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Corporate social responsibility in literacy: empowering change in South Africa

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2009-02-17T10:32:03Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/6143

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Abstract

A critical equity and change enabler, literacy/education continues to prove very challenging to transform in South Africa. Having been a major apartheid resource through Bantu Education in entrenching South Africa's existing two worlds, business intervention in this crucial sector is the overriding interest of this research. How corporate social responsibility in education, assisted by public policy, reinforces inequality in the South African society, even as it attempts to alleviate poverty, is the thrust of the argument here around which many questions evolve. Some of the questions to which this thesis attempts to offer answers, therefore, are: What informs how business invests in education? How is public policy not an enabler of business investment in education? The objective is to determine the extent to which business investment in literacy/education can empower meaningful change in a market-driven South African society.

The argument reiterated in this thesis is that Corporate Social Investment (CSI) in education has the potential to be a strong change driver. Unfortunately, its current positioning in the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BB-BEE) strategy is weak and its effect on change equally weak. The extent to which CSI in literacy can facilitate transformation in South Africa is highly dependent on the elimination of the many challenges beyond the scope of business endeavour. The challenges include the low weighting of CSI in the BEE agenda which is a hindrance to mind-set change about the relevance of education to South Africa's transformation.

Employing the qualitative method, using elite interviewing, and relying on written records, this thesis starts off by finding the South African definition of the word Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) vis-à-vis global definitions. While Corporate Social Investment (CSI), it was discovered, is the preferred word in the private sector, findings here reveal that irrespective of what it is called in South Africa, CSR or CSI, both terms are fundamentally the same because, more in South Africa than anywhere else, the moral values that drive CSR or CSI are the same. That is, social justice, equity, and transformation.

In order to determine its potency in the change process, a cursory assessment of CSI in the various sectors of education reinforces the place of the definition in that process. As an 'investment', CSI is driven by market forces. Inherent in these forces are the inequalities that motivate capitalism and CSI is not insulated from those forces. Findings here emphasise that CSI, as yet another capitalist means of intervention in education, is thus severely challenged to be more than a tip of the ice-berg in the nation's change process.

Very importantly, this thesis shows how paradoxically, public policy through the DTI Codes of Conduct for BB-BEE further disempowers CSI in education. As a “residual element” with an insignificant weighting on the BEE Scorecard, this research argues that legislation diminishes the importance of education as an empowerment driver. The inadequate creation of jobs further makes the benefit of education to transformation even less stimulating.

It concludes that although CSR or CSI has enormous potential to drive change, the BEE legislation, the conceptualisation of CSR, and other micro issues evolving around poverty conspire to limit the extent to which CSI can empower change.

Key Words: Corporate Social Responsibility, South Africa, Equity, HUREPICS, Corporate Social Investment, Literacy, Partnership, Change, BEE, Means of production, neo-liberal.