called Nombulelo High School. The reason for this was sadly predictable: the matric results at Nombulelo in 2013 were exceptionally poor, even by its own low standards. There had been an enormous class of 215 learners of whom only 84 learners passed. Of these, a paltry 19 (9%) achieved a Bachelor level pass. Consequently, ex-Nombulelo students flooded the offices of Gadra in January 2014, looking for a place at GMS. I specifically made a point of speaking to a large number of these students, trying to solicit their views on what had gone wrong at the school. Without exception, every one of them blamed themselves. “We didn’t work hard enough.” “We were lazy.” “We were not serious.” Not a single one of the students who I spoke to a negative word to say about Nombulelo, about the teachers or about the education system in general. My conclusion was that their teachers had not taught these young people much English or Mathematics, but they had certainly got them to understand and accept their social destiny.

Giroux and Penna define the hidden curriculum as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom (1983: 100 – 121). Here my interest is in trying to understand the hidden curriculum that is taught in so-called dysfunctional schools, that is the curriculum that attempts to
explain to the black child why he or she, as a rule, obtains poor educational results. As a start, I suggest that this hidden curriculum revolves around the following central messages, amongst others:

- The black child should be grateful for all the benefits that have come with formal democracy – universal access to basic education, free schooling, free food and free uniforms.
- All persistent problems in the schooling system are a legacy of apartheid.
- The black child is lazy, disorganised and ill-disciplined. He or she is consequently unable to take advantage of the apparent opportunities afforded by the new South Africa. Amongst other things, he or she is unlikely to perform well at school.
- Because of his/her own inadequacies, the black child should have low expectations about life after school. However he/she should rest assured that government will continue to provide a safety for ‘the people’, through welfare transfers, free housing, public works programmes and the like.
- Because the standard of living in the townships has improved since 1994 everyone should feel indebted to the ruling party, which brought them not only freedom but also ‘a better life’.

The Nombulelo illustration is one of many that I can cite from my interactions with the public high schools in Grahamstown. Here I mention another two examples. First, when I undertook publicity work relating to the GMS at Khutliso Daniels in 2013, a senior member of the teaching staff interrupted me and launched into a rant about how school learners had everything going for them in the post-apartheid era – free schooling, a freely supplied textbook for every subject, free uniforms, a cooked meal, and close proximity to school. He told the learners that they would have no such luxuries at GMS – they would have to pay fees, travel a far way to school, and feed themselves. He therefore urged the Grade 12 learners to improve their discipline and focus in order to perform well in their final examinations. Second, at the beginning of 2015 GADRA Education in partnership with Rhodes University piloted a 4-week school for 2014 Grade 12 learners who qualified to write supplementary examinations in February and March 2015. Near the end of the opening assembly proceedings on 13 January, a parent rose to thank the organisers for their efforts. In his speech, he insisted that the ‘supplementary school’ was the learners third chance to succeed, their first having been their respective public schools and their second a study ‘camp’ held at the Grahamstown Military Base on the eve of the final examinations. The latter assertion is ludicrous and bizarre; in my view the camp robbed the students of their final days of preparation before the examination. Indeed the event was so badly organised that it had to been aborted after three days. When I addressed the students ten days after the start of the school, I offered them an alternative view. I suggested that the twenty days of teaching and education that they were receiving at the supplementary school would be their first and possibly their only experience of proper schooling. It was not their third chance, nor was it their second chance; it was their first chance.

To conclude this characterisation of the functionality of ‘dysfunctional’ schools, I focus on the issue of agency. The material and socio-political outcomes described above are not self-generated, rather they are produced and sustained by the agency of interested parties. The beneficiaries of educational patronage – bureaucrats and teachers – are, unsurprisingly, the primary agents in this regard. That is, the bureaucrats and teachers, through the institutional mechanism of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) work together to sustain the status quo (because it is in their interests to do so). This involves three main types of work, namely advocating for the
improvement of benefits for its members, the prevention of progressive reforms (e.g., blocking proposals to assess the subject knowledge of teachers) and the promotion of the ruling party. These elements of work are explicitly broadcast by SADTU, as integral to its identity and strategic modus operandi. The first and third elements are aimed at the further deepening of the patronage mechanisms already well entrenched. The second element aims to foster job security but has the effect of keeping the township schools exactly where they are – at the bottom of the educational pile. As Ndebele argues, SADTU “illustrates a culture that subordinates professionalism to maintain a political hegemony now emptied of visionary substance.” Professionalism is not the only casualty, so too is “the basic instinct that adults have toward their young: to protect them for the future of society” (Ndebele, 2015).

Conclusion

In Foucault’s approach, power is not possessed but rather exercised, in any unequal relation (for example between teacher and pupil, teacher and bureaucrat, teacher and principal, teacher and parent, child and parent, etc.). Foucault elaborates unequal relations as those that exist between forces of domination and those of resistance. Wherever there is domination, there is resistance, and vice versa. Because webs of domination are pervasive and complex, so too are expressions of resistance. Also it is quite conceivable that one can be exercising domination in one relation but resistance in another. In other words, there are necessarily tensions and contradictions within and across power relations. Consider for a moment parents: on the one hand, they benefit from the prevailing education power configurations (through free day care, meals and free uniforms for their kids); on the other hand, these same configurations deny their children education. In setting out the role of the intellectual, Foucault called for attention to be given to the fissures and faultlines in the power configurations that make up the battlefield that is contemporary society (in our case contemporary education in South Africa)

What’s effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves... In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield – that is the intellectual’s role. (Foucault, 1980, 62)

Broadly speaking, I would suggest that the beneficiaries of patronage (SADTU teachers and bureaucrats) exercise the most uncomplicated (least fraught) and banal domination within the prevailing education set-up, and therefore that there is little disruption that can be effected through working with them. Further, it is clear that the ANC is too beholden to SADTU support for it to provide progressive leadership in the public education sector. That would be tantamount to the ANC shooting itself in the foot. And so the submission of policy proposals, participating in parliamentary hearings public and the like, are unlikely to yield positive outcomes. By contrast, parents and learners may be beneficiaries of educational welfare but they simultaneously bear the brunt of a system that functions to fabricate them as loyal servants and dependent subjects (markers of Xs and bearers of welfare). There is therefore scope to work deliberately and strategically with these groupings to be more effective in their exercise of resistance than is currently the case. But the key point is this: a necessary pre-condition for any improvement in the educational outcomes achieved
in the ‘dysfunctional’ schools is a change in the prevailing power configurations that underpin and structure the schooling system.

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\(^1\) This is evidence through the SAQMEC and matric results, on a regular basis. Rural districts such as Fort Beaufort, Qumbu and Mount Frere are regularly the worst performing education districts in the country.\(^2\) As the Manager of the Border Rural Committee, I supported the utilisation of both EPWP and CWP in the Keiskammahoek District of the former Ciskei from around 2005 until I resigned from that position in 2009. These public works programmes provided wages in economic (e.g. agriculture, forestry), environmental (e.g. invasive alien removal, soil rehabilitation) and social (community gardens, school support) sectors. Since moving to Grahamstown in 2009, I have observed the expansion of both EPWP and CWP in the city.\(^3\) Thanks to Gavin Keeton for this out to me.\(^4\) Again, thanks to Gavin Keeton for reminding me of this.\(^5\) The event was reported in the Grocotts Mail on 23 January 2015.