

Editorial: **Is education making a difference in the creation of equitable societies?**

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This introductory editorial article is premised on the fundamental notion that education is about personal and social change. But such a view, as in Dickens's "A Tale of Two Cities", is fraught with contradictions. To illustrate: education could either be an instrument of oppression or of emancipation; it could be inequitable as in socially differentiated curricula and resource distribution; or it could unequivocally pursue equity for the benefit of all social strata. Our broad conceptual construction is guided by global and South African trends, as well as by the varied contributions featured in this special issue. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the underlying thrust is that exclusion, on whatever grounds, from quality education for all has a paralytic effect on the individual and on society, whereas equity is not only a moral compulsion but also a material imperative with broad palliative effects. The conclusion drawn is that democratic education systems should not only pay inordinate attention to SET (i.e. science, engineering, and technology) as a consequence of global exigencies, but that equal attention should be given to knowledge that enhances human sensibilities and social cohesion.

The ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilisation
(Mahatma Gandhi)

Introduction

On the face of it, the above question appears to be ill-informed and moronic. Naturally, it is widely accepted that the process of learning, facilitated by teaching and educative interaction, has been the motivating force behind the development of civilisations over several millennia. In pre-historic times, learning and teaching tended to be informal or non-formal, but the fact that it existed is incontestable and amply documented (Braudel, 1979; Crone, 1989; Davidson, 1991; Diop, 1987; Rury, 2005).

Arguably, the 19th century Industrial Revolution, as a convenient starting point but certainly not the genesis of the education process, necessitated the formation of structured, formalised, calibrated and output-oriented education systems, which virtually spread to all corners of the globe. And the nexus between education and industrial and social development was born then and nurtured ever since (Goldin & Katz, 2008). All of these antecedent efforts nudged each society or civilisation towards some elevated degree of social progress although, most certainly, not the full realisation of equity, which is the ideal.

The answer to the question therefore, it seems, is patently clear: It is indeed incontrovertible that education has played a pivotal role in improving societies than, it may be deduced, if there were no education available at all. That fact that education is at the core of social advancement, with all its inherent implications, is well established. It is in this context that Robinson's assertion (1982:31)

that, “although education cannot transform the world, the world cannot be transformed without education”, and former President Nelson Mandela’s observation that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”, are generally regarded as commonsensical.

Therefore, the obvious should be stated, namely, that contemporary reality, in which technology dominates every aspect of human life, is the accumulation of a series of scientific/technical advances or innovations that have made life immeasurably more comfortable for many, by increasing communication and mobility, as well as improving health and prolonging life-spans.

On the other hand, the social sciences/humanities branch of knowledge is equally crucial in that, at the most primary level, it enhances general literacy, inspires the imagination towards greater possibilities, and increases global consciousness and interconnection. But, most importantly and intrinsically, it serves as a bulwark of self-efficacy.

These are the material benefits of education. However, the realisation of unmitigated equity has been slippery, as it is subject to extant social stratifications. It is therefore our view that there is actually what could be described as uneven development, between the technical and the social character of education. We are therefore prompted to reflect on some fundamental questions. For example, why is it that there have been so many groundbreaking discoveries in the sciences, such as stem cell research with its manifold life-enhancing benefits; inter-terrestrial probes into far-flung planets; or, on the macabre side, the deployment of drone planes (Robertson, 2009) with the capacity to guide destructive forces from a safe distance without evoking any moral compunction? Why is it that, at the beginning of the 21st century, it seems as though internecine conflict abounds and education, especially its equity dimension, falls short of effectively providing wide-spread viable options to intolerance and discrimination?

This is the heart of the paradox: a stark demonstration, in our considered opinion, of an unevenness in the distribution of resources and commitment to the natural sciences on the one hand, and the social sciences on the other. Is the unevenness intrinsic to these spheres of knowledge (i.e. the natural and social sciences) or is it a reflection of conscious social and political policy choices? A specific example is the determination spawned by the Cold War, which resulted in the landing of Sputnik on the moon by the Soviet Union in 1969, followed by the allocation of unprecedented billions of financial investments in space research over subsequent years, which was a political choice on the part of the United States — in the context of the Cold War — to demonstrate the ‘indomitability’ of its system. On the other hand, the Soviet Union also poured stupefying amounts of money into their space programme, in order to prove the ‘supremacy’ of its system. These choices and the related expenditure laid the foundation for a progeny of investments in, and preferences for, science, mathematics, engineering and technology (SMET) in many countries, and the relative or benign neglect of comparable investments in research and development in the improvement of curricula, which could have seriously engaged issues of human understanding and social cohesion.

Reflections of concern

The project of post-colonial and post-apartheid national reconstruction is daunting indeed. For example, South Africa (15 years since the demise of apartheid in 1994) and India (60 years since independence) are relatively young states, admittedly at different stages of maturity, both grappling with the daunting challenge of welding together their societies after centuries of division, characterised by racial, caste, gender, religious and other social prejudices, which stubbornly remain in their national psyches. Post-colonial/apartheid legacies seem to dog many other countries — even in free post-colonial states.

Although being much older socio-political formations, western industrialised countries (e.g. the United States, Canada and the European community) are confronted on the one hand, by deep-rooted historical legacies of inequality and, on the other, by contemporary realities that challenge their inherited homogeneous social identities, as xenophobic tendencies are in conflict with the integrative processes that globalisation has come to dictate.

These are but a few examples of the distressing episodes of intolerance that threaten social harmony and the ‘rainbow nation’ ideal in South Africa and globally, international peace and security.

The lesson to be drawn from the above scenarios is that it is folly to believe that social reconstruction initiatives can take place via a process of osmosis. Rather, it is the systematic and sustained investment, guided by evidence-based research, which offers a major promise for durable social solutions.

Let us hasten to point out that, while greater investment in the humanities and social sciences is crucial, it will not necessarily result in a deeper understanding of the diversity/differences, or an efficacious correlation with respect for human rights and social cohesion. Classic examples of this are the Third Reich and apartheid South Africa. With reference to the former, Wally Morrow, with great insight, made the following observation:

It is fashionable to think of education in terms of the ‘development of competencies’, but there are limitations to this view. Nazi leaders were not in general lacking in competence ... High levels of competence are compatible with moral degeneracy (<http://www.info.gov.za/> p. 20, accessed 29 September 2009).

In the case of South Africa, the erudite Hendrik Verwoerd, who became professor of Psychology at the University of Stellenbosch in 1928, was one of the central architects of the ideology of white supremacy, despite evidence to the contrary. Although he believed “that there were no biological differences between the big racial groups, and concluded that ‘this was not really a factor in the development of a higher social civilisation by the Caucasians’, he nevertheless subscribed to the now-discredited US ‘separate but equal’ doctrine” (Lawrence, 2000). Indeed, horrific deeds were committed by those who had been schooled. These examples, by and large, bring into question the veracity of the proposition that education automatically results in social enlightenment. It is therefore necessary that continued reflection ensures that social justice and human rights are core ingredients in all curricula.

Bases for equity

In 1995, a consortium of international organisations, led by the Management of Social Transformations Program (MOST), which was affiliated to UNESCO, held a symposium in Roskilde, Denmark, with the purpose to: “Explore courses of action in order to go from a world characterised by the rise of social exclusion to one in which societies can regain social cohesion” (UNESCO, 1995).

There is actually a growing global awareness of the importance of human rights, democratic practice and inclusivity in the governance of states, so as to ensure social cohesion and international co-operation. This trend is influenced by calculations that positive constructions of human co-existence yield greater dividends than the wastage brought about by unbalanced investments. The 2004 United Nations Human Development Report, entitled *Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World*, underscored the need for “unity within diversity” (UNDP, 2004). A year earlier, in 2003, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) released the report, *Time for Equality at Work*, which originated from an equity discourse and decried discrimination in the workplace (ILO, 2003:ix).

The findings contained in the ILO and the Human Development reports were based on extensive research, conducted in various countries. In 2005, Banks and a panel of international scholars published a monograph, entitled *Democracy and Diversity*, which distilled a vast body of knowledge and skills on how to promote citizenship while, at the same time, acknowledging differences — what Nieto (2009) calls ‘diversity education’.

In South Africa, as is most certainly the case in other parts of the world as well, these issues are particularly pressing, given that the country’s apartheid past is still very much alive today. There is also a compelling need to conceive and create new social relations within the learning and teaching environment, as these generally serve as cradles of new realities. This, we believe, is a chal-

lenge faced by many modern societies, as illustrated most recently by the social eruptions in a number of African, European, Middle-Eastern and Asian countries, being largely indicative of an intolerance of differences.

The challenge

Therefore, the past, the present and the future constitute daunting challenges that call for a sustained reconstructive and intellectual project, designed not only to improve understanding of issues of identity, difference, social cohesion and democratic practice, but also to conceive new possibilities, guided by research that is committed to eschewing the irrationalities brought about by racism, patriarchy and other forms of intolerance.

How can education acknowledge both cultural diversity and promote the social cohesion so necessary in modern, pluralistic and democratic societies? How can reconciliation and social cohesion be achieved and sustained? What mechanisms or agencies exist to manage social integration in an enduring, confidence-inspiring and constructive manner? Is social cohesion necessary? Can it be achieved? What are the social and educational obstacles and barriers to national unity and equitable international co-operation? These are some of the questions that merit attention and which will invariably be addressed from different contexts.

Research-based perspectives

This guest issue seeks to centre conversation around a variety of issues regarding the role of education in addressing diversity and social cohesion, with special attention to research conducted in South Africa. We will report on some of the latest research findings in the field, cover topics that have been neglected, and highlight the different theoretical approaches and methods used to study diversity. In the process we will provide pointers as to where future research might be gainfully directed. The critical reader will then be better positioned to build upon and/or 'deconstruct' the work published in this issue.

As we look back over the past one-and-a-half decades, we see the massive disruption of the old order that came in the wake of the South African Schools Act (SASA), 1996, which laid the foundation for the dismantling of the legal architecture of racially segregated schooling in South Africa. In the higher education sector, the same objective of eradicating discrimination with regard to access to tertiary institutions on the basis of race, etc., was achieved via the Higher Education Act, 1997.

And thus began the daunting journey towards reconstruction. But this journey towards achieving social justice and equity in both sectors of education has been far from sanguine. In 1999, Vally and Dalamba chronicled the widespread opposition to school desegregation initiatives, experienced in many formerly white-controlled school districts. There were numerous studies before and after the Vally & Dalamba study, which investigated various aspects of school desegregation and integration (Christie, 1990; Metcalfe, 1991; Carrim, 1992; Cross *et al.*, 1998; Naidoo, 1996; Zafar, 1998; Soudien, 1998; Kruss, 2001; Sujee, 2004; Nkomo *et al.*, 2004; Molewa & Molewa, 2005; Chisholm & Sujee, 2006; Weber, 2006; and Vandeyar & Jansen, 2008). These studies concentrated overwhelmingly on the problems encountered with the desegregation/integration project. Until recently, research into transformation (desegregation/integration) in higher education has been comparatively less abundant. Earlier works, published during the 1990s, addressed issues of transformation challenges (Mabokela, 2001; Jansen *et al.*, 2007; Cross & Johnson, 2008; Cloete *et al.*, 2002; Sehoole, 2005; Thaver, 2006), as well as institutional cultures (Higgins, 2007; Jansen *et al.*, 2007). The recently released *Ministerial Report on Transformation and Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions*, represents the first attempt at a more comprehensive investigation of the state of transformation on the higher education landscape, and could be regarded as seminal. We have included a critical reflection on the Report by Oloyede in the book review section that will, undoubtedly, influence subsequent work on the transformation of higher education institutions. All too often the public debates about transformation in higher education are confined to pointing out

and condemning the injustices that continue to occur at these institutions. Such discussions must continue, but they should be informed by better understanding and explanation of what transpires daily on the various campuses as well as what informs the underlying tenacity of ideology. Oloyede theoretically links the topics dealt with in the report — diversity, racism, transformation and social cohesion — by clarifying what each of these conceptual and analytic tools might mean.

There is an emergent body of research that is casting light on nascent efforts and accomplishments in some schools (Weber, 2006; Vandeyar & Jansen, 2008; Nkomo & Vandeyar, 2008; Machaisa, 2008; Phatlane, 2008; Nkomo *et al.*, 2009; and Tabane, 2009;). (In more general terms, see the Chidester *et al.*, 2003 and Pillay *et al.*, 2006 volumes.) The findings of these studies are admittedly tentative. They represent, to borrow a phrase from Gladwell (2002), ‘tipping points’ with tremendous potential for achieving what should be the norm.

The Weber *et al.* article forms part of a growing body of empirical research that is investigating the texture of the learning-teaching environment in desegregated schools (see e.g. Phatlane, Tabane, Machaisa). As noted above, in 1999 the South African Human Rights Commission commissioned an investigation (Vally & Dalamba, 1999) that chronicled a rather dim, conflictual picture of what was taking place at desegregated public high schools. While the intervening period between then and now was relatively short, it is nevertheless necessary to do some preliminary assessments in order to determine whether progress has been made or not. Weber *et al.* found that both conflict and co-operation amongst students had developed over time, in selected desegregated schools in Gauteng. Earlier antagonism appears to be slowly receding and replaced by greater tolerance of the ‘Other’. They conclude that present relationships with regard to race, class and gender are far from being cast in stone and have the potential to change, with far-reaching implications for the construction of a national identity. While Weber and colleagues discuss their research in relation to history and national development in South Africa, several writers in this volume (e.g. Carter *et al.*) frame their research in terms of policy goals. We need a greater diversity of work that analyses the correspondence between what happens at schools and in classrooms on the one hand, and the overarching social, historical and cultural forces at work in communities and society at large on the other.

Despite legislation and policies that prohibit discrimination based on race and gender, for example, there are still challenges that remain due to a variety of reasons. The Dieltiens *et al.* contribution suggests that, even though “gender equity is a foundational principle of the Department of Education”, the application of gender-blind or gender-neutral approaches by officials result in problems pertaining to the maldistribution and misdirection of efforts that could enhance the realisation of gender equity. Dieltiens *et al.* base their criticism on a spectrum of feminist work and, more in particular, the theory of social justice developed by Nancy Fraser. They show how gender discrimination is perpetuated, despite the good intentions of policy-makers and despite formal policy goals.

Carrim’s contribution draws our attention to an existing, but seldom researched discrimination with regard to hair texture (also see Golden, 2005). He states that the empirical evidence he collected indicated that hair type distinguished ‘black’ students from ‘white’ students, a gay student from heterosexual male students, and working class students from middle and upper class students. Hair thus “provides ... a bio-physical signifier to justify and naturalise discrimination”. This analysis draws attention to the “intersections between different types of discrimination”. Promoting human rights and equity entails acknowledgement of the complexity and multiplicity of the social identities we carry with us as individual human beings.

The value of the contributions by Dieltiens *et al.* and Carrim derives from their ability to identify the insufficiency of identified approaches and forms of discrimination that require not only awareness, but also pedagogic attention. Given the lingering effects of apartheid practices in the education domain on the one hand, and the legislative and policy commitment to non-discrimination on the other, it should follow that all teaching staff should be equipped with effective ways of addressing issues of identity and diversity, by including these in all training programmes. Yet, this

is not always the case. Silbert's contribution constitutes a critical analysis of the whole-school evaluation policy and the South African Schools Act of 1996. The absence of diversity and social justice in the discourses of these policy texts and laws suggests that schools are not compelled to address these topics in any formalised or structured way. Silbert argues that this is not only a policy implementation problem, but that it is also a problem inherent in the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement. These writings decontextualise the world in which students are situated politically, historically and socially. They and the policies and practices derived from them in South Africa assume an objectified student, and seek to prepare her/him for a global world, isolated from national and community culture. This "ideal" learning subject is ill-prepared to deal with the issues of race, gender, social class, language, etc.

We are aware of the fact that more than 50 years have passed since the historic United States Supreme Court's decision that declared the "separate but equal" doctrine in education unconstitutional. Ever since that declaration, it has been a bumpy road. Many people in minority communities, frustrated with the continued legacy of inequality in education, established charter schools in an effort to avoid the effects of segregation, as Hubbard *et al.* report in their contribution. They draw on "findings from a larger case study of a conversion charter school in California in order to examine issues of equity from two perspectives: access and quality." They "focus attention on internal dynamics, raising critical questions about the policies and practices enacted within the school and about the long-term effects of the everyday interaction between teachers and students ... [and] reveal the extent to which educational outcomes are socially constructed, and [it] shows how structural arrangements within the school sustain rather than lessen educational inequity". The attainment of equity in education is a path fraught with subterfuge. When crass opposition is vanquished, less virulent forms are adopted by an array of dissenting actors, as is reflected in the Carter *et al.* contribution. Their analytical lens is focused on "how social and symbolic boundaries reproduced by educational actors in everyday school practices illuminate the macro-micro tension between the goals of racial integration policy and perceived group interests", based on "ethnographic, interview, and survey data obtained over a four-year period from multiracial and desegregated schools located in four US and South African cities". Efforts aimed at the transformation of education in South Africa, a relatively newcomer in this regard, could draw some lessons from the US experiences, while being mindful of contextual factors and historical antecedents.

Despite globalisation in both South Africa and the United States, and no doubt elsewhere as well, the national psyche interprets the world parochially and chauvinistically. Comparative studies, such as the article by Carter *et al.*, are therefore welcomed and we hope that future work will compare developments in South Africa to other southern African and developing countries, focusing on common continental and global problems. Such work could also, for example, build on the collaborative work that has already been carried out in South Africa and India (Soudien, Carrim & Sayed, 2004; Sayed *et al.*, 2007). The field of comparative and international education is still not fully developed in South Africa. The 'social boundaries' that need to be crossed in schools are akin to, and as tenacious as the national boundaries that need to be crossed in research and scholarship.

It is indeed the case that the impact of transformative forces on institutional cultures may sometimes not be immediately registered. It is only with hindsight that their role in institutional and governance systems is being appreciated. Gladwell's (2002) 'tipping point' notion often takes effect both cumulatively and gradually. Luescher "critically discusses two key moments in the governance history of the University of Cape Town [UCT]. The first case involves the experience of 'racial parallelism' in student governance in the late 1980s and early 1990s ... The second case traces the origins of the 'demographic representivity rule' in the university's statute to student demands for a dissolution of Council and its replacement by a University Transformation Forum in the early 1990s. The article thus shows that the recognition of race as politically significant in student politics and university governance was the outcome of a deliberate struggle by students in general, and black students in particular, to de-privatise and [de]politicise any sense of racial/racist marginalisation and therefore to open up race as a topic for deliberation in the political realm of the university. While

it cannot be claimed that the ideal of equity has been achieved at UCT, it is clear that ‘representativity’ has become part of the governance norm. There is general agreement that the demographic profile at historically white universities has changed dramatically post-1994, due to the increase in black and female students. Less progress has been realised insofar as black and female academics are concerned, however.

Thaver’s contribution considers the research practices of academics within the equity paradigm. Her analytical lens is focused on the “scientific inquiry and the contestations around the validity of knowledge problems”, and finds that the now dominant “market-logic environment either draws on, or eclipses the diversity imperative”, with the result that “conservative social relations” remain largely unaltered. This ‘market-logic’ has its origins in globalisation and its influence in recent decades has been as far-reaching at South African universities as it has at tertiary institutions in other countries.

Luescher shows the relevance of history and the application of the historical method in illuminating diversity studies in the case of UCT. Drawing on contemporary research, conducted at five universities, Thaver shows the importance of contemporary global trends in buttressing, at the expense of equity, “the traditional and conservative social relations that are so characteristic of the academy”.

Conclusion

This guest issue features a variety of contributions that deal with various aspects of the publication’s theme. Some dwell on persistent problems of transformation in education, while others have fixed their sights on the unfolding narrative of change directed at equity considerations. However, in one way or another, all give credence to François de la Rochefoucauld’s adage that “the only thing constant in life is change”.

Reflecting on the skewed and differential investments referred to above, Horgan (n.d.) opines:

Neither doomed to violence nor peaceful by nature, we are shaped by the civilisations we create. Modern society spends a good deal of time, effort, and scientific resource[s] on finding better ways to wage war. What if we directed just a fraction of that energy toward[s] finding a better way to wage peace?

The waging of peace is more than the absence of war. It is as much the unflinching quest for social justice, designed to achieve general social welfare and prosperity. Therefore, unrelenting efforts to achieve equity must be pursued for the sake of global social stability and progress, for without these, humanity is doomed to strife and the wasteful stifling of talent of the excluded subaltern. Fortunately, in recent times in South Africa, there has been the emergence of a public conversation in this regard. Examples include the following: A warning by one academic about the imprudence of state funding that does not reflect sufficient attention to the social sciences and the humanities wherein, he suggests, the strength of the country lies (Makgoba, 2008); the Academy of Science of South Africa, commissioning a study on the role of the humanities and social sciences in higher education, and also intending to exploit the full range of the human intellect (ASSAf, 2008); and the Dinokeng scenarios exercise that calls, *inter alia*, for a conversation about persistent social inequalities and, needless to say, the role that education should play in addressing this challenge (Dinokeng Scenarios, 2009). In a sense then, the challenge of the 21st century posed by Ghandi’s injunction that “[t]he ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilisation”, is worthy of serious consideration.

Finally, while the quality of the education system enjoys prominence in current public discourse, there must be equal insistence on equity, as the two must go hand in hand if, in response to the question posed in this contribution, education is going to make a meaningful difference to the creation of an equitable society. The question is therefore neither ill-informed nor moronic, and the answer should be unequivocally affirmative.

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