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Ten years of race, education and democracy

While South African educational institutions have come a long way in the past decade, much still remains to be done, writes the Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria

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Against expectation the transition to a non-racial schooling system in South Africa proceeded without much trauma. There were no street-level confrontations of the order of Little Rock, Arkansas, in the United States, or dramatic implosions of the school system as a result of the change of government and policy with respect to the deracialisation of education.

It would be a mistake of judgement and analysis though to focus attention only on what is visible in making an assessment of how far South Africa has come with respect to race, democracy and education since 1994. Every day there are hundreds of incidents, unseen and unrecorded, that happen to younger and older pupils because of race.

In South African schools the grouping of children, the dominant assessment practices, the learner preferences of the teacher, the display of cultural symbols, the organisation of religious symbols, the scope of awards and rewards and the decisions of "who teaches what" are organised in ways that show preferences based on race, social class, religion and gender.

Teachers, when approached on the subject of race and identity in their classrooms, would invariably make the claim that "we see children, not colour". And that is exactly where the problem lies: a lack of consciousness that the ways in which schools are organised and teaching is implemented holds direct consequences for learners, identity and transformation.

These dilemmas of race are not restricted to the school. Undergraduate students at former white universities are often deeply alienated from one

another. At a typical Afrikaans university alienation on the surface appears to be about language, about symbols, and about culture. But it goes deeper. In university residences white Afrikaans students make their first contact with black people on an equal footing; that is, not as labourers in their households or employees of their families. Suddenly, they are thrown into an environment in which institutions immediately expect mutual respect.

Black students, on the other hand, come from a more diverse set of experiences. Those from rural areas and who attended all-black schools find the environment alienating and hostile. Those who experienced desegregated English schools find the Afrikaans university environment confusing. Having made friends with white students in English high schools, they find the hostile reception among white university students to be unfamiliar, alienating and provocative.

In Afrikaans universities such as Pretoria University, third- and fourth-generation students come to residence often with powerful memories from their parents and grandparents who once occupied a similar residence. Those memories have to do with pride and purpose, with inclusion and initiation, with culture and community, with lasting friendships and marriages within a monocultural environment. This is one reason why policies that outlaw initiation simply drive the practice underground.

For black students a residence has a different meaning, at once both pragmatic and individualist. It is a place for the individual student in which to live, eat and study; it is nothing else. And this is where hard racial attitudes begin to be mistaken

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as something else. White students claim that black students fail to participate in residential culture; black students feel that "white" culture is imposed on newcomers to the institution.

It is not fair to ignore those schools and individuals who work against the grain and it is not wise to overlook those cases that contain the germ of innovation and resilience for broader application in the education system.

An observation, through weekly lunches with ten

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of my first-year students, is that young women students make the transition more easily than their male counterparts. In one of these groups I found that the first-year women students had made close friends within their group, across racial lines, within six months and that they were creating opportunities for learning one another's languages. To be sure they also recorded the unease of first contact and the difficulty of the initial approach beyond the comforts of their familiar "groups". But what I found fascinating was the speed with which they arrived at this point.

A recent study involves three high schools that, despite their conservative histories, have created significant levels of racial desegregation without high levels of white flight. These schools, named after former apartheid presidents and prime ministers (JG Strijdom, General Jan Smuts and CR Swart) have received national recognition and rewards for what our research team calls "exceptional patterns of racial integration".

It is too early in this research to make firm claims about the reasons these schools have been able to make such progress against the grain. But I have some hypotheses that include the power of leadership, the pragmatism of Afrikaans communities and the working-class character of the schools. Where options are limited white schools are more likely to accept the demand from black students for access to what is perceived to be better-managed and better-resourced school environments.

The single most important observation that can be made about race and schooling after ten years is that schools and universities have been more successful at meeting the demand for racial desegregation than achieving the ideal of social integration. Schools and universities struggle with migration towards higher levels of integration. The first level, easily achieved, is racial desegregation; the second level is staffing integration; the third level is curriculum integration; and the fourth level is institutional culture integration.

It has been easier to open the Freedom Charter's "doors of learning". What happens behind those doors is more complex. The Achilles heel of white schools has not been accommodating some black

pupils in former white classrooms; it is having black teachers in the same space. That is why most (though certainly not all) of the so-called liberal, white English-speaking schools have made little progress on this subject. It has to do with deeply ingrained, racialised notions of white competence and black incompetence. It has even been more difficult to achieve a sense of racial justice within the school curriculum.

The last frontier in the quest for social integration and non-racial community in former white institutions always will be this hard-to-define phenomenon called "institutional culture". Institutional culture is defined simply by one of my colleagues as how an institution describes "the way we do things around here".

Institutional culture has to do with whose portraits and paintings appear in the corridors; what collections dominate the library; who gets honorary degrees; who dominates school governing bodies and who gets relegated to the status of observers; whose liturgy is represented at the school assembly; the complexion and repertoire of the school or university choir; who continues to gain access to institutional contracts; whose language dominates; what kinds of sporting codes a school allows; the complexion of who works in the school's secretarial pool and those who work cleaning the swimming pool;

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who gets called "Mr" and who, irrespective of age, is simply called "Klaas"; the content of school songs, the metaphors for talking about others; and the ways in which schools or universities talk about the future.

In this domain of democratisation, institutional cultures and education institutions fail to include, accommodate and affirm racial diversity and difference and community and commonality. In this domain the assault on the cultural senses of incoming black pupils and students conveys powerful messages of who the institution is for.

It would be naive to believe cultural constructions of power within education do not find a corresponding resonance and reinforcement from broader society. Among families, political parties, religious organisations, sporting associations and business communities essentialist views of racial identity retain a deep meaning. This constitutes a major obstacle to resolving the fiction about essential racial identities that lie at the root of what is brought into school. Such notions of firm and inflexible apartheid categories are continually

reinforced through bureaucracy, including in powerful ways, instruments such as the national census and the employment equity schedules.

The problem of redressing racial divisions in education cannot proceed without identifying the specific "points of power" that sustain the status quo in schools and universities. In schools the most crucial "point of power" is the school governing body (SGB).

This is the entity that dictates the pace, content and direction of change. The equivalent "point of power" in universities is the middle-level management, both in the academic and the administrative divisions.

It is readily observed that institutions are able to create diversity and signal inclusive directions at the levels of senior

management and at the levels of student admission. But the institutional culture is largely contained in middle-level management. In higher education institutions, these "points of power" are much more distributed than in schools, but they are also unevenly distributed.

What does this mean for leadership under conditions of social transition? It is important in to approach the transformation of educational soberly.

On the one hand leadership matters. At the same time leadership in the context of a negotiated transition is a constant struggle to balance tension between inclusion and correction; between affirmation and anger; between accommodation and insertion; and between racial reconciliation and social justice.

It is possible to harness the authority and integrity of leadership in ways that advance the democratisation of universities and schools. Leadership is a key "point of power" in making democratic gains in time.

Participation was the touchstone of student struggles against apartheid education.

The demand for democratic participation in education was a "non-negotiable" and it included participation by all stakeholders in the affairs of a school. In universities

the broad management forums and now the institutional forums became the symbol of this quest to broaden and deepen stakeholder participation. But participation has proved to be more complex, contorted and contested than the liberation slogans suggested. Once the demand for formal participation had been met it was gradually realised that policy intentions fell far short of practical outcomes.

In schools there is abundant evidence that participation is a function of social class and cultural capital within former white schools. School governing bodies are less sites of contestation over democratic values than they are sites of domination by white parents who claim and hold ownership of the school's ideological and material cultures.

In black schools our research also points to non-participation by black parents even when there is relatively uncontested space for school ownership and development. The simplistic policy response to this observation is "capacity building" and yet the problem of non-participation runs deeper than can be resolved by occasional workshops or seminars sponsored by provincial or national government.

In higher education institutions participation has run into asymmetries of power that few could have anticipated during the heady days of the

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struggle. New patterns of management have been expressed through centralised decision-making, dramatic cuts in institutional budgets, the re-trenchment of staff and the creation of an entirely different campus climate in which accountability trumped autonomy, quality assurance replaced trust and surveillance displaced self-management.

Participation is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for achieving deep, meaningful and sustainable changes in the lives of schools as critical sites for the expression of our democratic ideals. The formal arrangements for democratic education are clearly in place. The base values of non-racism, non-sexism and redress are visibly dispersed in government policy on education.

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But policy is not practice and, while an impressive architecture exists for democratic education, South Africa has a long way to travel to make ideals concrete and achievable within educational institutions. What new surveillance measures have done effectively is to muzzle any serious or sustained attention in schools to matters of deep learning about democratic principles and practices within the lives of teachers, learners and community. The final grade of high school (grade 12) has become nothing more than a high-intensity and high-stakes testing environment in which learners spend their time preparing for matriculation examinations to shield schools from government scrutiny and to compete mindlessly for public recognition.

Despite their obvious limits, schools remain the life-blood of this young democracy. What happens in schools matters enormously. The choices young people make depend crucially on their experiences of schooling, including the experience of living with others or living with difference. It is in schools and universities where democratic practice must continue to be pursued in the next 10 years. Much remains to be done.

A longer version of this article has been published in the Mail & Guardian