

## From a disenchantment with public schooling to alternative schooling practice

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This article explores two widely differing alternatives to educational provisioning. The Accelerated Schools Project and Amish one-roomed schooling are discussed and compared. Disenchanted stakeholders in education in South Africa are advised to actively participate in questioning the quality of educational provision and functioning. Alternatives to unsatisfactory practices should be investigated in the South African context.

### Introduction

The current state of government education in South Africa is a cause for concern for many stakeholders in education. Teachers, learners, parents and the employers in the workplace are asking questions about the standards of education, the provision of educational facilities, the viability of changing curricula and the delivery of competent, skilled personnel (Asmal, 2000:2). There is a general concern that the government is not meeting the basic needs of the average South African learner in terms of intellectual, affective, physical, attitudinal and spiritual development. Parents are often required to dig into their pockets to provide money for extra teachers and subject options. According to Pretorius (2001:7) South African parents pay more for public schools than in most other countries, and the rising cost of fees has prompted the Department of Education to investigate ways of curbing the runaway cost of education. A serious problem appears to be a general drop in academic standards and general behaviour amongst both teachers and learners. The strong call for values and lifeskills education can be regarded as resulting directly from the need to improve this dilemma. Parents are furthermore concerned that their children will not be able to cope in the international work arena, and are looking to options for internationally recognised education. These concerns are expressed across the board by stakeholders of all races and creeds. A large number of parents in South Africa have during the past few years been taking on greater responsibility for their children's schooling by starting private, alternative and home schools which are founded on the creation of consistency between the home, church and school (Gardiner, 1995:24). Alternative schooling options have long been characteristic of societies who become disenchanted with the provision of state education.

### Context

The South African government is currently doing its utmost to bring education to the masses (Asmal, 2000:2). The energy and money in education must be channelled to address the imbalances in education created by the past ideology of *apartheid*. Therefore, emphasis must necessarily currently be on the massification of education. Rensburg (Bak (ed.), 1999:108) indicates that South African educational transformation comprises a confluence of policy imperatives and contextual realities which focus on change for the ideals of post-apartheid, hence non-racism and redress in order to improve educational provision for all. Educational aspects which require redress are the previously legislated disparities between race groups, an ideologically abhorrent curriculum for servitude; curricula which failed to advance global competitiveness, and which failed to motivate lifelong learning.

### Problem statement

The problem which this article addresses can be formulated as follows: If basic government schooling does not meet the instructional needs of its learners, *what alternative options* can be explored in terms of

educational provisioning? In this article *two widely different alternatives*, which have been implemented in the United States of America will be discussed, namely the *accelerated schools alternative* and an example of *one-room schooling* (e.g. *Amish schools*). The American examples were selected on the basis of the multiculturalism and socio-economic spread of the American people.

### Dissatisfaction with state schooling

The tide of discontent with state schooling all over the globe has generated a strong grass roots base of alternative schooling practices (Hegener & Hegener, 1988:14). Why are learners and other stakeholders dissatisfied with government schools? There are many reasons for such disenchantment. Why are our children in South Africa learning so little? According to Taylor (Bak (ed.), 1999:99) there are three principal reasons for the poor state of learning in South African schools. The first reason is poverty. It always remains difficult for poor children to progress since they lack the stimulus provided by the home and the general cultural milieu of the middle class. Another reason relates to the inefficiency of the civil service to deliver effective schooling. According to Taylor, poverty and systemic inefficiency accord for 95% of the poor learning in South African schools. A third reason is that a further 5 – 10% of the failure appears to be the poor implementation of the new nationwide curriculum, Curriculum 2005. Taylor (Bak (ed.), 1999:101) indicates that the fine intentions of Curriculum 2005 are not realised due to the fact that the learner-centred pedagogy of the new curriculum has become to be associated with unorganised groupwork, where teachers are not instructionally involved, that the basic skills of reading and writing are declining and that academic content is not sufficiently addressed. The ideals of Curriculum 2005 are currently not yet being attained. In this regard Taylor (Bak (ed.), 1999:101) refers to its emphasis on developing:

- high level cognitive skills: analysis, critique, synthesis;
- tolerance, understanding and a sense of opportunity provided by our cultural and natural diversity;
- initiative and responsibility amongst all actors at all levels of the system; and
- the application of knowledge to the real world, and conversely, the development of new knowledge out of problems encountered in real life.

The Review Committee on the implementation of *Curriculum 2005* has identified poor teacher preparedness and a lack of specified content as two main areas of concern in the effective implementation of the curriculum (Department of National Education, 2000:1-6).

The bottom line is that teaching and learning in South Africa are far from ideal. Asmal (2000:4-5) has vowed to address the problems of rampant inequality, low teacher morale, failures of governance and management to deliver and the poor quality of learning. Many learners in South Africa are not achieving according to their potential (Kokot, 1992:111). According to Hahn (in Kellmayer, 1995:76) the following

conditions are major risk factors indicating that a learner may be in danger of dropping out:

- Behind in grade level and older than classmates
- Poor academic performance
- Cultural discrepancy between home and school
- Dislike of school and control procedures
- Detention and suspension
- Pregnancy
- Drug and alcohol addiction
- Member of single-parent household
- Attractiveness of work and pay
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities and emotional problems
- Language difficulties

The risk factors mentioned above are rife in South African schools. In particular, South African learners perform poorly on internationally standardised tests of mathematics and science. School leavers become job seekers or enter higher education with serious gaps in fundamental knowledge, reasoning skills and methods of study (Asmal, 2000:5).

### Alternative options

There are probably as many definitions of alternative education as there are alternative programmes (Holzman, 1997:81). The concept of "alternative schooling" however denotes by its definition a departure from the norm (Hegener & Hegener, 1988:8). In traditional schools learners are taught either directly or indirectly to conform. The primary function of the traditional school is to provide a co-operative workforce for an industrialised country. Why then, did the alternative school movement develop? According to Hegener and Hegener (1988:9), one of the main driving forces behind the development of this movement was the quest for a superior or a unique quality of education. This quest is clearly seen in South African society, as the private school industry is currently blooming. Where private schools cannot be afforded, parents are taking a greater interest in government schools by means of governing body participation. As the school fees for government schools are rising dramatically, parents are seriously questioning their effectiveness.

There are a great variety of alternative schooling options available to choose from: for example Montessori and Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner) schools, religiously orientated schools (e.g. Accelerated Christian Education schools), home schools, and schools with approaches which draw upon recent research on cognitive development and learning styles (e.g. Project Golden Key based on Vygotsky's ideas). Although these schools represent an array of educational options, they are all concerned with the development of the whole personality, thus the full human possibilities of each learner (Miller in Hegener & Hegener, 1988:14). In the next paragraphs accelerated schools and one-roomed schools will be discussed as two widely differing options with the same goal in mind: *relevant quality schooling for specific populations*.

### Accelerated schools

#### *Underlying philosophy*

The Accelerated schools movement was launched at Stanford University in 1986 by Dr Henry Levin as a comprehensive approach to school change, designed to improve schooling for children in at-risk communities (Levin in Finnan, St John, McCarthy & Slovacek, 1996:3). Dr Levin proposed a new kind of school where staff, parents, students, district office representatives, and local community members would work together to accelerate learning by providing all students with the challenging activities that have traditionally been reserved only for students identified as gifted and talented. His viewpoint was that children caught in at-risk situations have exactly the same characteristics and potential of all children, including curiosity, desire to learn, imagination and need for love, support and affirmation.

The Accelerated Schools movement in the United States of America is not however just a collection of programmes or piecemeal policies and practices, as it is based upon a coherent philosophy and principles. The Accelerated School philosophy draws heavily on the

work of the educator and philosopher John Dewey, who believed that schools in poor neighbourhoods were treated unfairly and that such schools were stifling the creativity and inquisitiveness of learners by not allowing them to be actively involved in their own learning (Kelly, 1999:91-92; Finnan, St John, McCarthy & Slovacek, 1996:125; 229; 297). In contrast to earlier school reform efforts, the Accelerated Schools movement emphasises systemic change (Finnan *et al.*, 1996:54-55). Dr Levin's doctoral students started applying the principles of accelerated learning in a number of schools with high populations of at-risk students. These schools showed extraordinary results. Accelerated schools are learning organisations and thus stakeholders are regarded as vital interactive parts of the whole education system.

Levin (in Finnan *et al.*, 1996:15) indicates that the *three central principles* on which accelerated schools are based are:

- the creation of a unity of purpose,
- empowerment with responsibility, and
- building on strengths.

All three principles are inclusionary and emphasise stakeholders' active participation and involvement in the learning process.

#### *Unity of Purpose:*

Unity of Purpose refers to the common purpose and practices of the school on behalf of all learners (National Centre for the Accelerated Schools Project, 1997/1998:10-15) (see Figure 1). Whereas the traditional school separates learners according to abilities, subject choice and administrative functions, accelerated schools forge a unity of purpose around the education for all learners and all members of the school community. Accelerated schools work towards high expectations for all learners and the learners internalise these high expectations for themselves.

#### *Empowerment with Responsibility:*

Empowerment with responsibility refers to who makes the educational decisions and takes responsibility for their consequences (National Centre for the Accelerated Schools Project, 1997/1998:17-24) (See Diagram 1). Traditional schools rely heavily on higher authorities such as Departments of Education and Education Ministries. Staff at school sites thus have little discretionary power over curriculum and instructional practices. In an accelerated school all stakeholders i.e. the teaching staff, parents and learners together take responsibility for the major decisions that determine educational outcomes. Levin (in Finnan *et al.* 1996:16) explains that accelerated schools are therefore no longer places where roles, responsibilities and practices are determined by forces beyond the control of its members. The school for instance takes responsibility for the consequences of its decisions through continuous assessment and accountability, holding as its ultimate purpose the vision of what the school will become.

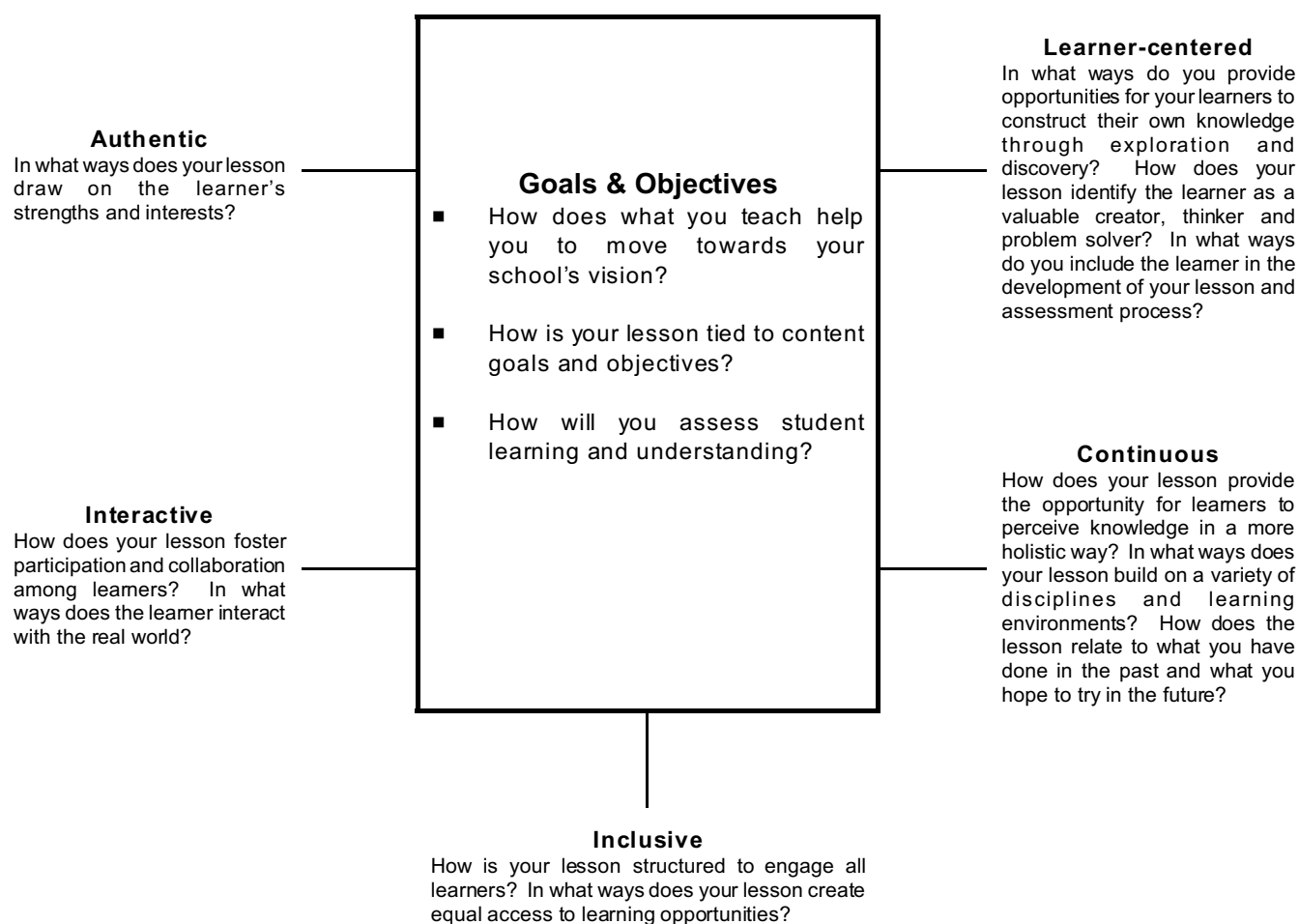
#### *Building on strengths:*

Whereas traditional schools are bent on identifying the weaknesses of their learners and rectifying these weaknesses (a deficit model), accelerated schools begin by identifying the strengths of their learners and other members of the community and building on those strengths to overcome areas of weakness (National Centre of the Accelerated Schools Project, 1997/1998:34-38) (See Diagram 1). Strengths do not only include intellectual strengths, but also areas of interest, curiosity, motivation, and knowledge that grow out of the culture, experiences and personalities of all learners. Classroom and schoolwide curricular approaches that build on the *inclusion* of every learner in the central life of the school are implemented. The school is enriched by the diversity which individuals bring to the school in terms of culture and experience. In creating their dream school, accelerated school communities thus recognise and utilise the knowledge, talents and resources of everyone in the community.

### Curriculum

The Accelerated School Curriculum is founded on the idea that power-

**Powerful Learning for Students:  
Integrating the 5 Components**



**Figure 1** (National Centre for the Accelerated Schools Project 1997/1998: Appendix A)

ful learning experiences are arrived at through the integration of the curriculum, instruction and organisation (Finnan *et al.*, 1996:300-301). Schools are encouraged to create learning situations in which every school day encompasses the best things known about curriculum, instruction and organisation. The curriculum philosophy is typical of a constructivist approach to knowledge creation (Finnan *et al.*, 1996:14-15; 19; 166-167). Accelerated school communities should thus work together to create *powerful learning* experiences where each learner is treated as gifted, where higher-order, challenging and complex activities are stressed, content is relevant, and learners actively discover the curriculum objectives in a safe environment, rather than passively being exposed to text book content.

The Accelerated Schools movement does not have a recipe for formulating powerful learning experiences. There is no checklist of features that make up an accelerated school. The model rather builds the capacity of each school to assess its own needs and develop integrated plans that will lead to the school's unique vision. Each powerful learning experience is however regarded as having three dimensions — the first dimension is what is taught — the content or curriculum, the second dimension is how the content is taught — instruction. The third dimension is the context or organisation in which one galvanises all available resources to achieve the what and how. Context, or organisation, includes the applicability of content to

the world outside the classroom, the creative use of time, flexibility of the schedule, deployment of staffing, etc.

Alternative schooling practice necessarily leads to alternative assessment practices. Alternative assessment in accelerated schools focuses on the assessment of relevant knowledge and skills in an authentic context (National Centre for the Accelerated Schools Project, 1997/1998). Self-assessment and peer assessment are encouraged in accelerated schools. Assessment procedures are in general designed to allow students to demonstrate their ability to apply learning in a variety of real-life situations (Lefrancois, 1997:458).

**Teacher training**

The Accelerated Schools Project is both a philosophy and a process. Underlying the principles of accelerated schools are a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that are necessary to create a culture for accelerated school change (Finnan *et al.*, 1995:299). Teachers in accelerated schools are trained to identify and apply these values: equity, participation, communication, reflection, experimentation, trust, risk taking and professionalisation. The teachers need to learn to facilitate, reflect and enquire. The transformation of a school to an accelerated school begins with the entire school community taking a deep look into its present situation through a process called *taking stock*. The entire school community then forges a *shared vision* of what it wants

the school to be. By comparing the vision to the actual present situation, the school community identifies *priority challenge areas*.

In order to implement the instructional process, cadres (self-selected groups) of teachers come forward to analyse the particular needs in the immediate learning environment (Finnan *et al.*, 1996:11-12; 20-22; 302-303). They are responsible for carrying out the most intensive analysis of their particular priority areas through an *enquiry* process. The enquiry process is a systematic method that helps school communities clearly understand problems, find and implement solutions and assess their results. Typically, there are three to five cadres per school. Cadres may focus on priorities from school organisation and resources to parental involvement to curriculum areas.

The content of teacher training programmes for accelerated schools focuses on the following areas:

- the three principles of accelerated schools — building on strengths, empowerment coupled with responsibility and unity of purpose
- the five components of accelerated teaching and learning — authentic, interactive, learner-centred, inclusive and continuous strategies
- the elements of powerful learning — the what, the how and the context
- the accelerated schools process of change

### Amish schools

#### *Underlying philosophy*

The Amish philosophy and process differ widely from that of the accelerated schools movement, as the Amish do not wish their learners to question society or to move outside the boundaries of their traditional way of living. Amish families emigrated to America several centuries ago to seek the religious liberty denied to them in Europe (Fischer & Stahl, 1997:4). Their history stretches back to the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth century Europe. Youthful reformers in Zurich, Switzerland outraged religious authorities by rebaptising one another in January of 1525 (Kraybill (ed.), 1993:4-7). At the time the re-baptism of adults was punishable by death. Previously baptised as infants in the Catholic Church, the radicals were dubbed "Anabaptists". Breaking off from the Swiss Anabaptists, the Amish emerged as a separate group in 1693 when Jacob Amman, an elder of the church, sought to revitalise the church. Amman's followers were eventually called Amish. Most of the Amish fled Europe and settled in North America in the mid 1700s and 1800s. They are currently scattered across 22 states in America and in Ontario, Canada.

Because tradition is a sacred trust to them, it is vitally important to them that the ideals of their ancestors are upheld and maintained in the future. The Amish family, and to a lesser extent the Amish school, are believed to have the primary responsibility for training the child for life (Hostetler, 1993:172). The child also has an explicit relationship to a wide social fabric within his culture: his parents, siblings, extended relatives, church, community and the school — all of which work together to equip him or her for adult life. According to the Amish, true education is the cultivation of humility, simple living and the will of God (Hostetler & Huntington, 1992:14). Schools are expected to teach children literacy, co-operation, and the skills needed to live productive lives in keeping with values taught in the home and the church. The goal of Amish schools is to prepare children for usefulness by preparing them for a skilled, honest and simple way of living.

Amish schools are built and operated by parents of a local church district and thus not by central organisation (Hostetler, 1993:78).

### Curriculum

The Amish have two types of schools: the *elementary* school, consisting of the first eight grades and the *vocational* school. The vocational school provides on-the-job training that combines instruction and farm work for learners who are not old enough to obtain

work permits. Local preferences and different state rulings on school curriculum result in variations in the subject matter taught (Hostetler, 1993:181).

The Amish scholars learn English (with the emphasis on reading, grammar, spelling, penmanship and composition) and Arithmetic (with the emphasis on addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, decimals, percentages, ratios, volumes and areas, conversion of weights and measures and simple and compound interest). The Amish do not study the new Mathematics. They further study Health, History and Geography, Science and Art. Amish learners are taught to be very obedient, observant and diligent.

It is interesting to note that Religion as a subject is not taught formally in Amish schools. However, religion is in fact taught all day long during lessons and on the playground: in arithmetic, by accuracy and no cheating; in language, by learning to say exactly what they mean; in history, by humanity; in health, by teaching cleanliness and thriftiness; in geography, by broadening one's understanding of the world, etc. The emphasis is throughout on preparing for the Amish way of living and the responsibilities of adulthood.

As there is a great deal of intermarriage amongst the Amish, certain handicaps such as inherited deafness and increased dwarfism have become evident throughout the years (Fisher & Stahl, 1997:78). In order to cope with the special needs displayed by these handicapped learners, two special schools for the Amish handicapped have been opened in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In these schools the learners are taught responsibility and life-skills for independent living. The Amish also support government-run special education classes for learners who cannot benefit from the Amish special classes.

Amish learners are encouraged to assess their own progress against set performance criteria (self-assessment). Competition amongst learners is not stressed, with the result that criterion-referenced assessment is the most common form of assessment. Amish learners are encouraged *to understand* why they need to learn certain knowledge, skills and attitudes, with the result that they are intrinsically motivated to pursue their studies as they see the direct relevance of their studies to adult living (Fischer & Stahl, 1997:7). For example, before children can learn arithmetic they must be taught its value as a workable and necessary skill. Once they leave school, they will for instance use their knowledge and skill in arithmetic in their farming enterprises to measure animal feed, to calculate the amount of fertilizer needed for a field of a certain size, etc. This type of assessment can thus also be regarded as a form of authentic assessment.

In general, Amish report cards are based on the following categories: 100% is A+, 93–99% is A, 86–92% is B, 77–85% is C, 70–76% is D, and 69% and below is F. A percentage mark of 70% is required to pass. Daily scores are recorded and are averaged for report card marking. The report also has a detailed section for describing behavioural patterns such as co-operation in tasks and disciplinary problems or strengths.

### Teacher training

According to Fisher and Stahl (1997:58) the majority of Amish teachers are young, single women of the Amish faith. In Pennsylvania some Amish schools for instance have conservative Mennonite teachers, since these schools are sometimes run by the Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites. The Mennonites derive their name from Menno Simons, a prominent Dutch Anabaptist leader. Although distinct from the Amish, the Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites share many practices and cooperate in educational projects such as parochial schools (Kraybill, 1993:6). In Kansas, where the Amish attend public rural one-room schools, the teachers are hired by the State and are usually non-Amish, but nevertheless sympathetic to their way of life. For an Amish teacher, teaching is a labour of love and dedication and is considered a sacred service for which money cannot be an incentive.

It is interesting to note that although many states have in the past insisted that teachers for the Amish schools should have a college

degree, the Amish community has steadfastly refused to send its teachers for higher education. Fisher and Stahl (1997:59) indicate that practical learning is deemed more valuable than "book learning" by the Amish, and that in instances where teachers have of their own accord started taking college courses by correspondence, they have been advised to drop such learning attempts by the church leadership, as they might thus be exposed to worldly influences.

The Amish community has developed a whole network of training and support for teachers. Teachers in districts frequently meet co-operatively to discuss curriculum goals, strategies and content selection and assessment practices. Such meetings also serve as in-service training sessions for novice and inexperienced teachers. Planning and preparation methodologies are discussed and compared, and examples of good practice are circulated. Instructional problems and practices are discussed. The "Blackboard Bulletin", a monthly periodical journal for Amish teachers, is widely read and applied (Fisher & Stahl, 1997:62). Teachers thus work co-operatively and have an effective support network.

### Conclusions

The concept of "alternative schooling" can in practice take many different forms, depending on particular societal needs and preferences of communities. The two options mentioned in this article represent two very different responses to a similar need experienced by stakeholders: a perceived quality and relevant education for specific learners. The one response was the *accelerated schools project* where alternative powerful instructional strategies were advised with a view to developing the whole child by building on the strengths of each learner, and the other the *Amish one-roomed school* where a return to and control over traditional values and living was deemed preferable to public schooling.

Both of the mentioned options are typified by a concerted effort on the part of the school *community to be involved* in creating relevant and useful educational experiences for the learners concerned. The community participation in effect operationalises the vision of the immediate society for the creation of relevant quality schooling. In both cases teachers, parents and learners are all seen as *active participants* in the creation of a learning society. This leads to their experiencing the school as "owned" by the community. This ownership further leads to pride in the development and achievement of the learners.

Both alternatives encourage *teachers to work co-operatively* with other teachers and other stakeholders to provide relevant and powerful learning experiences. Assessment practices in both cases offer opportunities for *authentic assessment* and *alternative assessment practices* such as *self-assessment*. Even though teaching methodologies vary extensively in the two mentioned alternatives, the teaching methodologies employed are implemented with a view to creating meaningful and useful learning experiences, the outcomes of which will be applied in real-life contexts, whether in the *high-context agricultural Amish society* or in the *low-context greater American society*.

An example of a local South African farm school in a disadvantaged area which has made a concerted effort to turn itself around to meet the needs of the immediate population is that of Verkeerdevlei Primary in the Free State (Grey, 2001:5). Frick Leonard, the principal, has led the school from an all-whites school six years ago to an effective black school. The first aspect Leonard concentrated upon when turning the school around was the establishment of a school

culture which put the *needs of the learners first*. The *underlying philosophy* of the school is that the school needs to be a safe haven from racism where learners learn to *construct knowledge, apply skills and develop dispositions* which will make them able and productive citizens. This unity of purpose underlies all schooling endeavours. One of the harshest realities the learners faced initially was that of hunger. Coming from families who struggle to keep above the poverty line in the nearby township or farms, nutritional lacks often created exhausted learners, particularly on Monday mornings. The solution was a gardening and feeding initiative, which served both to supplement the children's diet and which served as an authentic educational project. Leonard explains that learning remains the core activity of the dusty little school, and that through the initiatives of the school (such as the gardening project and language and communication initiatives) bridges between the different peoples of the little town of Verkeerdevlei are being built.

Perhaps disenchanted stakeholders in education in South Africa should get together and debate whether government schooling is appropriate for the learners in their particular contexts. *Should alternative options not be explored?* Or should stakeholders not become more involved in government schooling provisioning and functioning? Could existing government schools not be adapted to achieve the ideals of accelerated schooling? Greater school involvement on the part of stakeholders will no doubt not only widen the variety of educational offerings, but will indirectly lead to an improvement in the quality of government schools. All stakeholders in education should actively participate in questioning the quality of schools in our developing society to ensure that improved and relevant educational opportunities are created.

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