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A Portrait of an Integrating School: Equity High

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ABSTRACT

This research study seeks to understand how a former Afrikaans medium school, named after a prominent president of the apartheid era and steeped within the proud traditions and customs of the Afrikaans culture, went *against the grain* to become a shining beacon of democracy in South Africa. Utilising the methodology of portraiture this research study draws attention to the outstanding qualities of this school, Equity High, studying *excellence* rather than *pathology*. Three major research findings emanated from this study: first, a transitory leader that is committed to humanistic principles and norms can effect positive educational change; second, if change attempts are to be successful, individuals and groups must find meaning concerning *what* should change as well as *how* to go about it; and third, a school climate that promotes cultural interconnectedness and cultural interdependency can foster a sense of belonging and a feeling at home for all students at school.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Racial problems in white schools have been well documented and the few dramatic incidents of racial confrontation have enjoyed popular as well as scholarly attention (Pandor, 2004; Jansen, 1998). Yet there is virtually no research on what I call “exceptional patterns of desegregation.” By this I mean studies of white schools that have experienced significant levels of black enrolment without significant levels of white flight. A further observation among many white schools is that while black students are often allowed into the school, schools are far more resistant (or unable) to change the dominant racial patterns of

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teacher appointments. Even more difficult might be changing the overall curriculum and culture of the school (the taken-for-granted, everyday practices or 'the way we do things here') to reflect and accommodate the diversity in the student body. Accordingly, the research study asks how, whether and to what extent have these schools transformed the second-order changes that accompany the act of increasing black enrolments in the student body?

This research study sets out to explain the phenomenon of "school desegregation" from both a theoretical and practical perspective. The theoretical interest is to explain why white conservative schools – against expectations – have been able to desegregate without replacing an all-white school with an all-black school. The practical interest in this study is to ask what lessons could be learnt for informing and accelerating racial desegregation as well as social integration among historically white schools.

An earlier investigation identified two South African schools that have demonstrated what I call "exceptional patterns of desegregation." These two schools were chosen as reputational samples based on criteria such as prominent newspaper coverage and departmental recognition as models of integration. Both schools are former white, conservative and Afrikaans medium high schools in the Gauteng Province of South Africa.

This paper reports on one of these schools, Equity High, that was one of the research sites of the study. The portrait of the other school Diversity High is captured in the book entitled: *Diversity High: Class, Color, Culture and Character at a South African High school*.¹ I begin by outlining the background context of the study. This is followed by a description of the research methodology, which can be described as 'portraiture' that was applied in this research study. I conclude by sketching a portrait of an integrating school called Equity High.

Conceptual Markers

Critical race theory (CRT), postcolonial theory and cosmopolitanism are explored in this study as valuable approaches for thinking through different ways of conceptualizing intercultural education

¹Vandeyar, S & Jansen, J., 2008. *Diversity High: Class, Color, Culture and Character at a South African High school*. Rowman & Littlefield publishers (formerly University Press of America).

and the difficulties of changing the western-derived models of schools and universities which have become global.

Scholars of CRT are unified by two common interests – to understand how a ‘regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of colour have been created and maintained in [society]’ (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995: xiii; Guinier, 1991; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Cadwell, 1996; Tate, 1997) and to change the bond that exists between law and racial power. The concern of critical race theory is to re-narrativize the globalisation story in a way that places historically marginalised parts of the world at the centre rather than the periphery of the education and globalisation debate.

CRT argues that social reality is created only through the stories we tell as individuals and as a society and that only by looking at the narratives of those who have been victimized by the legal system can we understand the “socially ingrained” and “systemic” forces at work in their oppression (Pizarro, 1999).

Since reality as we understand it is primarily a socially constructed entity, critical race theorists argue that we must acknowledge the multiplicity of realities that exist in order to better understand specific manifestations of the interactions of these realities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1999; Delgado 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, 1993; Roediger, 1991). Central to CRT is the notion that the dominant mindset of society, the shared stereotypes, beliefs and understanding can only be challenged through telling stories. As Tate (1997:235) explains, “... the voice of the individual can provide insight into the political, structural and representational dimensions of the legal system, especially as they relate to the group case”.

Postcolonial theory focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain” (Young 2001:11; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996; Mongia, 1996; Barker, Hume and Iversen, 1994). Postcolonial studies seek to deconstruct the ongoing discourses; it points out the need to ask questions and to focus different ways of stating problems in the dominant discourses in education, for example related to power (Foucault 1979). Cultural hegemonic European knowledge is criticized in an attempt to reintroduce and give value to knowledge represented from the non-European world (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Gandhi, 1998, Spivak, 1995, 2000).

An important concept in post-colonial theory is that of hybridity which refers to the integration (or mingling) of cultural signs and

practices from the colonizing and colonised cultures. Hybridity is celebrated for its ability to break down the false sense that colonized cultures – or colonizing cultures for that matter are monolithic or have essential, unchanging features (Lye, 1998) and is conceived as a “Third Space of enunciation” (Bhabha, 1994:37). However, although the assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices and the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching and dynamic, it can also be seen as oppressive if issues of power are left unaddressed.

Another important theoretical framework for considering approaches to multicultural education and the questions of diversity, pluralism and citizenship in a global age is that of “Cosmopolitanism” (Gilroy, 2006; Appiah, 2006, Rajan and Sharma, 2006; Nussbaum, 1996, 1997; Carlson, 2003; Fullinwider, 2001). Cosmopolitanism opens up the way for new conceptions of the world that transcends traditional boundaries by offering people a way to think about their own identity and how they may formulate a more conciliatory view of the ‘other’ beliefs and cultures. The cosmopolitan vision is not one of uniformity but of unity in diversity. It combines a commitment to humanist principles and norms, an assumption of human equality, with a recognition of difference, and a celebration of diversity (Kaldor, 2003) by developing a cosmopolitan perspective in citizens, whether they are engaged in the everyday practice of their citizenship in the local community, or are seeking to conceptualise the nation, or indeed are analyzing global questions. It is a perspective that enables individuals, both migrants and established citizens, to negotiate their multiple identities and loyalties and prepares those in established communities to recognize that individual situations can no longer exclusively be explained in the traditional ‘bounded’ notions of citizenship, territoriality and nationality (Serrano and Walker, 2007). At its most basic, cosmopolitanism is a view of the world such as that proposed by Anderson-Gold (2001:1). “... the cosmopolitan is one that views herself as a citizen of a world community based upon common human values”.

The above mentioned approaches to addressing diversity in education illustrate how cultural identities shift as people experience new languages, experiences and understanding (Gandhi 1998). Different cultures interact in a third space in which boundaries and borders become ever more porous in the contemporary world. The education system and schools in particular have to take cognizance of these identity shifts in preparing the youth for their rightful place on the global stage.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology of 'portraiture,' described and illustrated in Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's landmark study *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*, is now well established in educational scholarship (Chapman, 2007, 2005; 2002; Hill, 2005; Bannister & Hodges, 2005; Levy, 2004; Russell, 2003; Hackman, 2002; O'Brien, 2001; English, 2000, Peshkin, 2000). Portraiture draws attention to the outstanding qualities of high schools, consciously choosing to focus on excellence rather than pathology. It promises, like the artist painting a portrait, a full and sensitive portrayal of the subject, focusing on and drawing out the most positive features of a school.

The researcher begins by asking "what is good here?" and begins by searching for what is good and healthy with the assumption that expressions of goodness will always be laced with imperfections, Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis (1997). The portraitist intentionally sets out to explore the strengths of the research site and the ways in which challenges are approached and managed. She does, however, not exclude the messy contradictory nature of human experiences and behaviors:

As a matter of fact, I think one of the most powerful characteristics of portraiture is its ability to embrace contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of the human development and social relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005:9).

The methodology of portraiture therefore allows the researcher to capture and embrace these conflicting actions to present an overall picture of determination and agency in actively setting out to listen *for* a story, rather than *to* a story (ethnographer). As a method of inquiry, portraiture moves beyond the surface image in its search for the essence and is probing, layered and interpretive in nature. The portraitist strives to develop a text that comes as close as possible to painting with words, seeking to capture the texture and nuance of human experience, through the different aspects of both *context* and *voice* (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2002).

Context involves not just the physical setting in which action takes place, but also the historical, cultural and ideological setting. *Voice* unfolds in six ways. First, as *witness* in which the researcher accurately records and reports on the phenomenon under study. Second, as *interpreter* in which the researcher attempts to explain the rationale for something that happened. Third,

"*voice as preoccupation*" where the researcher embeds the data within a theoretical framework. Fourth, "*voice as autobiography*" in which aspects of the researcher's story that directly relate to the research project are shared with the reader. The fifth and six layers, "*listening for voice*" and "*voice in conversation*" require that the researcher pay attention not only to what the research subject (the 'actor') says with words, but also to what she says with body language and with silences.

Chapman's (2007:161) metaphor that in using portraiture "researchers move beyond depictions of the half-full or half-empty glass to interrogate perceptions and behaviours that are floating around in the water", aptly captures the essence of the methodology of portraiture.

The methods used were unusual in case studies of schools. First, conventional "data" through extended film footage was created in order to capture the dynamic forms of student and staff interactions over a six-month period of data collection in each school. Such data then also formed the stimulus for guiding other forms of data collection and for assigning the quality of vividness to the *observational data*. The film footage was sampled in advance and given as "briefs" to the professional filming company that took these shoots. In the first round of data collection the filming team were instructed to sample the following events: a school assembly, an extra-curricular activity, a change-of-class sequence (when students move from one class to the next for instruction), a staff room sitting, and an interval period. These events had to be filmed with the concentration of staff-staff and student-student interactions across racial lines.

Second, intensive interviews were conducted over the sixth month period of observation with the school management team, the school governing body, the student representative body, teachers, and individual and groups of learners in the course of normal activity.

Finally an exhaustive study was conducted of the written and published documentary records over the life of the school including photographs, student magazines, annual reports, newspaper coverage of school events, memoranda to teachers, parental newsletters, and other artefacts. The *documentary data* was weaved into the narrative with interview and observational data to construct the stories of progress within each school with respect to desegregation and integration.

A PORTRAIT OF AN INTEGRATING SCHOOL: EQUITY HIGH

Nestled in what was once an Afrikaner stronghold and a shining beacon of the apartheid system is a secondary school called Equity High that was formerly named after a prominent president of the apartheid era. This school formerly catered exclusively to white Afrikaans-speaking children that came from middle to upper-class backgrounds. Little did the then president (a bastion of apartheid ideology) know that it would one day become a proud emblem of democracy in South Africa? How does a school that is steeped in proud traditions and customs of the Afrikaans culture change so dramatically?

During the pre- 1994 period, Equity High was situated within a broader socio-economic community that was resident to a number of doctors and university academics. As a result parental involvement at the school was high and parental ideals and aspirations for their children even higher. The school during this time was noted for its outstanding academic achievement, sporting prowess and for promoting the Afrikaans language, culture, customs and traditions. Almost every Afrikaans-speaking child in the area sought entrance into this school. In its prime, the school serviced a student population of approximately 1600 students, the majority of whom endowed with fervent ideals of the apartheid ideology went on to pursue careers at Universities.

The advent of democracy and an ageing white community within which the school was situated witnessed dramatic changes at Equity High. By 1995 the student population of the school had dwindled to a meagre 400. The School Governing Body (SGB) largely due to the incentives of the then principal took the decision to offer dual medium instruction in an attempt to attract white English-speaking students to the school. A decision was taken to introduce dual medium instruction in Grade 8 and 9 only and to accept a total of 120 students. However, the intended outcomes of the SGB did not materialise. As soon as the school changed its language policy, it was inundated with approximately 500 applications from African² children who sought admission to the school. The school was situated within close proximity of one of

²African – The terms Coloured, White, Indian and African – derive from the apartheid racial classifications of the different peoples of South Africa. The use of these terms, although problematic, has continued through the post-apartheid era in the country. The term African refers to the indigenous black people of South African. In this paper, I use these terms grudgingly to help present the necessary context for my work.

the major routes to an African township and these students were prepared to commute to and from the school. The SGB did not foresee the possibility of this occurrence and it was too late to retract their decision, given the political order of the day.

The conservative white community were outraged by this decision and its implications for the broader community as a whole. Fears of the drop in property prices, a drop of standards at the school and a fear of 'the other' were vehemently expressed by all stakeholders. White parents immediately reacted by taking their children out of the school and placing them in surrounding white schools that had kept their Afrikaans status quo intact. The boldest reaction of all was when a white parent held the principal at gunpoint blaming him for the drastic change to the otherwise placid existence of the white community. In the face of these threats to his personal safety, the principal resigned from the profession and sought refuge in the corporate world.

Education change

The decision taken, the incumbent principal had to salvage the situation and try to make things work in the interest of all stakeholders, including students. The incumbent principal, Dr Johan Venter, a transitory and diplomatic leader, immediately assessed the educational landscape within which the school was situated and set in motion a leadership strategy that would take a conservative white Afrikaans school and transform it into a shining beacon of the rainbow nation of South Africa. How did this happen?

Johan was an Afrikaans-speaking male in his early fifties who had grown up in one of the lily-white suburbs of Pretoria,³ within a community that was enshrouded with the canonical principles of apartheid. When other Afrikaans medium schools chose to stubbornly maintain their 'white island' effect or to opt for an assimilatory approach, Johan chose to 'go against the grain'. What made him different?

Childhood memories come gushing to the fore as Johan fondly recalls moments of his life that contributed to his 'humaneness'. Johan was an only child. He nostalgically talks about Thandi, an African female who was his nanny and domestic helper. "I knew that when I got home from school, Thandi would be there for me. My mum worked and only came home in the evening".

³Pretoria – A major city within the Gauteng province of South Africa.

He remembers the countless hours he spent in Thandi's care, as both his parents worked. The conversation then shifts to the time when he would visit his grandparents on the farm during school holidays where he would spend hours lazing in the sun with the children of African labourers of the farm; playing, running barefoot, swimming in the nearby river, laughing and learning to speak a bit of the indigenous African language. These occasional episodic escapades away from the 'lily-white' suburb seemed to have left an indelible mark on him. He talks about "...there were times that I could not wait for school holidays because I knew I was going to see my friends on the farm again". It would seem that Johan learnt very early in life to see beyond color and to appreciate the interconnectedness of humanity.

Johan was no stranger to Equity High. He had been at the school in the capacity of Head of Department in 1992 when the first rumblings of change in the language policy could be heard in the hallways and corridors of the school. He left Equity High in 1992 to take on a deputy principal's post at a private school. In 1998 he returned to Equity High to assume his position as the principal of the school, three years after the change in language policy had occurred. At the time he inherited a situation in which teacher morale and levels of commitment to educational change was low, relationships between white and black students strained and tense, parental involvement virtually non-existent and academic standards precariously perched on a downward slide.

Johan, a candidate of academic merit holding a PhD in Education Management, immediately took on this daunting challenge in the face of all odds. Sceptics within the teaching fraternity and broader community saw Equity High as doomed to failure, an experiment in democracy that had gone horribly wrong. Many were eager and enthusiastic to use the case of Equity High as an example to protect their otherwise cloistered existence. Johan realised that the presence of such sceptics within the staffing component of the school would only serve to generate negative energy and force Equity High into an abyss of despair and despondency.

His first point of departure was to remove these undesirable elements from the school. A change in the mindsets of all stakeholders was required if educational change was to succeed at Equity High. During a staff meeting Johan outlined his strategic plan for educational change at Equity High and informed staff that those who could not or would not change their mindsets were free to leave the school. This was a rather drastic measure

but a clear indicator of the principals' stance and commitment to educational change. Some staff members opted to take transfers to other Afrikaans medium schools who had maintained their 'white island' status. Others resigned from the profession altogether and went into the employ of the corporate world. Johan was determined to work with people who were committed to change and the new ideals of democracy that are embedded in the Constitution of South Africa. He set out to recruit teachers that shared this collective vision of educational change. In so doing he attempted to develop a staffing component that would work in unison towards creating a school that would be truly reflective of the rainbow nation of South Africa.

Still working within the constraints of the parallel medium framework of the school, Johan seized every opportunity to increase contact between black and white students. Most white students opted for Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and almost all black students followed the English medium stream. He set about making first order changes to the school, in the form of replacing traditional cultural activities of the school such as the *Musical Evening*, which was an evening that revered Afrikaans culture, language and traditions, with *Spotlight Evening* in an attempt to provide opportunities for all students to "tell



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



their stories” and in so doing to make all students feel a sense of belonging and feeling at home at the school.

Furthermore, he apportioned a degree of responsibility and freedom to students in an attempt to expose them to democratic decision making. Spotlight evening was coordinated from start to end by students themselves, the only prerequisite placed on students was that the performance had to be representative of all students at the school. Journalists from renowned newspapers were invited to attend this evening and to report their impressions of the activities of the evening. Students were thus aware of the fact that they had to produce a performance of high quality. This external quality measure not only served to motivate students to perform but was used as a marketing strategy to advertise the quality and standard of work at Equity High to the broader community. Students thus became the ambassadors of the school.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Another measure was to replace the traditional cultural committee of the school that was aptly called “Die Voortrekkers”. This was the official cultural committee at most white Afrikaans-speaking schools. The main aim of this committee was to promote the Afrikaans, language, culture, customs, traditions and symbols. Johan changed this to the *Cultural Committee* ensuring representation from all cultural groups. The main aim of this committee was to promote intercultural learning and intercultural understanding. In this way students were exposed to a variety of cultures, traditions and customs of the ‘rainbow nation’ of South Africa. The traditional gumboot dance, the origins of which began with mineworkers in the Gold mines of South Africa, soon became a hit with all students and teachers of the school.

These first order changes which often took on a celebratory approach to addressing diversity soon began to influence



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

second order changes at the school. The music department, the drama department and the art department of the school began interrogating the content of the curriculum and soon began to adopt an inclusive approach to their teaching, productions and performances. The choir changed from the traditional eurocentric emphasis and became representative of all cultural groups of the school in composition as well as in the choice of songs that were sung, giving it a distinctive South African flavour. Second order changes were soon instituted in other learning areas as teachers began to interrogate the curriculum and to effect changes, which witnessed blends of knowledge systems. These changes challenged the powerful effects that European and North American global dominance through colonialism and imperialism had on education. The concept of hybridity as expounded by scholars of post colonial theory had found a home at Equity High.

As an academic, Johan realised that the traditional Matric Ball, an event that was held by all former white schools was ill-timed. This event happened just before the preliminary examinations. Students spent much time and energy in preparing and designing their outfits, securing a partner etc. The bad timing of this



Figure 9

event served to interrupt many students' academic trajectories. Johan thus went against the grain and shifted this event to the end of the year, a week after the final paper had been written. Structured in such a way, the Matric Ball became a huge success with students and parents alike.

Grade 12 students who were seniors at the school were given certain privileges. In most former white schools, the tradition was that during assembly grade 12 students sat on chairs and the rest of the students would be seated on the floor in the hall. Johan extended this further by demarcating certain areas of the school grounds for Grade 12 students only. In this way students felt a sense of territory and belonging. If senior students did not have a class during the last period of school they were allowed to go home. Johan gave students a certain degree of freedom and seemed to be shaping them to become independent and responsible decision-makers. In this manner the rigidity of school rules were subtly challenged and students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning in readiness for University entrance.

In the sports arena, Johan introduced the sport codes of soccer and cricket while still maintaining the traditional sporting codes



Figure 10

of all former white Afrikaans schools, namely that of rugby, hockey, swimming and netball.

These new incentives began to attract interest and attention. Equity High suddenly became a symbol of democracy in South Africa. Johan was not satisfied with only national interest in the school. He wanted to provide opportunities for his students on a global scale and set about establishing international ties by arousing international interest in the school. His efforts were rewarded in the form of obtaining exchanges for teachers and students with schools in Birmingham in the United Kingdom and schools in Norway.

As a transitory leader in a newfound democracy Johan adopted an inclusive approach to all aspects of schooling. He realised that he was working within a very sensitive environment and rather than eliminate existing symbols, traditions and customs of the school he proactively set out to create an inclusive climate that promoted cultural interconnectedness and interdependency where every individual felt a sense of place and feeling at home.

CONCLUSION

As a transitory leader Johan was committed to humanist principles and norms. He held the view that we are all members of a single human family and strove to assert the dignity and inherent rights of individuals wherever they were situated geographically or socially, as aptly captured in one of his many speeches to students: “Not one of us lives in a vacuum. Give space to your fellow citizens. Understand how he looks at you as you live your life. Understand how he evaluates you in terms of the choices you make”.

He strongly advocated the theory of ‘Cosmopolitanism’ by getting students to be in touch with their roots, the nation and the universe, and to view themselves as citizens of the world community based upon common human values. “A true citizen of this world keeps others in mind and does not always seek to impress his own mind and way of thinking on others. If you’re gifted as to be able to lead them, then lead them to discover the corners of their own minds” (Johan).

In this way the portrait of Equity High depicted all the colors and shades of the rainbow nation while artfully capturing the looming shadows of the apartheid history and ideology. It became a portrait that conveyed a message of growth and regeneration, of reconciliation and unity in diversity, that boldly affirmed every individual’s identity within an ethos and climate that was committed to the slogan “Proudly South African”.

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