

Educating for failure? Ontological or soteriological perspectives on crossing the digital divide?¹

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Abstract

This contribution takes as a point of departure an assessment of the impact of the digital divide with specific reference to the education sector in the South African context. A core problem is clearly that such a large proportion of learners drop out of secondary schools, while the pass rates at Bachelor's level are also alarmingly low. Does this imply that formal education takes place with the assumption of expected failure? This contribution explores the question of what perspective Christianity and Christian theology can bring to this social reality. It suggests that this perspective is related to the perplexing question of what the purpose of education may be in the first place. The article surveys various options in this regard (knowledge, skills, virtues, values, worldviews) and then argues that the purpose of education is also about developing interpretative and integrative frameworks, learning to see the world around us in a way that makes sense. Given such observations, various strategies to cross the deep divides in the South African education system are suggested. However, it is argued that "crossing" the digital divide should not be reduced to offering soteriological answers to questions regarding the nature of education that are primarily ontological in nature.

Keywords

digital divide; education; inequality; ontology; soteriology; worldviews

"Thus, the praise and jubilation about schools and education ... gradually gave way to pessimistic complaints and unmerciful judgements. ... Our modern education was particularly considered to be an impenetrable thicket of foolishness, prejudices, and blunders. Education, it was said, destroyed all that is good in a child:

1 This article is based on a paper read at the annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa on "Crossing the digital divide: Theological reflection on (in)equalities and (in)justices in the South African society", Stellenbosch University, 21–23 June 2023.

desire for knowledge, capability of observation, independence, and personality. Instead, education filled children with fear and fright, brought about anaemia and nervous breakdown, and often caused suicide” (Bavinck 2008:206).²

Introduction

Throughout human history instances emerged where access to an innovation provided some with a competitive advantage over others. One may consider the use of fire, various stone tools, the domestication of animals, the domestication of plants (agriculture), the use of bronze and later iron, the wheel, reading and writing, ploughing, gunpowder, optic glasses, printing, the compass, shared corporate risk-taking, the steam engine and the combustion engine, flying, submarines, nuclear power and now also computer skills, not to mention artificial intelligence. The task of education in every age may well be to increase the number of those who cross any such a divide. Only a few will ever become innovators who create a new divide or who consolidate a competitive advantage by sustaining minor innovations. But for a country’s work force it is important to have a large proportion of the population being able to make appropriate use of such innovations.

How, then, should one assess the impact of the present digital divide (see below), for example in the education sector in the South African context?

Some selected “facts” and figures on education in South Africa

There can be no doubt about the impact of the digital divide in South Africa and this is nowhere more obvious than in education. In short, the digital divide exacerbates reigning inequalities. An overwhelming majority of the South African population has access to cell phones (112.7 million cellular mobile connections were active in South Africa by early 2023) but not necessarily to smart phones (there are 26.3 million smart

2 This remarkable assessment comes from Herman Bavinck’s essay “Trends in Pedagogy” [1909].

phone users in South Africa in 2023, compared to 9.7 million in 2014).³ Some have access to computers and develop computer skills; others don't. Some have continuous access to the internet; others don't. As is common knowledge, this created immense difficulties for education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some institutions could go online for teaching and learning while others simply stopped their education programmes.

I am a practitioner within, but no expert on, South African education systems. I therefore cannot offer a comprehensive analysis with authority. The following evidence reported in the media is worth considering so as to interpret the effectiveness of South African education systems:

- The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement has been conducting a study on the reading and comprehension skills of fourth graders every five years since 2001. Its 2023-report on Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicates that South Africa's grade four children fared the worst of 57 countries included in the survey. Although there are considerable internal differences in terms of province, language of education, race, gender, and parental employment, 81% of the children could not read with comprehension (compared to 78% in 2016).⁴
- A similar problem plagues skills in mathematics at various levels in South Africa. Journalist Nick Dall (2022) captures the problem succinctly: "The latest Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019⁵ confirms what those on the ground have known for decades: South African school students are bad at maths. At primary school level, South Africa had the third lowest score out of the 64 countries. Things are no better at high school, where South Africa's Grade 9 learners received the second lowest score out of 39 countries. Moreover, less than a third of all students in the final year of high school take maths – and only half of them pass

3 See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/488376/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-south-africa/> [Accessed: 19 May 2023]. Given lengthy URLs, references to website material without an author are placed here in footnotes instead of in the text.

4 See <https://pirls2021.org/results/trends/overall> [Accessed: 17 May 2023].

5 For the US-based report, see the homepage at <https://nces.ed.gov/timss/>.

their exams, according to data from the South African Institute of Professional Accountants.”

- Although the official pass rate in the 2022 national matric exams was 80,1%, this does not consider the drop-out rate from Grade 10 to Grade 12. Businesstech reports that there were 1 062 510 learners in grade 10 in 2020, while 725 146 wrote the National Senior Certificate and 580 555 passed the exam in 2022. Accordingly, the “real” pass rate is then lower than 55%.⁶
- South Africa’s Department of Higher Education and Training reports that by 2020 just 6% of adults in South Africa between the age of 25 and 64 had university degrees. A further 6% had diplomas and 3.4% held technical and vocational education and training (TVET) certificates. In that age sector of the population 51.7% did not complete secondary schooling (Grade 12 or equivalent).⁷ Again there are differences in terms of age groups (with higher percentages among younger people), population groups, provinces, and gender.
- The enrolment of students in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector (with 50 public TVET colleges and 253 campuses) increased steadily from 358 393 students in 2010 to 673 490 students in 2019.⁸ TVET colleges offer two main qualification types, namely the National Certificate (Vocational) and National Technical Education Diploma, referred to as the NATED. Certification rates can best be assessed at the N3 and N6 levels. At the N3 level 18 383 of the 41 201 students who wrote the exams in 2013 passed (44.6%). This improved to 83.2% in 2018 but declined to 68.0% in 2019 (37 863 out of the 55 707 students who wrote the exams). Such numbers need to be compared with the much larger number of students who wrote the senior certificate. At the N6 level 15 268 of the 42 841 students (or 35.6%) passed the exams in 2013, while 113 393 out of

6 See <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/657849/south-africas-real-matric-pass-rate-is-under-55/> [Accessed: 18 May 2023].

7 See <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/only-6-of-south-africans-have-university-degrees-report-says-8717cdd0-e701-474b-96f1-2377038b32df>. The DHET report (March 2021) is entitled, *Post-School Education and Training Monitor: Macro-Indicator Trends*.

8 See section 4.1.4 and table 14 of the DHET report.

117 641 students (96.4%) passed it in 2019.⁹ The real concern lies with throughput rates. Of the 88 771 students had enrolled for the NC(V) Level 2 programme in 2016, only 8 135 students of this cohort (9.2%) completed the NC(V) Level 4 qualification after three years (in 2018).¹⁰

- The efficiency in terms of throughput and dropout rates of the post-school education and training (PSET) system in South Africa has been steadily improving over the last decade or so. At public universities in South Africa (both contact and distance) 18.8 % of students registered in 2009 for the first time completed a Bachelor’s degree within 3 years, while this improved to 29.9% for the 2016 intake. Nevertheless, in the 2009 cohort 60.9% of Bachelor’s students completed the degree within 10 years (72.6% for contact universities, 30.5% for distance universities).¹¹
- There are also some 287 private colleges, but the total number of students registered at such institutions is not reported. In addition, there are 9 Community Education and Training colleges in the country, one in each province. These colleges constitute “an effort to support those with lower levels of education, both in terms of their labour market prospects and their broader functioning in society. These are so-called ‘second-chance’ institutions, offering education and training opportunities to youth and adults who did not, for whatever reason, have access to sufficient education and training earlier in their lives.”¹² Although the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training envisages one million students to be enrolled at CET colleges by 2030, this is unlikely as enrolment declined from 2010 to 2019 in terms of the national population between the age of 15 and 35 years enrolled at such institutions (from an estimated 1.5% in 2010 to 0.8% in 2019). In fact, this figure is inflated as total enrolment (of all ages) is divided by the population between the ages of 15 and 35.

9 See section 6.1.2 and tables 30 to 32 of the DHET report.

10 See section 7.1.2 and table 41 of the DHET report.

11 See section 7.1.1 and tables 36–38 of the DHET Report.

12 See section 4.1.6 of the DHET report,

- Government spending on education as a proportion of both overall government expenditure (20.8 percent in 2020/21) and GDP (7.7 percent in 2020/21) far exceeds the benchmarks set by UNESCO for all countries in the world (4.0–6.0% of GDP and 15.0–20.0% of public spending). Of such government spending on education 70.5% was allocated to primary and secondary education and 29.5% to tertiary education.¹³ In short: the funds available for education is not the primary problem.
- According to Debra Shepherd (2022), “the proportion of employed teachers with a REQV14 equivalent and higher increased from just less than 40% in 2000–2012 to roughly two-thirds by 2016–2021. In other words, at least 2 in 3 teachers employed in the basic schooling sector between 2016 and 2021 were fully professionally qualified, and 9 in 10 teachers were adequately qualified.” The figures are understandably somewhat lower for teaching associates. In short, the problem does not lie only with suitably qualified teachers (see Shepherd 2022).
- The Media Hack Collective reports that in a presentation to parliament the Department of Basic Education claimed that 17,517 schools were connected to the internet – or 71% of public schools. However, a 2019 report from National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) has it that 4,695 schools have access for teaching and learning (about 20% of public schools) and 6,770 schools have internet access for administrative purposes (that’s 29%). Crudely, the department appears to have added the schools with teaching and administration together to get the total number of schools. The NEIMS report (August 2019) states that at most, 11,465 of South Africa’s public schools have access to the internet (49% of public schools).¹⁴

13 See section 7.2.2 and Figures 20 and 21 of the DHET Report.

14 See <https://mediahack.co.za/datastories/schools-internet/> [Accessed 19 May 2023].

What, then, are the aims of education?

Following these observations, one may suggest that the common task of teachers and lecturers at all levels is to improve the systems of education in order to ensure better quality and to enhance the levels of education obtained by South African citizens. Given the gross inequalities in the system that the statistics above indicate, there is an equally obvious concern for justice. The reasons for this may be many but the “Bantu education” of the apartheid era and the educational advantages that some received at the cost of others cannot be addressed within a decade or two. Officially, apartheid may have lasted less than fifty years (1948-1994) but before this there is the legacy of colonialism that may take several generations to address.

There are of course also debates around the actual content of the curriculum, given relevance within the (South) African context, the need to retrieve indigenous knowledge, to define standards of excellence not merely derived from Europe. Failure in education may well result from disinterest in the subject matter. I will not address such debates here. It should nevertheless be clear that any education will require at least linguistic, mathematical, and digital literacy.

Either way, a concern for justice cannot only focus on ensuring that more students will complete their studies in the end. Not everyone can or should go to a university or receive tertiary education. There should be similar appreciation for vocational training or entrepreneurship. What about those who drop out of the system? How does education help them? Are we educating a significant number of people knowing that they will fail and drop out of the system, almost setting them up for failure and in the process making them incompetent to do anything else? This is a question once raised by the German philosopher Reimer Gronemeyer with reference to a similar situation in Tanzania.¹⁵

If an education system is geared towards producing matriculants but around half of those who started in Grade 1 never complete, what was the

15 This was something of an oral aside by Reimer Gronemeyer during a paper entitled “Plea for a Critter Church” during an online conference on “Rethinking Theology in the Anthropocene”, 15–17 July 2021.

purpose of such education? Likewise, if an education system is designed to enable digital literacy without the necessary facilities and educators, many, perhaps the majority, are set up for almost necessary failure, leaving them likely to remain unemployed and in a digital age maybe also unemployable except for “unskilled” jobs. One answer may of course lie with technical and vocational education and training but my impression (to be tested through further conversation) is that this is perceived as an avenue for those who fail to obtain a school-leaving certificate. The benchmarks of the National Qualification Framework are set by the National Senior Certificate (NQF level 4) and in tertiary education by a Doctoral Degree (NQF level 10). The aim of the framework is of course to ensure that every qualification is offered at the same standard, thus overcoming the sub-standard education of Bantu education. Everything else must then be judged in terms of its equivalence with such levels and standards. The problem is that technical and vocational education and training simply does not have the same social status and is judged with the NQF as point of reference. One can still award an honorary doctorate for the performing arts but why must that be judged in terms of a PhD? Can one also obtain a PhD in brick laying, plumbing, picking grapes, truck driving, or sweeping the factory floor? Or is this by definition rated as nothing higher than NQF level 1, namely a “General Certificate”? In some disciplines there may be public recognition for outstanding achievements without comparing that to a PhD such as law, sport, music, and nowadays also cooking (being a master chef), but what about the rest?

In short, this raises the question what education is there for in the first place. Is there perhaps a fundamental misunderstanding of the very aims of education?

What may Christian discourse on education mean?

In the rest of the contribution I will explore the question what perspective Christianity in general and Christian theology in particular can bring to this social reality? The question is not about Christian education if understood as the education of Christians or as education on the subject of Christianity, its core belief, traditions, symbols, forms of praxis, spirituality and so forth (i.e. catechesis). That typically happens within Christian communities, but

of course also in homes, family networks, and at a range of institutions and organisations. The focus is also not on establishing Christian schools where Christian perspectives on education can be offered, where Christian values can be upheld, or Christian virtues be cultivated and where there is some place for Christian instruction.

Instead, the question is what the aims of education in general are, in society, also secular society. Does Christianity have anything particular to offer in this regard or do Christians merely mimic what others are saying. Do they even legitimise secular perspectives in this regard? This is a thorny question in which the answers are by no means obvious and often conflated and confused with Christian education.

One may find the right track by raising the question of whether education is there for the sake of Christianity – or whether Christianity is there, in functionalist terms, for the sake of education? Both options are deeply problematic. In the public sphere, Christianity (churches) is often understood in such functionalist terms, namely as an influential agent in civil society to help with a range of social issues – voter education, education around HIV, poverty alleviation, addressing environmental degradation, providing various social services and so forth, but also as a private service provider in education at all levels, including pre-school crèches. There can be no doubt about the immensely positive role that churches have played in education in South Africa in this regard. Such a functionalist understanding of the role of religion therefore cannot be denied but no self-respecting church (or any other religious organisation) will agree that Ultimate Reality is in the service of anything that is penultimate (to adapt Bonhoeffer's famous distinction).

However, the opposite position, namely that education is there for the sake of Christianity, is equally problematic. One may phrase the question in different ways:¹⁶ Are we human in order to become Christians, or do we become Christians in order to be human (again)? Is culture there for the sake of Christ, or did Christ come so that culture can flourish (à la H. R. Niebuhr)? Is society necessary in order to establish churches through

16 These questions are shaped by Arnold van Ruler's oeuvre. I have raised such questions in many other publications (e.g. Conradie 2019a).

which eternal salvation may be found or is the church there for the sake of society? Is God's work of creation there for the sake of salvation, or is salvation necessary for the sake of creation? Are humans there for the sake of the world, or does the world provide natural resources for the sake of humans? The binary ways of phrasing the question may be part of the problem, but at least this helps to break through tacit assumptions about the purpose of education.

How, then, should education be understood in terms of God's economy, i.e. God's work of creation, providence, salvation, the formation, ministries and missions of the church and consummation (see Conradie 2015)? Where does education fit in? One pertinent misunderstanding needs to be addressed here, namely that education may be equated to salvation. Many students intuitively assume that education, i.e. obtaining a Senior Certificate or a university degree is indeed "salvific", if not in a religious sense of the word. This makes sense in many ways, given the possibilities of obtaining a good job, a better salary and therefore the ability to care for one's family and to have access to the "good things" in life. Such students may well thank God for success in their studies. By contrast, those who are in danger of dropping out of the system, especially at universities, may well become frustrated and angry as their hopes and dreams are crushed. Vehement student protests express such anxieties against a Eurocentric system that (they feel) is rigged against them. Those who register and do not make it may even feel damned by God and the world, so that education is still regarded as salvific and failure then as damnation. Nevertheless, unless a "modern" (or moral influence) view of atonement is assumed,¹⁷ one needs to insist that any such a soteriological approach to education is inappropriate. Indeed, one should not give soteriological answers to "ontological" questions.¹⁸

17 See the classic typology proposed by Gustaf Aulén in *Christus Victor* (2002). See also my pneumatological adaptation of this typology (Conradie 2019b).

18 This is a comment frequently repeated in the oeuvre of Arnold van Ruler. See his *This Earthly Life Matters* (2023:88, 181, 182).

What is education there for?

Education is a term describing a process. It is in this sense similar to process terms such as development, liberation, social transformation, or reconciliation.¹⁹ None of these can be understood as an aim in itself. What is education then there for? It cannot be that the purpose of education is liberation (e.g. the “pedagogy of the oppressed”) or development since these are themselves process terms. To frame the question in this way is to bring one’s deepest assumptions about education into play. Strangely, an answer is often taken for granted because education is regarded as “obviously a good thing”. It is therefore seldom articulated. Let me offer some options without reference to the vast literature that could possibly be brought into play:

Some would maintain that education is there for the sake of gaining knowledge of the world around us. In that sense knowledge is itself a virtue. In a way this is obviously true as parents seek to make the world around them familiar to their children, including learning to name family members, animals, household items, street names, and many more. This is also a core intuition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, namely that such knowledge is found in Indigenous cultures and needs to be cultivated and where necessary retrieved. This also indicates long-standing contestations (following Foucault) over what counts as knowledge given assumptions of modernity, Eurocentric views of knowledge production and the dominance of the Global North in academic research. Either way, if the focus of education is on gaining knowledge, then this elicits debates on the best ways of transferring and acquiring such knowledge. Often this prompts a move away from “teaching” to “learning” and therefore providing an environment that is conducive for students to acquire such knowledge on their own and in their own time. At worst, such an understanding of education prompts a consumerist hermeneutic where knowledge becomes “for sale” (see Conradie 2011).

Is knowledge then an aim in itself? Perhaps, but since Francis Bacon and the age of discovery typically this prompts debates about the usefulness

19 I have discussed the nature of such process terms in various publications on development (Conradie 2018) and reconciliation (Conradie 2013).

of such knowledge. If so, knowledge is also power. The focus of education then shifts from knowledge for its own sake to acquiring skills to use such knowledge, from a focus on the knowledge of the classics (in the past) to empirical investigations in the present in order to seek a better life in the future. The argument is that developing skills to acquire knowledge is more important and more long-lasting than gaining knowledge itself, not least given the vastness of such knowledge. A wide range of such skills are of course relevant, but the focus is typically on using knowledge to gain control over the forces of nature through the development of various forms of technology. And then the skills to use such technology, including digital skills. Accordingly, there is also a need to cultivate academic skills to gain knowledge and to find innovative solutions to problems in society. Such academic skills include reading and comprehension skills, writing skills, argumentative skills, critical skills, and various research skills (e.g. on methodologies appropriate to the subject matter studied). If education is about acquiring skills, then the gymnasium needs to be supplemented and eventually replaced by *Realschulen* (vocational schools providing training in vocational skills). Then a different approach to education is also required, namely one of trial and error where students need to try to apply their skills while the teacher becomes a coach to correct errors, to demonstrate how this may best be done and to provide helpful feedback to students to constantly improve such skills. Such a view of teaching is more labour intensive given the need for individual feedback. This applies, for example, especially at the elementary phase but also at postgraduate level.

Another, perhaps more traditional view is that education is about cultivating virtue. The wisdom literature in the biblical texts typically understand instruction accordingly, namely to cultivate the virtue of wisdom. It would then maintain that awe before Yahweh is the point of departure for such wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). One can add many further virtues, including the other cardinal virtues of justice, courage, and temperance. Another classical virtue is that of *humanitas* or humaneness (a love of people = philanthropy), a cultural orientation that transcends nationality or race that must be acquired through education.²⁰ One may also add a range of

20 See Bavinck's essay on "Classic education" (2008:216). In reading this essay one cannot but be struck by the emphasis on *imitatio* as the method in and even the goal of a classical education. Bavinck nevertheless notes a shift from imitating the ancients to

academic virtues such as a willingness to learn, curiosity (elsewhere a vice!), humility, rigor, critical inquiry, wonder and awe. If the cultivation of virtues becomes the highest aim of education, a different approach is needed, one that recognizes the wisdom in the saying that “virtue cannot be taught.” Learning then takes place through imitation, more than by self-acquisition of knowledge or trial and error to improve skills. Imitation is not only of teachers but especially imitation of the classics (whether in Greek or Roman antiquity or more broadly understood²¹). Here there is a need for a community of scholars, examples, role models, regular exercises, storytelling, supportive friends and so forth. But it does require a live demonstration of such virtues from respected teachers who embody and practice such academic virtues over an extended period of time.²² Students would typically sense that they will “never” be able to imitate their academic heroes, but academic mimesis is never a matter of carbon copying the examples of influential teachers (although body language is often copied – and irritatingly so). There is ample room for partial imitation and innovation.

Yet another position is that education serves some or other particular, higher cultural, aesthetic or moral goal. This can be framed in different ways depending on the ethical theory that is assumed, e.g. in terms of values, duties, moral virtues, rights or responsibilities. These goals may be formulated vaguely as human flourishing, responsible citizenship, sustaining community life, or innovation and progress, perhaps towards some cultural notion of “civilization”. However, the particular content of such a goal of education may also focus on values such as gender equality, religious tolerance, or a democratic culture. This may well be subject to

the formation of the self to a “noble humanity” through the ancients: “the significance was that through the reading of classical authors, one tried to enter into their spirit, to make their observation and thinking one’s own, and then, being formed in this way, one could then begin to move freely and independently in this milieu” (2008:221).

- 21 See David Tracy’s retrieval of the category of classics in *The Analogical Imagination* (1981).
- 22 My own teachers who were rightly famous, e.g. Johannes Degenaar, Willie Jonker and Hennie Rossouw, were not particularly good at transferring knowledge and paid scant attention to the teaching skills that one would find in teaching guides. They did produce some publications but their stature and the respect that they commanded was not based on that (only). Instead, they each embodied particular academic virtues and practised that over many decades of teaching.

contestation, for example in the context of various forms of nationalism, including Christian nationalism, romanticism, Zionism, or communism. Two contrasting teaching strategies may follow from this. One focuses on the rights, freedom, independence, creativity, even the majesty of the individual child with the assumption that this will by itself elicit the envisaged goal. Another focuses on education as socialization (or state-controlled indoctrination) so that education will ensure that the goals are indeed reached.²³

Is that all there is to say about education? Does Christianity, the Christian faith or Christian theology have anything substantive to contribute to this regard? Does this help in any way to cross the digital divide? I will come back to the last question in the conclusion below, but I do think there is another aspect to the aims of education.

One may argue that education is also about helping learners (also life-long learners) to integrate such knowledge, skills, virtues, and goals within larger interpretative frameworks that helps them cope with the demands of life. This is already necessary at the most basic level for infants to place their family members, cradle, room, and house within such a framework. Such frameworks are social, spatial, temporal, linguistic and cultural, but could later also include theoretical frameworks (mind-maps). These frameworks are essential in order to integrate any new experiences, knowledge, skills, virtues, or approaches. They are of course also constantly expanded, adapted, and sometimes also abandoned – if rarely so. Students do need linguistic, geographic, historical, and intellectual frameworks to be able to integrate any new knowledge albeit that this is often taken for granted and hard to teach. At a theoretical level such frameworks lead to competing approaches to a discipline and distinct research paradigms. For those operating within such a paradigm its parameters remain rather invisible. There may well be clashing assumptions in the frameworks adopted by teachers and students, for example prompting calls for decolonising (tertiary) education. At a theoretical level this also prompts calls for a decolonial epistemology and a retrieval of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. At the widest level such interpretative frameworks are embedded in worldviews, i.e. in the social

23 I am drawing here on Herman Bavinck's brief and remarkably erudite overview of "Trends in Pedagogy" (2008: 205–208).

construction of reality (see Conradie 2014). One way of seeing religion is that this entails the social construction of Ultimate Reality, in response to ultimate questions that cannot be answered but which also cannot but be addressed. Reality itself is therefore framed accordingly.

If education is about acquiring such interpretative and integrative frameworks (acknowledging how contested and distorted that may be), then teaching is about helping students to see the world in a particular way. This is typically not done directly but picked up through constant exposure between teachers and learners. To do so through distance learning is possible but much harder. As Brian O’Connell repeatedly argued in numerous speeches at UWC, education is then about sense-making, learning to understand the world around us and figuring out our place within that world.

It should be obvious, then, that Christianity could offer learners such an integrative interpretative framework, albeit one that also needs to be adapted constantly. It offers a way of looking at the world, namely as God’s own beloved creation. This does make a huge difference. As I have argued elsewhere, this is best illustrated by “warped” views of nature, e.g. as being a leisurely hide-out (romanticism), “red in tooth and claw” (social Darwinism), nothing but real estate (colonialism), natural resources for extraction and exploitation (industrialised capitalism), or something sublime, to be worshipped (New Age mysticism).²⁴ The Christian eye,” observes David Bentley Hart (2005:58), “sees (or should see) a deeper truth in the world than mere ‘nature,’ and it is a truth that gives rise not to optimism but to joy.”

Such a view of education can also be narrowly understood as religious instruction or indoctrination, namely, to drill learners with the particular content of ecclesiastic confessions. Accordingly, the only purpose of a

24 For a discussion of such “warped” worldviews, see Snyder (2011), also my *The Earth in God’s Economy* (Conradie 2015). I recently came across Kant’s essay on “The end of all things” (2012:224) where four further rather graphic images are used: 1) the world as an inn where everyone arriving there on his life’s journey must be prepared to be driven out soon by his successor; 2) the world as a penitentiary, a place of chastisement and purification for fallen spirits driven out of heaven; 3) the world as a madhouse where everyone induces every thinkable sorrow unto others; and 4) the world as a toilet where all the excrement from other worlds has been deposited.

general education is to enable Christian education. Learning grammar is necessary to read the Bible, learning logic to understand the Christian faith and learning rhetoric (from *ratio* to *oratio*) to proclaim and practice such faith. In such cases a worldview can operate more like a blindfold so that the focus shifts to seeing the worldview instead of seeing the world as it is, facilitated with the lens of the adopted worldview.

Bridging the digital and other divides

Given the above argument, let me concretise this with some strategies to cross the deep divides in the South African education system.

- There have been several dramatic improvements in the educational system at many different levels, especially in terms of quantity and access to educational opportunities. These achievements should be celebrated, especially the achievements of schools in quintile 1 that have to cope with fewer resources.
- There remain grave and widespread concerns over the quality of education, not only in terms of those who fail but also for those who succeed, at all levels, including the standards at a doctoral level. The numbers of those who do succeed therefore need to be taken with a pinch of salt. The various commissions of inquiry and their reports are necessary as long as it is remembered that more and more bureaucratic rules to enhance standards may be exactly counterproductive. Quality is at least also a matter of imagination and dedication and cannot be engineered or regulated. It can be imitated, at best in a community of excellence. Sports teams realise that better than the educational system, it seems.
- There is an urgent need to raise the profile and status of technical and vocational education and training. There would be many primary school learners who would prefer to follow such a track compared to an academic track but are discouraged due to its low status, for example in the field of agriculture where the impact of Bantu education still inhibits interest in the field. Germany sets a well-known example of an appreciation for technical skills that may be emulated. I think there is a need for a celebrity to host a televised competition for the grape picker of the year, the brick layer of the

year, or the mechanic of the year, alongside master chef competitions and the like.

- There is no need for everyone in South Africa to have advanced computer skills (not everyone would be interested or have such an ability), although anyone who has such an ability should have access to the internet, irrespective of her or his demographic circumstances. Crossing the digital divide would mean that those who do need access should be enabled to gain such access. There is a lot of work to be done in this regard. However, justice does not mean that everyone should have equal access or equal airtime. Instead, following a core insight from John Rawls' famous theory, justice would mean that those who do not have access are able to explain for themselves how they benefit from those who do have access – in the same way that one may benefit from the services of a motor vehicle mechanic without being one. Likewise, it may be in the interest of workers that the CEO of a company receives a higher salary than they do, but they need to explain to themselves why that is the case.
- Having said that, one also needs to recognise that, in a world where the vast majority can read and write, not to be able to do so places one at a serious competitive disadvantage. It is therefore in the interest of the national economy to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to learn how to read and write and that as many people as possible do have some competency in this regard. The purpose of such reading skills need not be to appreciate poetry or literature but would at least be to read street signs, do shopping and find a job. In the same way, all primary school children need the opportunity to develop some basic computer skills at least in order to use phones or digital devices (e.g. supermarket tills).
- The most significant sector impacted by the digital divide in South Africa is probably secondary education, i.e. those schools that are close to dysfunctional. If the aims of education sketched above hold true, more funding for education or better teacher qualifications will not suffice to address that problem. What is needed is the much slower process of building communities of character (with reciprocal responsibility) involving students, parents, teachers, and other local

stakeholders. What is needed is that the stories of schools where things have been turned around are told and celebrated.

On *crossing* the divide

To speak of “crossing” the digital divide from the perspective of the Christian faith of course brings the Christological symbol of the cross into play. Some would sense that it is indeed necessary to “save” our education from collapse and would therefore look for the significance of soteriological metaphors in this regard. My sense, though, is that this is inappropriate for various reasons.

First, it is not as if the whole education system is dysfunctional. As indicated above, the problem is that the South African education system is unequal. Second, in “saving” education there is a risk of misunderstanding, with the assumption that it is education that saves – so that it becomes necessary to save education. Third, as I argued above, it is not appropriate to jump to soteriological answers to questions regarding the nature of education that are primarily ontological in nature. When the purposes of education are not reduced to acquiring knowledge and developing skills, but also include the cultivation of virtues, promoting values and ways of seeing the world (as argued above), then a reductionist understanding of success (and failure) can be avoided.

Once these are indeed addressed, it becomes possible to gain clarity on the deeper divides in our country around poverty, unemployment (and unemployability) and inequality. The digital divide is a function of such divides although it also exacerbates such divides. The gospel does indeed address such divides through the message of liberation, reconciliation in Jesus Christ and “reconstruction and development” in every sphere of society. Again, these are all process terms that are aimed, let us say for the moment, at something like human flourishing (Ubuntu), planetary well-being or, from a Christian perspective, fellowship with the Triune God.

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