

This article was written for the Sunday Times 10 August by Prof. Jonathan Jansen on the “Crisis in Education Forum” held in East London on 5 August

It sounds like a location straight out of colonial England—The Guild Theatre, Oxford Street, East London—but last Tuesday night I found myself in the middle of one of the most exciting education debates this African country has ever had. On a cold winter’s night in a sleepy town known more for its retired pensioners than its intellectual life, more than four hundred people packed into this ramshackle theatre to listen, to question, to propose, to disagree, to plead, and to admonish those responsible for the disastrous state of education in the Eastern Cape.

They came from everywhere, black and white, students and teachers, pensioners (of course) and politicians, unionists and academics, international NGO activists and retired school principals—all to debate passionately the need to restore the human dignity of our children through decent education. People traveled from as far as Port Elizabeth and Alice to make their presence felt on this dark night. A highly innovative project of a talented newspaper editor, Dawn Barkhuizen started the *Dispatch Dialogues* (after the local newspaper, the Daily Dispatch) as a forum to bring leading voices in the country to discuss pressing public concerns from the crisis in government hospitals to the state of the Presidency.

What I heard that night from “people on the ground” was truly depressing. Fourteen years into our democracy and heart-wrenching tales are still told about schools without toilets, 160 Grade 1 children in a classroom, students killed on major roads because of the lack of school transportation, children routinely leaving school in the mornings, absentee teachers, the late-delivery of textbooks, and on and on and on. I was in the heart of South Africa’s most

corrupt province where more than half the children fail the final school examination every single year.

Then it dawned on me why there was a crisis. A short man dressed in colourful clothes, acting in a senior position in the provincial department of education, took the stage. I had seldom met a government official who was more unimpressive, inarticulate, defensive, evasive and clearly incapable of leading this desperate province out of its misery. He was so pathetic as a speaker, he did not even realize that the assembled crowd was laughing at him rather than at his ill-suited joke: “there is no crisis in education.”

There and then that puzzling question came to me again: if the Eastern Cape was the political heartland of the ANC, why has the leadership so consistently failed to make dramatic interventions in this province? Anyway, inside the hall the debate raged. People were clearly fed-up, and the anger was, for once, non-racial.

Somebody suggested, rightly, that our focus should be on the foundations of learning in the primary grades and not with that national obsession, the matriculation examination. Another person raised concerns about teacher salaries and the right to strike. Someone else queried whether I really believed that there was a connection between the corrupt behaviour of politicians and the moral decay among the youth. An old man who had devoted his life to the cause, spoke up courageously for deaf children. Inspectors must come back, insisted another.

What struck me that night in East London was not the disagreement but the passion; not the policies of government but the power of people; not the posturing of unions but the communion of citizens. Here in this Town Hall-type public meeting was a large audience of South Africans who were slowly

taking back that precious space called public education; it was, as a movement stalwart reminded me, not *government* education but *public* education according to some of the founding documents of our democracy.

This was a wonderful contrast to the recent assault on public reason by those promising to kill for politicians and to wreck the country if the courts did not sway to the naked populism of the flotsam of society.

I left East London lifted by the spirit of the people who, even in the face of education disaster, still believe that we can turn the school system around. They still believe that government has a role to play, but they also know that such a role is unlikely to be fulfilled by changing personalities such as Premiers and Education MECs. No, this is a group that recognizes that the power to change schools lie in their hands and not only in Bhisho.

Inspired, I drove to the airport with a novel thought: perhaps not a bad place to retire, after all.