‘OPENING THE WALLS OF LEARNING’:
Rethinking educational transformation

We cannot expect to produce an equitable social order through ‘raising educational standards’, if the prejudices, inequalities and social injustices existing in the broader society remain unresolved, writes *Adam Cooper* in this think piece on how language and dialogue shape perceptions and create walls between social groups.

The all-encompassing perspective of the South African education system

When I tell people that I conduct educational research, the response almost always involves someone telling me a story; a sensational tale that my interlocutor has heard about a school in a poor area where the students are illiterate, the educators rarely teach and the buildings consist of dilapidated carcasses left to rot in the post-apartheid era.

These accounts are proclaimed with a passionate sense of injustice for the nameless learners, justifying the teller’s belief that inequality in South Africa is actually the result of negligence, corruption and laziness, things of which my imaginary storyteller is not guilty.

While these depictions are not wholly untrue, they are the single, almost unchallenged narrative spoken or written about the South African education system.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that literacy, attendance and educator content knowledge are not systemic challenges. These are serious issues that we ignore at our great peril. However, this all-encompassing perspective of the South African education system prevents other simultaneous truths from emerging.

Furthermore, the dominant educational discourse problematically implies that education can be extrapolated, in policy and practice, from the society in which it is located. It implores us to ‘go back to basics’ and focus all of our attention on fixing the classroom, healing the toxic mix that plagues knowledge transmission within its borders, to use common metaphors that circulate in the education sector and amongst its experts.

It is implied that the efficient transmission of knowledge from the curriculum and textbook into the head of the learner will ensure that students become educated and grow up to secure middle-class jobs, eradicating the poverty and inequality that exists in the country. It is imagined that other troubles will naturally be ameliorated by resolving the ‘education crisis’ in this manner. I believe that this view is flawed.

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Feature Article

Challenging the narrative

In my book, *Dialogue in Places of learning: Youth Amplified from South Africa*, I try to shift the educational Rubik’s cube by presenting a different but parallel pedagogical reality.

The research ventures within and beyond the school walls, using multi-site ethnography (the systematic study of people and cultures) to explore educational sites in one poor Cape Flats community created during the apartheid era. I argue that education cannot be understood in isolation from the various contexts – including the society – in which it takes place.

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My focus is on language and dialogue because language is central to the dissemination of knowledge between teachers and students in classrooms, but it is also bound up in communicating to learners how they are positioned in the society in which they live and what they can expect in terms of social mobility; the prospects of an upwards movement or change in social status relative to others within a given society.

Through the ways in which we speak – our accents, word choices and pronunciation – others position us in the social hierarchy and make assumptions regarding our level of education, upbringing, moral conduct and likely futures.

How schools reinforce inequalities

The young people in my study spoke an informal version of Afrikaans that emerged historically through the mixing of the colonising Dutch and British, indigenous peoples like the Khoi and San and slaves imported from East Africa and Asia.

Their language differed from standardised Afrikaans that is inscribed in the school curriculum and which is a product of the white, Afrikaner political project. At the school teachers often dismissed student’s linguistic resources, saying things like:

> *‘The biggest problem is that learners come with a cultural deficiency… no books at home. The only proper English or Afrikaans they hear is from the teachers. Their oral tradition is good, but we need to get them studying and reading. It’s the basis of education. Once they have good command of the language, they will be fine.’*

Should it be a surprise then that this kind of disparaging teacher attitude resulted in that particular school having 400 grade 9s and only 60 matrics in 2012 – a 400% dropout rate?

A different set of linguistic norms and values existed among the young hip-hop crew that I encountered while working in this community. A number of the crew worked for a local NGO and the entire group performed their rap lyrics publicly in the community. One of the young men in the group said that:

> *‘When I’m at home I write better. When I’m at school I can’t write because there’s no activity or place for me to do that kind of stuff.’*

The hip-hop group provided him and his peers with a space to use their language unashamedly, engage with ideas about their community and society and to explore their heritage. The group used ideas like ‘conscious lyrics’ and ‘keeping it real’ from international hip-hop, the biggest youth sub-culture globally. They also referenced the human rights discourse that was prominent in the NGO sector. Through dialogues amongst themselves and with relevant others the group reflected, critically, on themselves and their society.

While working in this neighbourhood I wondered how the youth would relate to an alternative curriculum, one that engaged directly with issues like social justice and inequality.

Juxtaposing three educational places illustrated how South African schools subtly reproduce inequalities through the ways in which they sort students into hierarchies of worth.

I put this idea into practice by establishing a youth radio show at a local radio station, inviting students from this school and peers from three other schools, to attend on Saturday mornings. At the radio station, we watched documentaries, read Biko and interviewed the junior mayor of Cape Town, before each participant generated 10 questions. An hour-long discussion would follow, live on air.

During these sessions, the youth from the two well-resourced schools transported colonial-era ideas about standards and proper conduct, including linguistic ideologies, broadcasting these perspectives on the radio show and causing a fair amount of conflict.

Juxtaposing these three educational places, the school, hip-hop crew and radio show – sites that all involved young people from one neighbourhood – illustrated how South African schools subtly reproduce inequalities through the ways in which they sort students into hierarchies of worth.

Educational transformation is more than 'raising educational standards'

As in schools elsewhere, this sorting process and young people's learning endeavours are intimately linked to assessments of language use. Word and language choices, accents and pronunciations, give clues to people's social status.

For poor young people in the global era many of their linguistic expressions are treated as evidence of cultural mixings that occurred during colonialism, slavery and, more recently, patterns of mass migration. While no way of speaking or language is inherently superior or more scholarly and sophisticated than another and all languages contain mixtures of words that originate from a variety of sources, some students' linguistic and cultural resources are interpreted as evidence of inferiority.

These kinds of prejudices are particularly common at schools, as these formal educational sites usually only approve of standardised forms of language. Young people are experts at creatively using a wide range of words from different sources to assert their identities and ideas, however these practices are validated differently in a range of contexts. The radio show illuminated how informal places may also be oppressive in certain instances, as places are made up of the people who inhabit them, individuals who move through other sites and carry with them dominant ideas that circulate in society.

Places of learning are constructed historically and are shaped by relationships that exist inside and beyond their borders. This has implications for educational transformation, a topic widely discussed globally.

Educational transformation is usually associated with calls for efficient and regular assessment practices and more sophisticated standardised tests. Time on task, teacher attendance and content knowledge, literacy, numeracy and matric results. While these are all crucial indicators of high-quality education, we cannot expect to produce an equitable social order through 'raising educational standards' if the prejudices, inequalities and social injustices that exist in the broader society remain unresolved. Educational sites are produced by and connected to these wider contexts. If we would like to use education to catalyse social justice it is crucial to understand how educational institutions, policies and personnel may contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations, as well as how they may arm students with powerful forms of knowledge.

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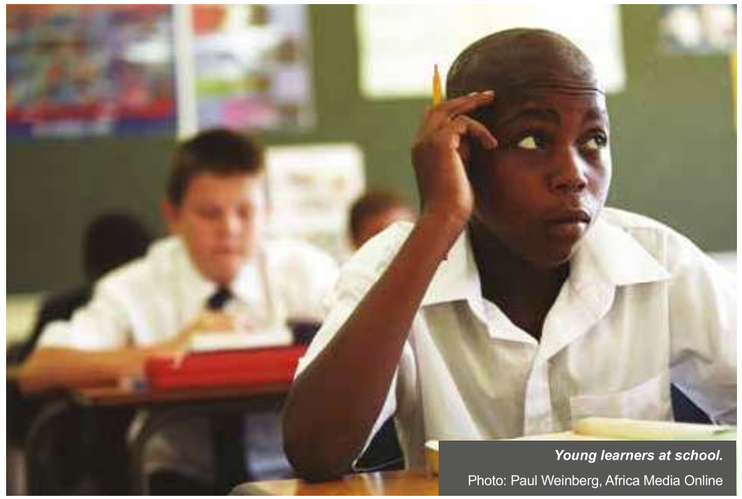

Young learners at school.
Photo: Paul Weinberg, Africa Media Online

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STARTING EARLY: Innovations in **HIV prevention**

There is growing evidence that children uninfected by the HI-virus and living with HIV-positive parents may be at increased risk of psychological and social problems. *Tamsen Rochat* describes a pioneering intervention for such families with primary school-aged children.

As HIV-exposed and affected children enter adolescence in poverty-stricken communities where violence is rife… these children are more at risk of abuse, early sexual debut and ultimately, HIV infection.

South Africa has made tremendous strides in advancing access to HIV prevention and treatment. As a result, most children born to HIV-infected parents are HIV-uninfected themselves. At least a third of children are being raised by an HIV-infected parent, most often a mother, in sub-Saharan Africa; and this number is probably higher in areas with high prevalence.

In South Africa, given the success of our HIV treatment programmes, these HIV-positive parents have access to life-saving treatment and are surviving to nurture and care for their own children. But in this new treatment era, different challenges arise for these parents, their children and families.

The literature identifies three groups of children as affected by parental HIV, including:

- *HIV-exposed* children who are exposed to HIV in utero or during breastfeeding, but who remain HIV-negative themselves;
- *HIV-affected* children, who are HIV-uninfected, and who were not directly exposed to the virus, but whose parents may have become HIV-infected during the course of their childhood. This latter group may also include children who have an HIV-infected father, or an HIV-infected caregiver who is not their biological parent; and
- *HIV-unexposed* children born to HIV-uninfected mothers, not directly exposed to the virus, and whose mothers remain uninfected throughout their childhood. However, there is increasing concern that very few *HIV-unexposed* children remain *HIV-unaffected* at a familial or community level, in particular where HIV prevalence is high.

There is growing evidence that these HIV-exposed and affected children may be at increased risk of psychological and social problems. As they enter adolescence, in poverty-stricken communities where violence is rife, evidence shows that these children are more at risk of abuse, early sexual debut and ultimately, HIV infection. Some of the potential pathways to these risks are illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig 1