

Transformation trajectory or perpetuation of coloniality: The envisaged role of School Governing Bodies in the decolonisation of school spaces in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The ushering in of the democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994 paved the way for decolonisation of schools. School Governing Bodies (SGBs) became legally recognised entities with the capacity to develop policies. This study explores the role of School Governing Bodies in former Model-C schools. The study used textual analysis to arrive at findings. Sources looked at include the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, relevant legislation and articles, books and court judgements. The study used decolonisation theory as the grounding theory for the research. The study found that, far from advancing transformation, SGBs perpetuate coloniality. The study found evidence of local communities and their languages being undermined and the imposition of Eurocentric Knowledge Systems and culture was prevalent. The study proposes involvement of the community in school governance and the prominence of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and cultures in the offering of education.

Keywords: Decolonisation, School Governing Bodies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Eurocentric, Ex-Model-C Schools

1. Introduction

The concept of transformation is most used as a descriptor attached to social change. Notions of change "are associated with relatively unobstructive interventions as much as with wholesale social engineering" (Motala, 2017). The attempts by government to ensure wholesale social engineering in schools are captured in Chapter 2 of the Constitution. The Bill of Rights entrenches the rights of equality, human dignity, freedom and political and social rights (Motala, 2017: 14; Act 101 of 1996).

Transformation and coloniality are polemics at opposing ends of the continuum in the basic education space within South Africa. Transformation is an aspirational concept that represents the collective wish of the South African populace for change in the governance of schools. At a theoretical level, this represents a departure from a Eurocentric and segregated education system bolstered by tenets of colonialism. Whilst the legislative framework allows for transformation of the academic project in line with the new (1994) political dispensation, the reality (lived experiences of parents, educators, learners and communities) points to a different political direction taken by School Governing Bodies. These point to a contradiction between policy and practice at schools. This suggests lack of political will from government as one of the reasons for this contradiction given that the Department of Basic Education allows the status quo to continue.

2. Objectives of the study

The study was based on the two objectives below:

- i. To investigate the role played by School Governing Bodies in the perpetuation of coloniality in South African Model-C schools.
- ii. To propose meaningful ways in which Model-C School Governing Bodies can play a meaningful role in the transformation of Model-C schools.

3. Significance of the study

The study is of value to researchers and students in the field of school governance. It will also assist policy-makers to consider more meaningful policy changes that will lead to School Governing Bodies being motivational forces for transformation in schools where they operate.

4. Research methodology

The study adopted a hermeneutic methodology to determine the role played by School Governing Bodies in advancing or retarding the transformation process in schools. The focus groups for the study consisted of School Governing Body members, educators, parents and Department of Basic Education officials, while the unit of analysis was the School Governing Bodies and Department of Basic Education officials. The justification for choosing this method was the fact that the main idea in hermeneutics is "to fuse the horizons of the past, present and future understanding (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 346). Furthermore, Bryman (2006) posits that hermeneutics "seek to bring out the meaning of the text from the perspective of the author".

5. Review of relevant literature

5.1 Legislative and policy framework

In the South African context, the empowering legislation for SGBs is the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996. The Act mandates the SGBs to complement the government "to improve the quality of education of individual schools" (Pillay & van Leeve, 2016). This is a profound statement that carries the hopes and aspirations of South Africans faced with socio-economic problems bordering on poverty, illiteracy, violence, social exclusion at different levels, etc. The magnitude of providing education to a person and it being the most important basic human right is evidenced by it being enshrined in most international charters and laws. Within the African continent it is enshrined in the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples Rights where Article 17 that states that every individual has the right to education. Article 11(3) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides that "States [or countries] to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures with a view to achieving the full realisation of this right and shall in particular provide free and fair education ..." Furthermore, Article 28 of the of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child compels the state to "make primary education compulsory and freely available to all".

5.2. School Governing Body powers

5.2.1 National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act No 27 of 1996).

Section 7 of the Act reaffirms the right of the school governing body to determine the admission policy of a school. These powers are consistent with Section 5 of the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996). The conditions attached to these powers are that this policy must be consistent with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the South African Schools Act and applicable provincial law. The policy also prescribes that a governing body must make a copy of the school's admission policy available to the Head of Department.

Section 9 of the policy prescribes that, "a public school and the administration of admissions by an education department must not unfairly discriminate in anyway against an applicant for admission". By extension, this

also means that a school governing body may also not discriminate against any already admitted learners in the school.

Section 10 prescribes that, "a learner is admitted to the total school programme and may not be suspended from classes, denied access to cultural, sporting or social activities of the school".

5.2.2. Language in Education Policy Act of 1996

The policy is aimed at promoting multilingualism and to further promote government's strategy of building a non-racial South Africa. Through the policy, the government aims to open access to education, promote growth amongst learners, and develop all languages. It therefore becomes illegal for a school or school governing body to discourage the use of other official languages within the school premises. Kaschula and Docrat (2018) observe that South Africa is caught up in a rip current of English. They argue that South Africans are biased in favour of English and against all other ten official languages. It was on this basis that in a ruling by Judge Moseneke in relation to a school's language of instruction, the judge called it "collateral irony". The judge was referring to the fact that parents who speak an African language at home prefer that their children to be taught in English (Kaschula and Docrat, 2018).

The above points to the pivotal importance of the work of School Governing Bodies and the work that they do in ensuring that all South African children across all divides get quality education. Furthermore, Maile (2012, p. 1) and Ngidi (2004, p. 261) suggest that school policies, as developed by the School Governing Body (SGB), present a framework within which principles are consistently applied across a school. Amongst the policies, that the SGB is charged with is the responsibility of creating an environment aimed to protect and promote learner rights. They specifically focus on discipline, pregnancy, language, fees, religion and culture (Mansfield-Barry & Stwayi, 2017). The devolution of the policy development role from national to local is meant to improve school governance by government sharing its power with other stakeholders. It is for this reason that the key principle of school governance is that decision-making should be based on consultation, collaboration, co-operation, mutual trust and maximum participation of all affected parties. School governance is thus viewed as a critical partnership between the school and other social partners (van Wyk, 2004; Mabovula, 2009, p. 23 & Mavuso and Duku, 2014).

Given the above assertions, it can be deduced that SGBs have a significant role to play in reversing the imbalances of the past. At the school level, they are the custodians of the transformation project to bridge the gap between rich and poor, rural and urban backgrounds, racial and cultural differences, and diverse religious practices. The powers of the SGB should be read with the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Important sections to be read with the South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA, 1996) include S29 (1) which states that "Everyone has a right (a) to a basic education ...", while Section 29(2) goes on to mention that "Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public education institutions where that education is reasonably practicable." Also important to consider together with the powers of the School Governing Body is section 30 of the Bill of Rights. Section 30 guarantees that "Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights."

In spite of the good legislative framework and the good intentions expressed in the legislation, the lived experiences of learners, particularly in former Model-C schools, present a different picture. Some SGBs developed codes of conduct to perpetuate the dominance of the previously advantaged communities whilst perpetuating the inferiority complex of the previously disadvantaged sections of the population. This presents itself as the maintenance of colonial relations through a psychological warfare waged by SGBs. The SGBs do this by passing codes of conduct that target black hair and African languages. Learners are prevented from speaking their mother tongue languages and also prevented from styling their hair in Afro, in a particular length, in dreadlocks and in plaits. SGBs also pass codes of conduct that exclude learners from

observing religious practices other than Christianity. This is a point made by De Kock, Sayed and Badroodien (2018) who posit that one of the ways in which schools perpetuate the colonial relation is insistence on the use of only English or Afrikaans as medium of instruction.

Through these anti-Constitution codes of conduct, SGBs have instilled a belief that being non-Christian and being black represents inferiority. These prejudicial codes of conduct also target Muslims and Rastafarian learners whose beliefs demand that they wear headgear. The prejudicial and reactionary codes of conduct are a vestige of the discriminatory past firmly rooted in apartheid (de Force, 2011; Parker, 2019; Perry, 2019; France-Presse, 2016 & the South African Human Rights Commission, 2017). This tendency has led to courts of law intervening in favour of the marginalised sections of the population. In the case involving a Rastafarian learner at Settlers High School, the "Court found it a blatant absurdity to view dreadlocks and wearing of a cap as a serious misconduct ..." (Antonie vs School Governing Body, Settlers High School & Others).

In so far as these codes of conduct have also been used to target African language use at schools is also demeaning and discriminatory. Mignolo (2009) refers to the use of language and hair to demean learners as "coloniality of being". Using such methods to discriminate against black learners impacts on their knowledge acquisition capacity. It creates a doubt in them about their self-worth, which further weakens their sense of identity. Mignolo (2009) views these as conscious acts that perpetuate "the master/slave dialect". This statement is succinctly stated in the quotation below;

Science (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; language is not just 'cultural' phenomenon in which people find their 'identity'; they are also, the location where knowledge is inscribed' (Mignolo, 2007).

The danger of undermining a persons' language lies in the fact that language is not only a communication tool but also a carrier of culture (wa Thiong'o, 1986). SGBs using codes of conduct to wage a psychological warfare within the classroom is a perpetuation of coloniality. To express the above argument, Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits that;

... the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.

The attempts by SGBs to maintain racial superiority and racial purity of whites (through coloniality) are ahistorical. That is so because historically cross-cultural interaction is a natural process of history. When cultures interact, they lead to what is called "Hybrid Spaces" or "Third Spaces" (Bhabha, 2004), whilst Kalua (2009) posits that these hybrid spaces are characterised by "shifting identities". Those involved in cross-cultural interaction are involved in a turbulent process of new self-discovery that holds no static identity. Furthermore, Bhabha (2004), Hart (2012), Kalua (2009) & Hurtnyk (2005) postulate that cultural interaction is the foundation of hybridity. These researchers also argue that "Third Spaces" involve ambiguity, confusion, alienation, and "slipping in and out of determinant identity". Hybridization therefore is a process beyond "assimilation and integration". Third Spaces are the spaces that South African learners should be moving towards, without the gatekeeping of the SGBs.

6. Discussion

There is enough evidence in the literature above to suggest that some School Governing Bodies in South Africa do not perform according to the prescripts of the law. Literature also abounds with evidence to show that, beyond attitude, the reactionary performance of the SGBs (in some former Model-C schools) is also due to lack of proper training (reskilling and upskilling). There is a dire need for all SGBs to be trained on human rights, related legislation, and the transformation project of the country. The other reason is that schools have not yet confronted the reality that some of the parents elected to SGBs are right wing elements who not only fail the schools they serve but also the communities they serve. These gatekeepers (right wing

elements) have contributed to dampening the reality of schools being a hub for the development of a non-racial, non-sexist, and non-sectarian cross-culture.

Given that culture is not static but a dynamic 'process' giving possibilities for the development of "Third Spaces" or "Hybrid Spaces" with no gatekeeping and segregation within schools, there are possibilities of a new culture evolving from South African schools. The process of cross-cultural integration is a delicate process of 'shifting of identities' and it needs to be handled by conscious and conscientious people (SGBs). Whilst the cultural evolution that happens through cross-cultural integration abounds with confusion and ambiguity, it is also full of possibilities for the country. It presents a possibility for new culture or cultures to emerge from integrated schools in South Africa.

Complicity and polarisation of black parents have also made it easy and possible for the conditions of coloniality to perpetuate. The majority of black parents whose kids study in the ex-Model-C schools assume that it is a privilege for their kids to be accepted in these schools. They therefore accept whatever conditions are meted out to their children who are learners in these schools. The skewed power relations favouring white South Africans have led to an inferiority complex for some South Africans. Racist and conservative school governing bodies continue to feed on this fear and insecurity whereby they even use these parents to rubber-stamp their condescending behaviour and policies. The schools perpetuate racism in overt and covert ways. Overtly, the teachers and administrators openly abuse their power, position and privilege to abuse, exploit, and control black learners (Calabrese and Underwood, 1994). This tendency is not limited to the staff but also extends to white learners. Power relations inform the relations between black and white and it finds expression in racist attitudes and behaviour. "The abuse of power in the most subtle forms can be expressed as the aggressive verbal behaviour often experienced as the put-down. In its extreme form, it is expressed by the violent behaviour where physical violence serves as an instructional tool" (Calabrese and Underwood, 1994).

The fact that black learners are always deliberately outnumbered in these schools, has created status consciousness amongst the few parents who have made it to get their kids into these schools. The acquired false sense of superiority and achievement creates vanity that prevents these parents from even clubbing together to fight injustice. This has been the experience of black learners in ex-Model-C schools where they feel ridiculed and exploited. Those who dare challenge these schools and their management are frowned upon and ostracised as if to send a message to others never to even try. These factors have contributed to keeping black parents apart and complicit leading to them also forcing the kids to be subservient.

The other contributory factor to the perpetuation of ostracism of black learners is access to legal services by the ex-Model-C schools. Black parents fear to legally challenge racist practices in these schools for fear that they might not have the necessary finances to sustain a legal challenge. This is in spite of the fact that those who have dared to challenge the racist practices of these schools have in some instances won. The notion of invincibility and superiority of the ex-Model-C schools continues to be tested and exposed as non-existent. However, these challenges have not been coordinated and are far in-between for them to deal a blow to institutionalised racism. There is a need for coordinated and inclusive interventions to change the status quo. Racism in schools today can be understood in the context of the history of the country. Education under apartheid reinforced race, gender, class and ethnic differences to support the political economy of the country. It is no different from the Nazi propaganda about which Huxle (1935) in a South African Human Rights Commission Report (1999) posited, "It is a cloak for selfish economic aims which in their unclashed nakedness would look ugly enough". Racism education in South Africa should not be seen as an autonomous form of oppression but as a system that is inextricably linked to power relations that are mutually reinforcing with race, class, gender and ethnic inequalities. The approach of school governing bodies in former Model-C schools is to pursue integration through assimilation. The black learners are expected to adapt to the dominant culture of the white learners with no consideration for their cultures. This is usually disguised as maintaining standards with the veiled implication that the racial minority, black

learners, pose a threat to their educational standards. In a covert way, students from affluent and favoured backgrounds (mostly white) get an advantage in competitions for grade placements, recommendations, awards and career opportunities. This is a sentiment shared by Barban (1981) when writing about racism in the US schools. He posits that "Racism in the public school is evidenced in prevailing attitudes, behaviour, policies and culture that are maintained to support the unequal distribution of resources and application of justice; it supports sanctions against less privileged groups."

Hellenberg, as quoted in Qukula (2018) posits that most of the schools only address symptoms of poor transformation even though cases continue to flare up. Hellenberg goes on to argue that most teachers in South Africa are under 35 and 45. What this symbolises is that this age group represents teachers who were taught and trained in a racially divided educational system under apartheid. This means that most of the teachers in the ex-Model-C schools were trained under the apartheid system and have therefore assimilated values of racism and segregation. What this points to is the need for government to invest in retraining teachers in order to equip them with skills to deal with learners from diverse backgrounds. Failure to deal with transformation makes black learners feel that they do not belong in the Model-C schools where they learn. This situation has led to a situation where black learners are assimilated instead of being integrated into the school system.

Another notable concern is the lack of representativity in the School Governing Bodies of the former Model-C schools. "There is a small percentage or no black people (on SGB's in ex-Model C schools)" (Vally and Dalamba, 1999). This is an observation shared by parents at most of the "white schools". In one Free State school there was only one black person on an SGB that was all white (Vally and Dalamba, 1999). The perception is that the inclusion of a token percentage of black SGB members would meet the requirements of representativity, however, minimally. This is an ongoing reflection of the problematic attitude amongst some predominantly white school governing bodies. Whilst African people are moving into former Model-C schools, they are underrepresented in school governance. In some extreme instances, white learners were even deregistered at former model c schools on account of the schools being run by a black principal (Govender, 2018). Black parents speak of racism and marginalisation in the former model c schools (Review of School Governance in South Africa, 2004: 67). Black parents are a minority in SGBs of formerly Model-C schools. In terms of representativity and inclusiveness of other racial groups, the situation is more complicated and a cause for concern. The pace of transformation in relation to integration in schools that served racial groups other than whites appears to be slow despite the numerous opportunities that are existing for schools to ensure racial integration.

7. Recommendations

The government must enforce the creation of awareness on diversity (inclusive of anti-racism) at schools. It is not enough that the basis of the curriculum is understanding diversity. The Department of Basic Education must develop a specific anti-discrimination programme with clearly defined objectives and impact assessment tools and time-frames.

Schools should not play lip service to inclusivity. It is pivotal that learners feel and see themselves represented in the staff complement, in the school policies and in the learning materials. This will not only go far beyond the objective of inclusivity but will also ensure that the curriculum and school environment are not divorced from their lived experiences. Black learners would then not have to work twice as hard as their counterparts to feel part of the school and to achieve academically as much.

Developing strategies to bridge the gap is also critical in dealing with perceptions, attitudes and stereotypes particularly in a multi-racial setting. It is critical to narrow the gap between the school and the community and between the different cultural and racial groups representing the parents. There are several strategies to do that. Firstly, the school needs to create an opportunity where parents and others are able to access

the schools while schools are in session. Parents can be invited to see the school at work and they could come to the school as a diverse group.

Secondly, the school needs to structure a number of neighbourhood meetings that would involve learners, teachers, school administrators and local residents. These meetings need to be scheduled by the school as part of their programme without waiting for a crisis to happen. Through these meetings some form of cohesion between parents and the schools can develop. In addition, appreciation and acceptance of diversity can evolve from these meetings.

Thirdly, media can be roped in to assist in reporting positive diversity management stories about the school. This can bring about a positive spin to race relations in the schools and the learners can quickly pick on that and gradually deal with the stereotypes.

8. Concluding remarks

Some school governing bodies in former Model-C schools continue to abuse their power perpetuating racism in how they deal with black learners in schools. This they do by undermining all that makes them (black learners) who they are; their language, their hair and their culture in general. Most of these ex-Model-C schools have failed to implement the transformation agenda of the country. They have failed to integrate black learners into their schools as equal and worthy partners but instead have assimilated them. To be accepted, as part of their schools, black learners have to change their accent, straighten their hair and stop speaking their languages, at least at school.

The governing bodies use both covert and overt ways to foster racism in schools, all in an attempt to privilege white learners over black learners. Contributory factors to the perpetuation of racism in schools include factors like the limited number of black parents who are part of the parents in the school and worse in the governing body. Lack of access to resources and ultimately to legal services pose an obstacle to black parents challenging racist practices in former Model-C schools.

Schools must adopt different strategies to rid their schools of racism and to introduce a culture of inclusivity and integration as envisaged in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The Bill of Rights outlines the type of society aspired to in the new political dispensation.

It was found that lack of training and lack of understanding of the broader legislative imperatives contribute to School Governing Bodies' failure to play a transformative role in schools and in the communities where they operate. Whichever way one looks at it, racism is dehumanising and is an abuse of power and privilege.

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