People's Education (for People's Power) — a promise unfulfilled

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The central feature of Athenian citizens' rights, that is, people's participation in government, is also enshrined in the South African Constitution. This article argues for the Athenian style of participatory democracy as a viable model of participation in governing South African schools. The author claims that 'people's education', which had its origins in the principles of the Freedom Charter¹ — was diluted during the negotiations for South Africa's new democratic government. As a result, the political and educational ideal of 'people's education for 'people's power' has given way to democratic elitism in post-apartheid South African schools.

Introduction

The idea of democracy comes from two Greek words: *demos*, meaning 'people', and *kratos*, meaning 'power'. In classical Athens (508–322 BC), 'the people', who had a say in ruling the general public, were the free, adult Greek males — who had the right to make decisions and speak in public gatherings. Interestingly, Athenian democracy did not include the participation of a large section of the population: slaves, children, women and foreigners. Among the Athenian governors was Pericles (450–429 BC), who declared that "[o]ur constitution is called democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people… each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well" (Thucydides, 1972:145-147). As Kreibig (2000:94) maintains, "we might contest Pericles' claim that 'the whole people' governed, but here is a powerful statement in support of participatory democracy" ['the rule of the whole people'] (author's addition). In the words of Pateman (1970:22), "it is their [both classical (Pericles, Thucydides, 1972) and modern (Budge, 1993) participatory theorists] (author's addition) stress on this aspect of participation and its place at the centre of their theories, that marks the distinctive contribution of the theories of participatory democracy to democratic theory as a whole". This article argues that:
- ancient Athenian democracy was not based on old-fashioned and unrealistic theoretical and practical foundations;
- the principles of Athenian democracy were evident in the model of democracy developed during the anti-apartheid struggle, and particularly in the Freedom Charter; and that

•   the anti-apartheid era slogan of 'people's education for people's power' was not
    translated into post-apartheid South African schools.

Athenian democracy: its critique and its affirmation

This section discusses conceptions of democracy in the times of the Greek city-state
of Athens. The purpose is to show how classical (and modern) theorists defined, criti-
cised and defended Athenian democracy. In *The Republic* (1994), Plato interrogated
the Athenian constitution, particularly its commitment to democratic participation. He
argued that the Greek *demos* can be understood as 'the mob'. He was critical of the
Athenian constitution's support for 'people's power', precisely because of its emphasis
on individual freedom and citizens' active participation in the polity. In Plato's (1994:
295-297) words, the *demos*, had "independence and freedom of speech, and everyone
has the right to do as he chooses; … it's an enjoyable, lax, and variegated kind of
political system, which treats everyone as equal, whether or not they are". According
to Plato (1994), Athenian democracy permitted ordinary citizens to do as they wish,
and he argued that this could lead to anarchy. In addition, he argued that strict equality,
in which everyone has equal right and capacity to rule, is likely to lead to instability,
since it entrusts the affairs of the state to people with no political knowledge and skills.
At the heart of Plato's (1994) critical interrogation of Athenian democracy is the idea
that engaging with the ideas of 'the people' is likely to be harmful to the city-state.

Supporting Plato's (1994) position, Aristotle (1943:178-179) maintained that if
power is in the hands of 'the people', the polity "could easily degenerate into a form
of autocracy, where the popular majority ignored the limits of laws and imposed its
will regardless". In a democracy, Aristotle (1943:179-180) wrote, the demos are capa-
ble of wisdom, but the "decrees of the people override the laws, by referring all things
to the popular assembly". This suggests that if ruling requires skills, it is absurd or
irrational to leave democracy "to the rabble, the vulgar, the unwashed or the unfit"
(Wolff, 1996:73). In a nutshell, Plato's (1994) and Aristotle's (1943) criticism of
Athenian democracy centered on the proposition that "the mob does not possess
enough intelligence or goodness to rule itself" (Robinson & Groves, 2000:123). In
modern societies, doubts and reservations about the Athenian version of 'government
of the people' also emerged from so-called revisionist writers on democratic theory,
writing around the mid-twentieth century.

In his influential book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1950), Schumpeter
provided an influential revision of the theory of democracy. His main criticism of the
classical doctrine was that the central participation and decision-making role of 'the
people' rested on empirically unrealistic foundations. Classical participatory theory is
quite unrealistic and demands a level of rationality and reasoning in political matters
of the Greek *demos* of whom Plato (1994) and Aristotle (1943) wrote. He writes:

> The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as
> he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he could

readily recognise as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. ...The principle of democracy ... means that the reins of government should be handed to those who command more support than do any of the competing individuals or teams (Schumpeter, 1950:262-273).

Schumpeter's (1950) claim that the *demos* are incapable of making everyday political decisions is not without contradictions. Part of what he claims is that in the domain of politics, the masses have no well-defined role. The only means of participation open to ordinary citizens of Schumpeter's (1950) democracy is to vote for political leaders. Enslin (2000:146) agrees when she observes that the "citizens' votes serve the purpose of electing a government from among candidates competing for leadership, which entitles them to act on behalf of the electorate". My disquiet about Schumpeter's (1950) seeming elitist conception of democracy, together with those of Plato (experts) and Aristotle (freeborn, non-artisan males), is that each views the electorates as passive, apathetic, inactive and generally uninterested in public affairs — in short, as subjects who cannot be expected to have rational opinions about political rule. Schumpeter's (1950) criticism of democratic theory has a significant bearing on issues addressed later in this paper, in particular the support of an elitist model of democracy in post-apartheid South African education policy.

A different standpoint to Plato (1994), Aristotle (1943) and Schumpeter's (1950) minimal and conditional role for the *demos* is worth quoting at length, for what it reveals about both human agency and the political nature of democratic processes:

[T]erms like 'political ignorance' and 'expertise', 'uneducated', 'unsophisticated' and 'apathetic' are all controvertible from differing points of view. This is particularly true when they are regarded as static and unresponsive to changes in political circumstances. …To accept that these characteristics are not static and that they change with political circumstances is to accept the thesis of participatory theorists, namely that an extension of opportunities will itself change the political nature of many citizens from the apathy and lack of interest, which produce withdrawal and ignorance, to involvement and interest, which produce more sophistication and information (Budge, 1993:148).

Budge's (1993) argument is that the elitist claim that ordinary citizens are 'ignorant', 'uneducated' 'unsophisticated' and 'apathetic', misses the point. The Athenian version of participatory democracy, in Budge's (1993:151) view, maintains that there is no insurmountable "knowledge barrier looming between population and elite which inevitably debars the former from full political participation; the longer a debate goes on the more citizens absorb specialised knowledge". Even more importantly, through popular participation "man's [sic] (author's addition) faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas broadened, his feelings ennobled, and his soul elevated" (Rousseau, 1968:64-65). In his book *Strong Democracy*, Barber (1984:151) also argued that "... democracy in the participatory mode … creates a political community capable of transforming dependent private individuals into free citizens and partial and private

interests into public goods". In the words of Margetson (1978:35-40), "participation … together with democracy and education … forms a three-piece suit … participation then is educative in that it is itself a learning process with the crucially valuable function of developing what is essentially human about persons". Thus far, I have briefly discussed three critics of 'classical democracy', Plato (1994), Aristotle (1943) and Schumpeter (1950). The classical and the revisionist argument is that 'people's power' expresses the will of the *demos* as reasonable beings, and that this is not an accurate representation. The reasons for this argument vary: 1) at the heart of Plato's (1994: 295) attack is the idea that "democracy originates when the poor win, kill or exile their opponents";[2] 2) for Aristotle (1943), 'people's power' overrides the law by submitting decisions on policy to the popular assembly; and 3) democracy is a specialist business, which should be conducted by the experts until electors choose other representatives — as Schumpeter (1950) asserts. Budge (1993) defends the Athenian notion of 'people's power' against some of these objections, arguing that knowledge, an intrinsic human good — is not static, but subject to both expansion and change. Pitkin and Shumer (2000:453) point out that the educational value of participation in democracy "is no dim and distant chimera, confined to the Greek city", but it is applicable in any given democratic national context. Against this background, Van Niekerk (1994:195) asserts that "popular [or people's] education [for people power] (author's addition) in the world cannot be properly understood without a clear knowledge of the historical forces that shaped them". The next section of the paper examines the Freedom Charter and subsequent anti-apartheid education initiatives for traces of Athenian democracy.

The Freedom Charter and 'people's education for people's power'

In June 1955, the Congress of the People met in Kliptown, Johannesburg and drew up a Charter for the democratic South Africa of the future. The demands of 'the people' for an alternative to the National Party's apartheid power were collected, debated and expressed in this Charter. Its preamble reads:

> We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people (The Freedom Charter, 1955:1).

The influence of the democratic ideas of the Greek city-state of Athens is evident in the first clause of the Charter — "The People shall govern" which declares:

> ... All people shall be entitled to take part in the administration of the country. ... All bodies of minority rule ... councils and authorities shall be replaced by democratic organs of self-government (The Freedom Charter, 1955:1).

There are three points worth noting about the Freedom Charter's concept of 'people's government'. Firstly, the reference to 'the will of the people' is strongly reminiscent of the Athenian definition of democracy sketched by Pericles. Secondly, it lays down the basis for democratic 'government of the people, by the people' in a united, non-racial and just South Africa. Thirdly, it envisages 'people's power' and control over

the representatives, contrary to what is permitted by the vision of appropriate and desirable government as held by Plato (1994), Aristotle (1943) and Schumpeter (1950). Furthermore, the clause "The People shall govern" is also remarkable in that: it implies that 'the people', the *demos*, are able to govern; it also reaffirms Pitkin & Shumer's (2000:453) claim that "democracy is no[t] ... confined to the [Athenian] (author's addition) Greek city". According to Sayed & Carrim (1997:91), "central to the notion of educational democracy in South Africa is the idea that democracy entails, and should enhance, greater participation". Regrettably, the Freedom Charter's concept of 'people's power' — and by implication of 'people's education', was undermined during the transition from apartheid to democracy.

The demand for democratic 'people's education' began in the 1950s in protest against the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (see Mashamba, 1991; Hyslop, 1999). In the 1980s, the anti-apartheid struggle's educational and political goals became clearer, with the demand for 'people's education for people's power'. The 'people's education' movement embraced Athenian democratic principles of 'people's power', mass participation, equality and freedom. In 1986, the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC) adopted the slogan 'people's education for people's power'. At an NECC conference in Durban in 1986, Zwelakhe Sisulu (1986:107-111) stated that:

> The NECC has opened the way for people's power to be developed in our struggle for a free, democratic ... and non-racial education. ...Students, parents and teachers now have democratic organisations available through which they strive to take control over education. ... The education struggle is a political struggle in South Africa. ... The demand for free, democratic people's education, we have said, is part of, indeed inextricably tied, to the struggle for a free, democratic, people's South Africa.

The NECC believed that 'people's education' and 'people's power' are not incompatible but, rather, are intimately and reciprocally linked. Hartshorne (1986 quoted in Van den Heever, 1987:2) described the NECC's struggle for free, democratic 'people's education' in South Africa as follows: "In the wider context of the NECC movement, people's education can be regarded as the working out of the educational consequences of the Freedom Charter…an expression of the will of the people". A very important demand was for the establishment of organs of 'people's power' such as Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) and Student Representative Councils (SRCs). The NECC conference also resolved that "progressive parent-teacher-student structures be formed at all schools so that ... parents, teachers and students can come to understand each other's [educational] demands and problems" (Nkomo, 1990:442). The NECC regarded parent-teacher-student structures as democratic mediums that could break the grip of 'immediatism', that is, the belief that the revolutionary victory was imminent — among the school student population 'immediatism' was expressed in the slogan 'Liberation Now, Education Later' in 1985. From the NECC perspective, in order to confront an undemocratic prefect system, school students needed to esta-

blish democratic Student Representative Councils.

The concept of student representative democracy was rooted in resistance politics. The democratic Student Representative Councils pointed to the educative value of participation in mass democratic movement. A Congress of South African Students (COSAS)[3] activist wrote:

> Students must be organised through democratically elected representative councils (SRCs) … 'we are members of society before we are students' – and thereby demonstrate that students can play a 'progressive role in the broad democratic alliance'. Therefore, SRCs must relate the struggles in schools to the struggles in their communities (Wolpe, 1988:206).

In the opinion of Hyslop (1988), the Soweto Student Representative Council (SSRC)[4] promoted the idea of democratic Student Representative Councils as a way of forming 'student government' and power. In other words, the SSRC was able to organise and mobilise learners around issues of common interest — servant leadership that serves the interests of others not for self. Within four months of the SSRC's establishment, students insisted on democratically elected representatives in South African schools starting with "the right to elect student representative councils… for the expression of student grievances" (Davenport, 1991:422). Most importantly, the SSRC's vision of a democratic society was likely to encourage students to take responsibility for their own education inside and outside the classroom. Starting with the broadening of the arenas of struggle against the 'prefect system', the fight to achieve democratic representation in school governance was connected to demands for the complete overhaul of the apartheid machinery.

Following the unbanning of anti-apartheid political formations in 1990, the ANC and its ally, the South African Communist Party (SACP), embraced the Freedom Charter's concept of popular democracy during the negotiations with the National Party government. The formal negotiation process, which began in 1990 with the first face-to-face meeting of the apartheid government and the ANC alliances, was significant in limiting the democratic power of the anti-apartheid movement, as well as in producing an 'elite pact' around the emerging policy framework and the establishment of educational priorities. As this paper will show, the political negotiations on education, which paralleled the policy process through the National Education Conference (NEC) — leading to the National Education and Training Forum (NETF) in 1993, resulted in a compromise that receded from the concept of 'people's education for people's power' rooted in the Freedom Charter tradition. The starting point is to look at the National Education Conference and its concept of 'people's education for people's power' in the 1990s.

The National Education Conference was convened in March 1992 in Broederstroom, outside Pretoria, by the Education Delegation. The Education Delegation was formed by Nelson Mandela in 1991 to participate in direct negotiations with the state to address the crisis and challenges in black education. The NEC called for 'people's

power' based on the principles of 'people's education':

> Education … policy and practice shall be governed by the principle of *democracy*, ensuring the active participation of various interest groups, in particular teachers, parents, workers and students; and education shall be based upon the principles of co-operation, critical thinking and civic responsibility, and shall equip indivi- duals for participation in all aspects of society (Back To Learning, 1992:8-9).

The NEC's concept of 'people's education' implied genuine engagement and robust internal debate on the future education policies that would prepare 'the people' for full participation in alternative or people's schools. It encouraged popular participation in the discourses of educational policy development, and was consistent with Arnstein's (1969) maximal degree of citizen power and control. In other words, the NEC sought to advance 'people's education' by creating 'public spaces' where the views of the anti-apartheid movement and other stakeholders in education were recognised during the negotiations for post-apartheid South African education policy. Put different, the NEC encouraged people's participation, that is, rigorous debate and engagement in policy formulation and curriculum development.

In contrast to the NEC, which represented anti-apartheid educational constitu- encies, the NETF was comprised of representatives from stakeholders in the education fraternity, ranging from the then National Party government circles; business; the independent homelands; the training sector; universities; parent organisations; church organisations and NGOs. The NEFT defined their mission as: "the formulation of policy frameworks … of the education and training system, which are linked to the human, social and economic development needs of South Africa" (Badat, 1995:144). Of course, programmes of human resource development were crucial in addressing the major inequalities with respect to race, class and gender; but from a 'people's edu- cation' perspective this was not the only outcome intended by its negotiators. As Chisholm and Fuller (1996:704-705) have noted, the democratic movement that domi- nated the NEC "advanced an agenda for central and local transformation built on the foundations of people's education ... NETF came to be dominated by representatives whose history and allegiance did not lie in the democratic movement". In other words, the NEFT elitist agenda of technocratic education came to dominate the discourse on education policy and practice in South Africa. This served to change the focus of the anti-apartheid movement's broader education agenda, led by the NECC and the NECs conceptualisation of 'people's education for people's power'. Let us turn our attention to post-apartheid democratic school governance, with special focus on School Gover- ning Bodies and Representative Councils of Learners.

South African education policy: 'people's education' or 'elitist education'

South Africa has undergone dramatic changes since the first non-racial and democratic election in the country's history on 27 April, 1994. The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996a) provided for a new uniform system for the organi- sation, governance and funding of schools. Starting with the Education White Paper

2: The Organisation, Governance and Funding of Schools (Department of Education, 1996b), the idea of democratic governance in schools was clearly articulated:

> Other representative and deliberative structures within schools, such as student representative councils, parents' associations, and staff meetings, are important for successful democratic practice and school management. They should support, but not substitute for, the governing body. An SRC in each school should be mandatory (Department of Education, 1996:10).

Up to this point, the populist language of 'people's education' in democratic school governance continued to inform South African educational policy. The White Paper 2 (Department of Education, 1996b) emphasised popular participation and greater involvement of students, parents and teachers in managing school affairs. Yet, it is impossible to read the Education White Paper 2 (Department of Education, 1996b) in an unambiguous way, because organs of 'people's power' such as PTSAs and SRCs are merely given supportive and mandatory roles in democratic practice and school management. From one perspective, the White Paper (Department of Education, 1996b) is about the ideal and vision of 'people's education' in post-apartheid South African schools. From another perspective, it shows less confidence in people's governing organs in South African schools. It is against this background that the enlarged elite pact in the interregnum, a negotiation period in South Africa, offered two democratic approaches to education arrangements: bottom-up (participative) and top-down (elitist). In short, the transition to what is supposed to be a 'people's democratic education' saw the masses who pushed the apartheid regime to negotiation, to use Fanon's (1968:183) expression, "sent back to the caves", thus reducing the spaces to conceive 'people's education for people's power' in school democratic governance. In support of this claim, this paper maintains that a classical concept of 'people's power' envisioned in the Freedom Charter is not reflected in post-apartheid South Africa.

At the heart of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Department of Education, 1996a) lies the idea of democratic governance and partnership. The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996a) paved the way for democratic representative structures, officially known as School Governing Bodies. According to the new school governing policy an SGB of an ordinary public school comprises: a) parents of learners at the school; b) educators at the school; c) learners in the eighth grade or higher in the school; d) non-teaching staff; e) the principal, in his or her official capacity; and f) co-opted members. The purpose of the SGBs with regard to school democratic governance is stated by the SASA (Department of Education, 1996a:14) as follows:

> The governance of every public school is vested in its governing body. … A governing body stands in a position of trust towards the school. … The governing body of a public school must function in terms of a constitution which complies with minimum requirements determined by the Member of the Executive Council (MEC).

The SASA's (Department of Education, 1996a) idea of democratic governance and partnership is vague and unhelpful for a number of reasons: 1) Members of the Executive Councils have vested powers to determine the powers and functions of governing bodies; 2) in carrying out their democratic mandate, School Governing Bodies do not exclude the importance of the government's calling upon expert advice; 3) by centering and narrowing of the educational policy agenda of 'people's education', the SASA (Department of Education, 1996a) seems to favour a top-down, vertical logic that dilutes the radical ideas of the anti-apartheid movement. According to Colebatch (2002:23), the vertical dimension of education policy "sees policy as rule ... it is concerned with the transmission downwards of authorised decisions ... the ability or capacity of subordinate officials to give effect to these decisions ... so as to achieve this compliance. In other words, the post-apartheid South African government decides on school democratic practices and transmits them to Members of the Executive Councils to implement. Furthermore, owing to the compromise of 'people's education for people's power', even consultations about school governance become synonymous with a top down, democratic form of government — this form of 'consultation' to use Arnstein (1969) terminology, exhibits a 'degree of tokenism', not genuine participation. South Africa has undergone dramatic changes since the first non-racial and democratic election in the country's history on 27 April 1994. Among other changes that have taken place is the deracialisation and desegregation of education. The South African government's intention to dismantle apartheid education and democratise education can be seen within the context of transforming South Africa from an apartheid regime to a new democratic order.

The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996a) stipulates that Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) must be established in schools with learners in Grade 8 and higher (14–18 years of age). The Guides for Representative Councils of Learners seem to suggest that Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) are elite and prestigious bodies. The Guides emphasise competition among learners to become representatives, rather than the involvement of all in school governance. The Guides define RCLs as:

> The most prestigious official structure of learners in the entire school [… A] structure made up of learners elected by their fellow learners to represent them […] The only body that represents every learner and in which every learner can participate (Department of Education, 1999:11).

Electing a pupil leader to a hierarchical structure is seen as comparable to electing a professional politician to the office of president, premier or mayor. This race for leadership encourages competition for power and prestige among learners in general. In the end, the post-apartheid South African education policy's conceptualisation of democratic education — a top-down, vertical logic — is likely to undermine democratic student representation in schools. I contend that RCLs should not be seen as miniature national legislative bodies of representatives from different and hostile interests, but

rather as deliberative bodies in schools. The emphasis on competitive struggle for the learners' vote is likely to undermine 'participation' — an essential component of representative democracy in post-apartheid South African schools. On the face of it, competition for power and prestige (as opposed to popular participation) runs the risk of silencing the less assertive and articulate learners.

In the 'classical' rule of Student Representative Councils, democratic theory entails self-management, self-motivation, and self-regulation. For example, 'student-government' encouraged "debates, discussions, invited speakers, plays, poetry readings, films and songs. Prescribed textbooks were critically dissected; the daily press was read politically" (Bundy, 1987:320). Unfortunately, post-apartheid South African education policy's *modus operandi* is competitive elitism and authority, not 'student government' and power. Given this state of affairs, the anti-apartheid struggle and its concept of 'people's schools for people's power' was "celebrated but not translated into a radical rethinking of liberation theory" (Gibson, 2001:72) — a promise unfulfilled. For a promise (people's education for people's rule) to be fulfilled, we need to create spaces for "learners to ... demonstrate readiness and practice deliberation, which would enable the education system to produce responsible, responsive and democratic citizens" (Mncube, 2008:89). Is the thinking of classical critics, modern revisionist theorist(s) and 'elitist' forces at work in post-apartheid South Africa(n schools)? This paper seeks to (re)-establish a defence of anti-apartheid movement's concept of 'people's education for people's power' that embodied the Athenian notion of participatory democracy, both on political and educational grounds.

Conclusion

I began by exploring the reservations of classical critics and a modern revisionist theorist who critically interrogated Athenian democracy, especially its commitment to 'people's power'. I argued that both the classical and the revisionist elitist models of democracy see tyranny in the *demos* and virtue in the *elites*. As an ideal, it is not difficult to see the attraction of democracy in the classical mode: it supports 'people's power', the *demos*'s ability to govern and manage their (public) affairs. Although 'people's education' has disappeared in the education discourse, the conception of school democratic governance endorsed by the South African education policy and subsequent initiatives, is one of popular participation in school governance. The discontinuities between the anti-apartheid movement's 'people's education', on the one hand, and democratic competitive elitism on the other, have to be understood in the context of a negotiated transition from apartheid to democracy, a compromise that ultimately gave way to democratic elitism in post-apartheid South African schools. Ultimately, the anti-apartheid movement's concept of 'people's education' embodied in the classical notion of 'people's power', was not translated into post-apartheid democratic school practice.

Notes

1   The Freedom Charter is the anti-apartheid opposition document drafted in Kliptown, Johannesburg, in 1955. The Charter lays out the requirements for a free, non-racial and democratic South Africa.

2   It is often claimed that much of Plato's (1994) anti-democratic orientation came from his teacher Socrates' trial and subsequent death at the hands of the 500-man jury of Athens. Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and undermining Athenian democracy. Against this backdrop, Plato's (1994) charge against the democracy of the Greek city-state of Athens was that it opened the gates to blatant injustice and tyranny, by an ignorant and prejudiced majority.

3   A school student organisation formed in 1979 that took a position founded on the Freedom Charter of 1955. COSAS's programme of action sought to achieve dynamic, free and compulsory education for all South African learners.

4   The origins of the Soweto Student Representative Council stem from the enforcement of Afrikaans as medium of instruction by conservative officials within the Bantu Education Department. However, the focus of this paper in not on compulsory Afrikaans, but on the educational benefits of mass participation in democratic governance in post-apartheid South African schools.

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