

# **The High Stakes of Remembering The Past in the South African History & Social Sciences Classroom: Creating A Way Forward For White Staff & Students**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

At a recent educational conference in South Africa, a white history teacher working in an overwhelming white school lamented, “Our students are absolutely bored with learning about the Apartheid era. Isn’t it about time to move on and focus on those things less divisive?” That comment got this author to thinking- Should history teachers allow “old dogs to lie” is their coverage of key historical events of South Africa? Should we be made to recall images, myths and stories of a time period known to be turbulent and divisive? Is there such a thing a trouble-free classroom or a neutral history syllabi?

### **Negative Historical Implications of Whiteness in South African Society**

Race, ethnicity and class have been perennial sources of conflict in South African society since the nation’s inception. Nonetheless, during the Apartheid era those tensions were both heightened and accentuated as whites attempted to pursue and enforce their definition of the good life with a comprehensive ethnic and exclusivist approach with State support. That is to say, the rule of law became a means of entrenching & preserving the rights of whites.

By virtue of being a public sphere- South African education was used by the ruling regime to support and legitimate its cultural, social and economic interests and to limit the aspirations of all other ethnic and racial groups. Hegemony and educational ideology became inseparable.

Education during the “apartheid era” fostered an environment of imposition, elitism and sustained gross religious, political, cultural and economic power in the hands of a few (see Njobe 1990). As a politically charged milieu, cultural groups were made to compete for the recognition and the securement of fundamental human rights. It was a hegemonic knowledge as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, in support of the ruling grouping (see Hall 1986).

....it supports conformity to the status quo. This knowledge is transmitted through families, schools, churches, businesses, the media, government, and the medical and legal professions. Dominant groups with power in these institutions create discourses, including myths, symbols, language patterns, and knowledge through which we understand ourselves as “property”- that is, hierarchically- classed, raced, and gendered persons. They also shape cultural practices, such as the work ethic and sexual behavior, further regulating fundamental aspects of our lives (Hobgood 2000:11).

In particular, history as taught in the nation’s schools, became ideologically stitched into the fabric of Apartheid and used to reinforce a politics of domination by SOME and the subjugation of OTHERS. The history syllabus, for the vast majority in South Africans was non-representative, offensive, discreditable and corrupt..

Schools became contested terrain. Thus, with the fall of the apartheid regime in 1994, educational institutions, as public entities, were made to re-examine, re-negotiate and re-validate their continued existence. It spurred many of them to develop more democratic public philosophies under the new dispensation. In particular, the current government of South Africa by giving voice to the differing configurations of culture, power and knowledge in the public sphere, it has challenged in many cases, traditionally white educational institutions to come to terms with the inequalities, power dynamics and human suffering rooted in such institutions as well as to learn ways to live and perceive of themselves as one amongst many, i.e. in a rainbow nation with multiple cultural codes, experiences and languages. This call for self-examination and critical consciousness has been reflected in the government’s efforts at transforming the national education syllabus, inclusive of history.

### **Hopes & Expectations Under The New Dispensation**

As might be expected, many of South Africa’s stakeholders brought to the table of this new democracy a myriad of hopes and expectations. So much so, in fact, that much of it sound like a mantra of cliches-.”In the new South Africa..” “Twelve years into freedom...”, “With the coming of majority rule....”; “With the fall of the apartheid regime....”, “ In light of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the women’s march to the Union Buildings....”; “30 years after the June 16<sup>th</sup> unarmed student uprising ...” “Ten years after the adoption of a new Constitution enshrining human-rights-orientated guarantees ...”; “With the country’s ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1999 (see Report on a Study by the SAHRC, February 1999)....”

These hopes and expectations were also specifically directed towards its educational system- “With the adoption of Section 29 (1) of the South African constitution that declares- “everyone has the right to basic education....”; “With the enactment of the South African Schools Act of 1996 that called for a new national educational system to redress the injustices created under the apartheid regime...”; “In response to the hearings of the Right to Basic Education in 2005 by the South African Human Rights Commission.....”

### **Social Realities In The New South Africa**

Conditions become “social problems” when society decides that something should be done about them (Kornblum & Julian 1974:1).

Alongside the hopes and expectations of South Africa’s stakeholders, are the perennial social problems that challenge the long term viability of this non-racial, rainbow nation.

Nearly half of the population of South Africa live in poverty, “with 22 million people described as ‘desperate’ and 5.3 million South African children...suffering from hunger”(Pilger:2006); 90 percent of privately owned land “has been and is still in the hands of whites”(Cose 1997:221), and the number of landless black farmers and their families have been evicted from farms continues to escalate (see Pilger 2006); sporadic eruptions of overt prejudice and racism continue to manifest themselves.(See Powell 2006) and poverty also continues to impact on education in terms of who can and who cannot pay school fees, as well as the hidden costs of uniforms, and transport.(see Cembali 2006).

### **RACE AS A REGENERATING FORCE**

Race does not proceed unchanged through time and space, but constructs and reconstructs itself, resistant to attempts both to be pinned down and eliminated. Racial identities cannot be bounded and framed, for they exceed, engulf, and mock the borders in

which we attempt to encase them. “Racism” does not exist in the singular, as a monolithic, all-encompassing system of domination (Dolby 2001:115).

It is the belief of this author that racism as a form of hegemony is a constantly mutating and regenerating social force, much like postoperative staph infections (*Staphylococcus aureus*). It is both extremely resilient and a “shape shifter.” It is a process that continuously finds new ways of appropriating power; it defines and delimits what is legitimate; it encourages the unwitting consent of others to domination; it de-emphasizes a shared understanding of humanness; and it fails to recognize and appreciate diversity, self-reflection and cooperation in the classroom. I argue that in order to effectively respond to racism as a form of hegemony in the classroom, students as well as educators need to discover and embrace non-hegemonic paradigms, which call for both personal and structural transformation as well as a fresh discernment regarding diversity. Racism is intimately connected to hegemonic action.

## **Hegemony**

Hegemony is defined in this paper as “the politics of domination”. At varying levels of interaction, hegemony can be characterized by such issues as unjust economic relations, biased racial relations, oppressive political relations, patriarchal gender relations and/or hierarchal power relations. Hegemony is also seen as being historic specific and as a constantly mutating phenomena.

Antonio Gramsci (20<sup>th</sup> century Italian Marxist) defined “hegemonic knowledge” as knowledge developed by dominant groups in a society to further their own monopolization of power (Hobgood 2000:11). It is the negative historical implication of whiteness which has underpinned the hubris of dominance in South Africa. It is a knowledge so entrenched in the national culture that families, schools, churches, businesses and the media support it without question. It is knowledge that perpetuates the subjugation of some people and justifies the domination by yet others, through the misinformation of hegemonic myths, symbols, language, patterns, and knowledge that regulates and shapes people’s lives. In such an environment, the abnormal becomes normal.

“When a people truly believe it is natural that some should “have” while others “do” that one should rule while another simply follows, it is easy to see how systematic oppression of whole

peoples could be legitimated and even glorified as the work of God in some instances. The process of which persons who are hierarchically defined as appropriate recipients of oppression become agents of this very oppression is commonly encompassed by the term “hegemony” (Gonzalez 1998:227).

Thus, hegemony when allowed to exist unchallenged, ultimately generates suffering and pain in defense of the status quo.

## **AN APARTHEID MINDSET IN A POST-APARTHEID WORLD**

### **Reluctance To Change**

One of things that this author discovered while living in Lesotho, a country completely surrounded by South Africa, is how intertwined the lives of the people are on both sides of the border. The residents of both Maseru and Ladybrand frequently cross back and forth between countries in order to shop, pay bills, and to attend school.

On one particular occasion, this author crossed over to South Africa with the hope of paying a medical bill and having lunch at a certain restaurant in Ladybrand. However, on the day concerned, I noticed that certain establishments on the South African side were opened while yet others were closed. Coming in contact with a white shopkeeper whose doors were open, this author asked as to what was happening. And he responded by saying, “They are having one of their holidays.” He then rolled his eyes as a sign of disapproval.

Ndabazandile (2006) having visited several white owned pubs and eating establishments across the country, found a similar attitude amongst the people encountered. That is to say, their televisions were solely fixed on rugby and English soccer and never on South African football, regardless of who might be in the room. Thabo Mbeki once said that South Africa is a country of two nations, one is white and rich, the other is black and poor (Khumalo 2003).

“While many government regulations have been repealed, there exists a mindset in certain individuals in our society that still relegate the interests of the majority to the bottom of the heap” (Ndabazandile 2006).

In South Africa, blacks are the majority. But that doesn't make them dominant. (Paulose 1986) in discussing the issue of what constitutes a minority in a pluralistic society, indicates that a minority is not those who are small in number, but those who are powerless and voiceless. "Though whites make up roughly 13 percent of the population, they earn more than 60 percent of the nation's total income" (Cose 1997:221).

Whites, as a dominating force in society regularly propagate certain hegemonic myths that need to be addressed. According to Ndebele (1998: 26), these acts oftentimes inflict invisible wounds more lethal than those which are visible; condescending platitudes capable of massacring countless people of color. Bartolome & Macedo (1997) have observed that whites oftentimes make use of historical amnesia, selectively remembering what serves their own interest.

## **EXAMINING LEGITIMIZING MYTHS IN THE CLASSROOM**

According to Trompenaars (1994),

Identifying systemic biases that disadvantage individuals and groups is often difficult for students, particularly those who have never experienced discrimination....Students recognize that although stereotypes are a normal human response to processing information, they are often inaccurate.

Trompenaars challenges teachers to empower students; to help them to identify and come to terms with their own prejudices, including race. From a South African context, teachers of the social sciences and history might want to address some of the commonly held "myths" propagated amongst white students and teachers.

### **Myth No. 1: Color-blindness & racial innocence**

...any white person who says they're not a racist- by that I mean someone whose perceptions are not coloured by race- is not being honest with themselves (Seary 2006).

One white educator working in a multicultural school setting once professed to this author, “When children come into my classroom, I don’t see Africans or Whites or Chinese, I just see children. I treat them all the same.” The primary point being deducted from that conversation being- “I am not a racist” and “I am not prejudiced.” Nonetheless, according to (Thompson 1998) one of the biggest hindrances towards true racial integration in the classroom is the inability by teachers, and in particular white teachers to talk about or to acknowledge the issue of race. Thompson calls such conversations “color talk.” In an effort to be respectful to cultural diversity, such teachers consciously choose to be silent. Such actions, however, according to Thompson, often mask the very ignorance and discomfort that the teacher concerned has regarding questions of race. She calls all such attempts to be “intentionally” color-blind while interacting with students as an affront to the unique racial, ethnic and cultural composition of the students as well as the individual teacher concerned. It is a defense mechanism for protecting our identities from pain.

rationalization about ourselves, our acts, or our motivations is another one of the more common defense mechanisms. Compared with other defensive mechanisms, rationalizing is a relatively mild way of protecting our identities from pain.. To rationalize (in the sense we are using it here) means to give a logical but false and self serving explanation for something. (O’Connell, A & V 1980:109 )

(Govender 2006) reported that a headmaster in Mpumalanga recently warned one of his teachers “not to teach about the apartheid era because it was over....he also did not approve of...photographs, which showed a policeman checking the passes of black people...”

“Racism” is always a part of unfinished business. As educators, we need to acknowledge and work through the negative historical implications of “whiteness”, which has undermined the hubris of dominance in South Africa and which continues to interact with all other forms of socialisation. According to (Terrblanche 2002:443), “A fundamental change in the way in which South Africans view fellow compatriots is therefore a sine qua non for building a better South Africa..”

## **Myth No. 2: “You Can’t Blame Me...I Didn’t Do It”**

Many whites (especially younger people) are inclined to say that they themselves did nothing wrong, and can therefore should not

be blamed for the effects of white domination and apartheid. However, they clearly do not understand the systemic character of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid, and their collective responsibility for what has happened. (Terrblanche 2002:5).

Whether we admit it or not, nearly everything that is owned and which benefits those in white South Africa is contaminated according to (Terrblanche 2002).

The moral responsibility of whites is further complicated by their relative isolation from other communities. Ignorance, arrogance and isolation protect their unearned benefits while keeping them in conformity to the status quo (Hobgood 2000:10).

Some in the white community, have grumbled that since the election of the ANC, they are becoming victims of “reverse discrimination” as that government concentrates its efforts of uplifting formerly disadvantaged communities through varying policies of affirmative action. (See Seary 2006)

It’s understandable, given all the philosophical, constitutional, and even moral problems with affirmative action, that any number of people would prefer simply to see it (and anything reminiscent of it) disappear. As it is true of any lesser evil, affirmative action is not a beautiful thing to gaze upon, and, to make matters worse, it reminds us of some unpleasant and ugly things about ourselves. Nonetheless....contemplate throwing out much of what has gone under the name of affirmative action, we must also seriously contemplate whether we are prepared to pay the long-term price of replacing a bad system with one that- in insisting that we blind ourselves to....racial reality- is incalculably worse (Cose 1997:137).

Cose also admits that affirmative action has multiple meanings, depending on the political and racial make-up of the people addressing the issue. “It can mean everything from quota programs for supposed incompetents to extending a hand to eminently qualified people previously held back by bias” (Cose 1997:96-99). Although he indicates that it is not the best solution to put forward, it is still the best possible way forward, under the circumstances. He equates it to paying taxes. No one in their right mind would say that they are unequivocally in favor of paying taxes. But the alternative to paying taxes is far worse; it is the best available alternative at the moment; it is a lesser evil. In a society where everything is equitable; “a place of perfect knowledge,



perfect competition, and perfect access to information and opportunity, all of which ensure that society will function in a perfectly bias-free way” (Cose 1997:96-99), in a such a society, perhaps, there would no need for such a thing as affirmative action.

## **THE “HOW TO” OF TEACHING HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, classrooms are not trouble-free. As history teachers we should expect to become adept with and discuss issues of discomfort, tension and conflict that might arise among our students, including the changing of a community’s name or the name of an institution or a major road throughout South Africa. Nonetheless, any discussion in the classroom should ultimately lead towards the empowerment and a constructive way forward for students- including an understanding of the legitimate desire to Africanize and de-colonize of a nation’s public assets. Such a discussion might also include an examination as to why other countries have done likewise; as was the case of India changing a city’s name from Bombay to Mumbai. Although this may be hard for teachers with little or no experience with issues of diversity, the key might be to work towards rejecting whatever residuals of prejudice that still lingers, i.e.

.....the sexism that still undermines girls and women, the classism that still harms so many children and their parents, the homophobia that still renders many in our democracy into second-class citizens, and the institutional barriers that still pose unjust obstacles to those physically challenged trying to lead good lives.... (Scapp 2003:159)

### **Taking Responsibility For the Beliefs That We Absorb**

An ethical agenda for people in dominant social locations includes taking responsibility for the beliefs we absorb in an uncritical way and unexamined way. These beliefs promote and extend systems of unearned and unshared privilege. An ethical agenda includes taking responsibility for the ways we become (often unwitting) conduits for passing these systems on to others, reproducing and intensifying the monopolization of social power  
Hobgood (2000:31)

Hobgood believes that the fundamental role of education under such conditions is to “break out of the socially constructed identities placed on us by those who dominate. According to Hobgood, we need to question our roles in the family, the neighborhood, the church, the workplace as well as the political system. It means disengaging ourselves from what Paulo Freire rightly described as the “banking model of education,” where teachers serve as experts and pour knowledge into the empty heads of the students. In return, the student gives the information back to the teacher in an unadulterated form. Nonetheless, we need to do more as educators than merely make our students critical thinkers. We need to work towards the transformation of students individually and collectively. (Giroux 1992:79) broadens the role of education beyond a conscious raising exercise or the process of raising questions in an effort to prick their conscience. According to him, students need to be commit themselves to transformative action.

A transformation of the oppressive dimensions of schooling must be preceded by a transformation of the language we use to speak about, and therefore comprehend, interpret, and criticize the process and purpose of schooling (McLaren 1997:28)

All knowledge, curriculum, institutional structures, issues of individuality and solidarity, as well as leadership styles in education are areas of dispute. Educators in such social situations, do not stand in isolation to the presence of domination and exploitation present in society as a whole.

If teachers are going to be held in any way responsible for the moral character of their students, then teachers will need to confront their own ethical positions and be clear about the connections between their teaching and the values they are advocating or are being asked to promote (Scapp 2003:16).

For many whites in South African society, they are “deeply scared-scared of violence. Of crime, of being squeezed out of a job by affirmative action and, above all, scared of the sheer brute power of African nationalism (Johnson 1996:134-137).

Those fears and concerns exert a powerful influence on the types of interaction that white educators have with their students in the classroom. Thus, white educators having been raised and steeped in a hegemonic environment, need to look elsewhere for educational strategies that will nurture an ethos of inclusiveness and critical pluralism.

## **Moving Beyond Political Correctness: Being Politically Active**

“We need to be more than politically correct in addressing issues in the classroom in the simplistic and cynical tone that the term has come to engender, but rather to become “personally conscious” in our roles as concerned white educators committed to social healing and positive change....(Nieto 1999:208)

Most of us as teachers are survivors- both inside and outside the classroom. We carefully survey the landscape around us, determine what it takes to live “trouble-free” and then put a plan into action. It is often a case of learning to “tolerate” those different from ourselves in a less than inclusive way. It does not involve being accessible or communicative.

The teaching of the social sciences and history, needs to develop a pedagogy which is something beyond being politically correct; We are called to contribute in a political and pro-active political way to inter-ethnic understanding.

What is needed, then, is committed and purposeful political activity, both within the classroom and outside of it, to ensure that the stated ideals of education in a democratic society are realized (Nieto 1999:210)

According to this author, we should not imagine “oppression” as someone else’s problem. That is to say, we must be willing to confront and recognize that we too are often part of the problem. Our racism, our sexual prejudices, our class anxieties, our empowered desires that we must confront and resist have contributed to hegemony in their own way.

Paulo Freire identified certain key factors that are needed by any educator who is to be involved in the struggle for liberation. These factors are “the ability to perceive and clarify reality in an oppressive and dehumanizing situation...[and] the ability to arrive at an effective action to change the situation as part of a pedagogical praxis” (Goba 1988:16).

Educators, as facilitators of social change, are obliged to work for the removal all artificial barriers which come to be erected as a result of racial, social, ethnic, sexist and political

prejudice: racism, classism, sexism and any other “ism” that keeps people from living empowered lives.

True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible. We cannot go on nursing grudges even voraciously for those who cannot speak for themselves and longer. We have to accept that what we do we do for generations past, present, and yet to come. This is what makes a community a community or a people a people- for better or for worse (Tutu 1999:279).

According (TerraBlanche 2002 ) if whites do not critically re-evaluate their past, they cannot expect the victims of colonialism to accept them as trustworthy companions in building a common future. Since 1994 South Africans- especially whites- have had the opportunity to look at the country’s history from a totally new perspective, and many have taken up this challenge. That is to say, we cannot build the new epoch without a clear understanding of the old (TerraBlanche 2002:4).

### **Dialoguing In the Classroom And Beyond**

Fine, Weis & Powell (1997) observed that merely by including youth or teachers of different races and ethnicities in the same school does not in itself produce an environment that respects diversity. Chomsky makes a strong case for the use of dialogue and the need to bring people together, i.e

.Part of the genius of the system of domination and control is to separate people from one another so that it doesn’t happen...As long as we can’t consult our neighbors, we’ll believe that there are good times. It is important to make sure that people don’t consult their neighbors..... If they’re together, they’ll start having thoughts, interchanging them and learning about them.... (Chomsky 2001:28).

If education is to be an effective agent in a multicultural society, it must make an effort to develop a conceptual map of pluralism as well as an understanding of human differences. With

an education steeped in dialogue, there is no need to institutionalize a particular cultural reality, ethnocentric approach or cultural vision. Rather, it calls for the acceptance of many centers, whereby both the dominant as well as the minority cultures are enriched by the spiritual, moral and aesthetic values of the other.

South Africa cannot restore what it is still in the process of establishing. A positive change in race relations cannot come about in one quick and effortless motion. Rather, it will most probably be a slow and pain-staking endeavor, involving a long term commitment to race relations. It also implies the need of each teacher to realign their own racial constructs or perceptions of humankind as well as to work towards the shaping of all those people fall under their sphere of influence.

Paulo Freire has said, "...dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become and are more critically communicative beings"Shor & Freire (1987:98). It is a call to be more open.

## **CONCLUSION**

Plato of ancient Greece apparently thought that when a person knows what is good, the person would automatically do good. However, mankind now knows from experience that a gap tends to exist between knowing what should be done to be good and the actual behavioral response of doing good. That is, people who know good often do not do good., (Njobe 1990:1)

According to Wilson(2003) educators have two choices as to how they will teach. One is described as"surface teaching" and the other as"deep teaching". The first, focuses primarily on the sharing of information as "surface teaching;" it covers the topics and subject areas, but it oftentimes fail to uncover the essence, or deeper meanings of what is being covered. The other kind of teaching- deep teaching"- reaches below the surface of information and involves the sharing and igniting of ideas. As teachers of Social Studies and History the use of "deep teaching;" can help us to engaged students in a curriculum"which is constructive and which

grows and expands through the contributions of all in a multicultural classroom. In its application to the teaching of history, Giroux (1991) comments:

We don't need to treat history as a closed, singular narrative that simply has to be revered and memorised. Educating for difference, democracy and ethical responsibility is not about enshrining reverence in the service of creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent and vibrant (Giroux 1991:501-519).

Sarah Joseph in her book, *Mapping Multiculturalism*, places the threat of hegemony in the classroom as not coming from the threat of people who have a myopic understanding of the world...but from ideologies in a society which would support a politics of difference....societies can only be multicultural if individuals are multicultural. A safeguard of tolerance in a multicultural society is a multicultural sense of identity for individuals.(Joseph 2002:170)

Education, if it is doing its job, is preparing students to deal with multiple issues- race, class, gender and all other kinds of oppression in society, and to be effective agents of change.

Reconciliation is going to have to be the concern of every South African. It has to be a national project to which all earnestly strive to make their particular contribution- by learning the language and culture of others; by being willing to make amends; by refusing to deal in stereotypes by making racial and other jokes that ridicule a particular group; by contributing to a culture of respect for human rights, and seeking to enhance tolerance- with zero tolerance for intolerance; by working for a more inclusive society where most, if not all, can feel they belong- that they are insiders and not aliens and strangers on the outside, relegated to the edges of society.(Tutu 1999:274).

The time has come to collectively recall and debate the past and prepare for the future- by commemorating of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the women's march to the Union Buildings, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the student uprising in Soweto; for the changing a community's name from Pretoria to Tshwane and in becoming familiar with South Africa's Constitution.

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