

Educational Change and Moral Development¹

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Education is an arena where change is often both public and politicised. How do these changes influence the values formation of pupil. This is the question that our essay will attempt to address. Better known for his studies in identifying stages in moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg has made important theoretical contributions to an understanding of the 'hidden curriculum' of a school communities (Kohlberg 1975). The 'just school community' can be a place where individual morality is formulated and expressed. The governance, social structure and curriculum can serve to create a 'moral atmosphere'. In order to explore perceptions of what constitutes justice in a school community all sectors of that community should be consulted: pupils, teachers, principals, parents and departmental officials. Analyses of race, gender and social class can be used to raise fundamental questions about the nature of that 'justice'.

The idea of a 'good school'

At daybreak every morning minibus-taxis leave Soweto laden with school pupils. They travel northwards to the formerly white schools of central and northern Johannesburg. Under Apartheid these schools had substantially better state funding. Whereas the annual subsidy in 1984 for white children was calculated at R1 654, there was only R234 for each black pupil. Allocations for coloured and Asian pupils were R590 and R1 100 respectively. The differences between resources for white and black pupils is even greater if the estimated

25 % of black children not enrolled in schools are taken into account. In reality, black education received about one tenth. Structural inequities of such proportions cannot be undone easily.

Parents concerned about the future career prospects are prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that their children are able to attend a 'good school'. These are usually the former white schools which now charge fees of between R50 and R12,000 per annum. A less expensive option is the Indian or Coloured school, often located between the Black township and the white suburb. In turn there is a migration of Indian and coloured pupils to the white schools.

Because matriculation results are widely perceived as the indicator of success, competition between urban schools has moved beyond the inherited colonial sporting rivalry. In order to ensure high academic results it becomes important to attract only those pupils with the ability to enhance the statistics. Prospective pupils are therefore required to undergo various tests, focussed primarily on their English (or in some cases Afrikaans) ability. Such admissions policies are vigorously defended on the grounds that these schools are not equipped to deal with the seriously educationally disadvantaged (Dawes/Donald 1994).

The less attractive the school the more likely it is to have pupils who really need quality education. Black township schools now cater mainly for the poor. Formerly white, Indian and Coloured schools have become multicultural, often with a majority of black pupils. An expressed disillusionment with state education has seen an exodus of white pupils to a multitude of newly established and expensive private schools.

These are generally the patterns of change in metropolitan areas where *social class rather than race* has become the determining factor. The multicultural experience will continue to be available only for the urban and the privileged. In rural areas of the former homelands, the past decade has brought little change to black schools.

School amalgamation

There is however one environment where change has been radical: the small 'platteland' town. Much of our research has therefore been in schools of the Northern Cape. Geographically the largest province, an arid climate makes its population the smallest. The typical town can be hundreds of kilometres away from its closest neighbour. The range of educational option characteristic of metropolitan living is simply not available here.

Apartheid policy separated these small towns into three areas: white, coloured and black, each with its own school. Such duplication of resources often meant tiny schools providing parallel service. A consequence is that the Northern Cape has a pupil-teacher ratio of 30:1. Other provinces such as the Eastern Cape have ratios of over 60:1. These statistics are frightening for teachers of the Northern Cape who face the prospect of retrenchment or redeployment.

The Education Department of the Northern Cape has embarked on a process of school *amalgamation* designed to rationalise the educational infrastructure in each town. The policy is driven both by economic necessity and ideological commitment.

A survey of principals of schools where these changes are taking place indicates a remarkable degree of goodwill on their part. They speak of an acceptance of multicultural education and emphasise that in spite of the practical difficulties it is the right way to go.

An example is a former white school where pupil numbers have rocketed from 192 in 1996 to 411 in 1998 through a process of amalgamation. During this period the number of teachers dropped from 15 to 14, who are now responsible for teaching pupils with a diversity of first languages: Xhosa, Afrikaans and English. Clearly it has been a difficult process but the principal describes his attitude as:

"Positive—It can bring solutions to problems in the future." A colleague from a similar school describes his attitude as: "Very positive—Our school contributes now to the education of the broad community".

Amalgamation, as illustrated by these instances, is often more of a take over than a merger. In order to explore this question we visited a town where there had been outspoken resistance. The white school had taken the initiative and approached the Department with a plan to combine with the local coloured school into a single Afrikaans language school. They even offered the use of their school bus to transport pupils from the coloured township. The principal, the pupils, the teachers, and the parents rejected the offer out of hand. Our interviews with the various role players in the coloured school community uncovered a great deal of anger. It is partly directed against a Government which is perceived to have forgotten the coloureds, and partly an unwillingness to be manipulated by whites yet again. An underlying factor is the academic qualifications of whites are generally higher, and when it comes to retrenchments the first to go are the so-called 'unqualified teachers'. Years of privilege have made it possible for white schools to establish the kind of infrastructure which inevitably makes them the stronger partner in a relationship.

Various configurations of ideological commitment and self-interest are evident in much of what is happening in South African schools. In illustration thereof, we can draw on examples from the beginning of the decade:

Open schools

Shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, Piet Clase, then Minister of Education, introduced a proposal which allowed for the limited integration of schools. The Clase Models allowed local parent bodies to come to a decision on the matter of 'opening' their schools, but within certain parameters:

- Parent participation of 80 % in the poll, and of these 90 % had to be in favour
 - Admission criteria to be determined by the school
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- Traditional values and ethos of the school should be retained.

By the beginning of 1991, 209 of the white schools (8 % of the 2,537) had adopted one of the Clase models and had admitted 5,360 black pupils. The pace of change soon made the voting exercise redundant, when in the following year it was announced by the government that unless a poll was held to vote against it, all white schools would be what was called Model C schools. Nevertheless, the significance of the initial poll should not be underestimated as it provides an indication of changing white attitudes.

A study of the greater Johannesburg metropolitan area shows a significantly higher acceptance from schools at risk of closure due to declining student numbers (Metclafe 1991).

Teacher attitudes

'What has changed?' Teachers from every community will respond with negative commentary. Budgetary pressures have resulted in the Department insisting on the reduction of teacher numbers. This is a process that has been underway for several years. The possibility of unemployment has had a considerable impact on teacher morale. Even the agreement struck in the final months of 1998 between Government and unions of a moratorium on teacher retrenchments did little to reduce the suspicion. Educators surveyed during this time do not believe that the policy can be checked.

While the end of apartheid education is widely acclaimed, the reality of the culturally diverse classroom is an increased workload for the teacher. Morale is generally low and this appears to influence every perspective.

Pupil attitudes

Whereas teachers in virtually every kind of school were united in their frustration, pupil attitudes are strikingly different. A brief study

of three schools will illustrate something of the range of pupil perception.²

School A:

This is the school mentioned earlier, where amalgamation was resisted. It is a mixed gender coloured school in a small Northern Cape Town. In individual and group interviews there emerged a strongly held point of view that nothing had changed for the better. Consider the following:

“Our black and brown scholars can also join white schools. Beatings (corporal punishment) has been abolished and DEV was introduced. Otherwise nothing has changed. Our school is still in the same condition.”

“There have been no changes at our Coloured school. We as Coloureds do not receive the same rights that Blacks and Whites have. In the past it were the Whites, now its the Blacks, when is it our chance? We are permitted to study at white schools.”

“I feel that all changes are only beneficial (a favour) to the Blacks. They get everything for which they ask, but not us.”

“The President looks just to one side and not to all sides. We all want to be treated the same.”

“I feel there is still Apartheid towards us because the black schools get all the advantages and we have to sit and wait.”

There is a very strong sense of injustice. Attention was repeatedly drawn to the poor condition of the school building and grounds. References to the fact of white schools now being open to pupils of other races is a poignant reminder of the limits to change. Whenever mentioned, it would be undermined by another remark about

those schools only being for rich kids.

School B:

This large boy's school is situated in Kimberley. Over the past five years it has changed from being all white to now being over 70 percent black. It is a prestige school with considerably better facilities than average.

Nevertheless, almost all the changes mentioned by learners are described in negative terms. The strongest reaction is to the loss of respect for seniors. National educational policy has brought an end to practices like initiation and discipline exercised by school prefects. The prefect system has been replaced by a representative Student Council. Rules have been replaced by a document called 'Rights and Responsibilities'. All this is seen by most pupils to take away 'spirit and respect'.

Traditionally sacred places, the matrices' lawn and the 'matrices' toilet are now being trespassed by juniors. And there is nothing that could be done about it! Close on the heels of this erosion of discipline is the ultimate humiliation for the boys: corporal punishment is abolished.

Racial diversity is introduced obliquely in group discussion with a Grade 11 class as 'new sports' or 'more sports', referring to soccer and basketball. In written submissions three of the probably black pupils lament, 'Soccer and basketball are not taken seriously'. From the other side comes the lament that the new sports result in poor attendance at big matches, that is, the rugby and cricket matches. 'Pride isn't the same anymore'. The anonymous contributions touch on racial issues more directly:

'Our academic status has dropped, I think it is because of the blacks.'

'The increase in black scholars has led to a decrease in school morals and attitude.'

Race and difference remain indelibly written into school relation-

ships.³ For their part teachers at the school are considerably more positive. They welcome changes that promote democracy, non-racialism and human rights, and are often nonplussed by pupil conservatism. Instead of sport, their discourse about learner difference concerns itself with overcoming educational disadvantage and issues of second-language learning. Most refer to increased learner diversity in terms of the educational challenge.

School C:

This school is located on the other side of town in the black area. The murder of a pupil on school property the previous year had brought all sectors of the school community to a decision to change the school. The first step was to insist that the Education Department replace the existing principle. As described by one teacher:

We had to force the Principal to resign as he was very inefficient in many respects, for example, afraid to reprimand teachers who did not attend their periods and those who were absent from the school very often. Parents comment:

The first principal was bullied by the school children. The school was corrupt and it was as if we were in hell.

The changing of the uniform has shown us a progress with the school, and it encourages the pupil because it is something new to them after such a long time. It shows that the school as a whole has started afresh.

When the year 2002 arrives we'll see the pupils of Thomelang in parliament.

Pupils write:

I am glad about these changes because nobody could think that Thomelang could be changed but we have changed a lot. I also thank the strong principal. Our enemies try to destroy us. I feel very proud of my school.

There have been drastic changes within my school. Most importantly is the attendance of the teachers to their classes and school attendance of the pupils. Law, order, punctuality and discipline has made a point of reference. Mostly of all is the role of the pupils to the governance of the school, there has been no pessimism in the students—local source is optimism.

I feel happy, proud and pompous about all these changes that took place. For the past years my school has been the black sheep in front of our community, but its just that. Our people must take note of it, and stop ignoring the fact that there has a great deal of change.

We are the best school in the Northern Cape. We are the best school in the country. We feel good, we feel proud.

One of the outstanding characteristics of this school is the composition of its teaching staff. Most of them have a background as political activists. They used this boldness and organisational ability to make this school one of the few places where everyone is very positive about education.

Is there moral development?

Clearly, no two schools are alike. There is every possible configuration of language, culture and social class within the South African educational system. If a 'just school' has a predictable value system and stable organisational structure then it will be difficult to find many such schools in our rapidly changing society. However, if we understand it to mean an environment which promotes reflection on issues of justice, then many schools qualify.

The Soweto uprising of 1976 was lead by high school pupils and its initial focus was on transforming education. That generation debated, strategised and resisted. Elements of this 'struggle' tradition

have continued. If an essential requirement in the development of moral understanding is to be confronted by ambiguity (Walker 1983), then there can be little doubt that some of the contradictions in school communities provide valuable opportunities for reflection. However the trend for schools to become enclaves reflecting particular social classes, this awareness will be reduced.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on a research project sponsored by the President's Education Initiative and funded by DANIDA. A comprehensive report will appear as, see: (Mitchell 1999).
- 2 One of the most comprehensive studies of teacher attitudes during the initial stages of transition is Christie (1993).
- 3 An important study of patterns of change in two urban schools will be published by Van Heerden (1999). Cf. also, Du Toit (1995: 212—217).

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