

THE INFLUENCE OF INDIRECT FACTORS ON BLACK STUDENT TEACHERS' HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade teachers' thinking has come under the spotlight. Researchers such as Shulman have investigated the relationship between the teacher's knowledge of subject matter and the way the teacher presents and explain new knowledge to the pupils.¹ McGill investigated the relationship between student teachers' historical knowledge and understanding and their teaching of history. McGill found that 70% of the student teachers at Indumiso had a poor historical knowledge and an inadequate understanding of causation and explanation in history, a poor conception of historical time and an unsatisfactory understanding of empathy as a process in history.²

The question therefore arises: what are the causes of student's poor historical knowledge and understanding? There appear to be a multiplicity of causes, some of which are well known, for example the influence of political forces on black students' performance. At Indumiso there appear to be two sets of facts that influence and affect students' academic performance. The first set of factors directly influences student performance and includes the students' competence in English, the nature of the History syllabus and the means of instruction used by the History lecturers. The second set of so-called indirect factors includes the changing nature of the culture of black South Africans, the socio-economic conditions in black areas and the political forces operating in South Africa. The

connection between these two sets of factors and students' historical understanding is not always obvious and according to Thirion these factors cannot always be determined empirically.³ Despite these two limitations this investigation will attempt to assess how indirect factors affect student performance at Indumiso.

INDIRECT FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The changing nature of the culture of black South Africans

It can be argued that the nature of black people's culture can adversely affect students' performance. In order to examine this claim, it is necessary to determine how a culture influences one's way of thinking and to discuss the 'apparent conflict' between a Western and an African approach to education. Schofield points out that culture is a term frequently used without precise meaning.⁴ The anthropological definition of culture is taken to be "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as member of society"⁵. This definition is helpful as it assists one to understand a group's way of thinking and philosophy of life. Stenhouse argues that culture is a determinant of social interaction. A set of agreed upon meanings is signified in linguistic usage within which thinking systems are established. Part of the thinking systems include the rationality, value and belief systems, according to Lawton,⁶ who argues that they are important elements that form part of a culture and to a large extent determine how members of a group act.

An important aspect of culture is a group's view of reality and this to a large extent determines how a group behaves. The black (African) view of reality is fundamentally different from that of the European. This determines to a large extent how the black person thinks and acts, and influences his approach and involvement in education. In Western philosophy the central facet of reality is man himself. Descartes's dictum, "I think, therefore I am", illustrates this assumption in Western philosophy.⁷ This view of the individual is not readily accepted by the traditional black South African. For the black man the primacy of the group is important, not the individual. Many traditional blacks

and even westernised urbanised blacks believe the individual exists so that the group may survive and be happy. The individual's needs, pleasures, and choices are subordinate to the interests of the group. Such a view of reality and life can give rise to the following traditional attitudes: "Conservative - prefers tradition. Family and group come before the individual. Irrational - believes magical and religious explanations. Fatalistic - believes man is victim of chance. Intolerant - believes roles should be carried out according to traditional values. Parochial attitudes - makes little use of mass media and has unfavourable attitudes to Western education".⁸

Black culture in South Africa is in a state of change and transition. Black people's views of reality, rationality and value affect their thinking and cognitive style and difficulties result when blacks are plunged into a modern Western educational system.⁹ The cultural leap from a traditional rural environment to a Western educational system can produce a culture shock resulting in an inability to cope with the rationality system prevalent in Western education. It can be argued that because black people have traditional attitudes this adversely affects the way students study and learn history at Indumiso.

Thirion points out that "blacks find themselves in two worlds - the traditional world (at home) and the western world (at school)".¹⁰ Therefore even though student teachers at Indumiso may not have all these traditional attitudes, such attitudes can lead to a negative perception of the type of education offered at Indumiso which emphasises Western values. Students come from a background of traditional attitudes, and such attitudes can adversely affect their approach to studying history. Those who excelled in History and put the interests of the individual before those of the group can be looked upon as displaying undesirable and deviant behaviour by the rest of the group. Lecturers often comment in this respect that they seldom have 'good' students who do well academically. Most of the students tend to be merely average.¹¹

The black South African's concept of time

A further aspect of reality that can influence the students' historical understanding is the concept of time. The Zulu conception of historical time is different from that of the European, who has a linear chronological

conception of time. The Zulu, according to Bryant "recognises quite clearly that cosmic time went round in a cycle" and the 'past' is perceived as a set of amorphous events that are lumped together and "each year is recorded by the principal event which happened in it".¹² The associate Head of Department of Social Science maintains that "they (the students) don't have a sense of history, regarding when events finish on a linear time scale - in other words, they have no sense of time".¹³ A reasonable understanding of the linear concept of time is necessary in order to arrange events in a chronological sequence and to process the material the historian is dealing with. It can be argued that since the students have a cyclic view of time and tend to lump all events that occurred in the past together and don't really differentiate between events, this impedes their understanding of cause and effect.

Traditional Zulu religious ideas

Traditional Zulu religious ideas may also contribute to students' poor historical understanding. Krige points out the following interesting details concerning the religious system of the Zulus: "The real, vital religion of the Zulu is their ancestor worship. The ancestors take a real interest in their progeny; they guard them from danger and attend to their needs ... All prosperity is ascribed to the favour of the ancestors, misfortune to their anger".¹⁴

According to Vilakazi: "When a man dies, his shadow lives on as an ancestral spirit" and "these shadows are their gods and deserve 'respect' and 'praise'. Anyone who is dead is an ancestor and he can affect you".¹⁵ The Western approach to history examines the past in a rational and critical way (for example, moral judgements about good or bad behaviour of people in the past¹⁶ and is very different from the Zulu oral historical tradition. The Western approach to history can be perceived by students who still subscribe to traditional beliefs as simply meddling with the ancestors, which can be an extremely dangerous practice. If there are students who subscribe to traditional beliefs about the ancestors, these students can develop a cognitive barrier to accepting a Western method of doing and studying history.

According to Dlamini black culture was perceived as "primitive and inferior" during

the last three centuries.¹⁷ This leads to a lack of confidence among students and a failure to realise their full potential. Many students at Indumiso suffer from a lack of self-confidence when teaching and have a poor self-image. Lecturers who observed the lessons often comment that students "lack confidence".

Black South Africans see change as risk orientated

According to Blakemore McClelland points out that the need for achievement among individuals who are motivated in a traditional way is different from that of "modern individuals who are predisposed to change".¹⁸ The traditional black person sees change as risk orientated. According to Marcum black people do not really understand the Western educational system, particularly its value assumptions and its approach to the nature of knowledge.¹⁹ The modern approach to history as a discipline sees historical knowledge as provisional and problematic. This would necessitate a change in the approach to studying and learning history among students who see the modern approach as foreign because their mindset with regard to the past tends to be dominated by the experience of school History which emphasises a factual approach to history. Since the students do not understand the modern approach to history, they feel if they adopt this approach to history it will be risk orientated. Since students are motivated to pass and obtain certificates, they report to coping mechanisms such as rote learning without understanding: "All they (the students) are interested in is a certificate in order to gain a passport to financial security".²⁰ Student teachers appear to be motivated for reasons that are not linked to the pursuit of excellence in the academic sphere but rather for utilitarian reasons.

The influence of socio-economic conditions on black South Africans

There appears to be only an indirect connection between socio-economic conditions and student teachers' historical understanding and knowledge. The influence that socio-economic conditions have on education in black areas is well documented, for example reports on the South African Institute of Race Relations. Hofmeyr and Moulder (1989: 11) claim that: "in educational terms, South Africa is basically an underdeveloped

(developing) country, subject to all the forces and pressures that characterize other less developed countries".²¹ Simmons points out that some of the problems facing third world countries include "inefficiency within the schools and the educational system, which can be measured by high dropout rates, illiterate graduates, and lack of paper, pencils, textbooks, and even teachers in the classroom".²²

A brief examination of two socio-economic problems that can influence students' academic performance will be undertaken in this article. The first centres on the provision of education for blacks and the second focuses upon the problem of poverty among blacks.

The provision of education for blacks

In respect to the provision of education Table 1 gives details concerning per capita expenditure, pupil/teacher ratio and matriculation examination results for the racial groups in South Africa and for Kwazulu for 1987/88. According to Moulder these figures show that education is unfairly funded by the state and the result is an unequal provision of educational opportunities.²³ Black student teachers sampled in this study come from a deprived background of educational opportunities.

Table 1. The financing of education in South Africa and matriculation pass rates.²⁴

	Per capita Expenditure	Pupil/Teacher Ratio	Matriculation Pass rate as a %
Whites	R2 722,00	16 to 1	96,1% M.E. 42
Coloureds	R1 507,55	25 to 1	67,8% M.E. 16%
Indians	R2 014,88	20 to 1	95,1% M.E. 38%
DET	R 595,39	41 to 1	57,9% M.E. 16%
Kwazulu	R 411,58	40 to 1	Not available.

The institute of Race Relations points out that there is a shortage of space in the double sessions (the same teacher takes two classes a day). The platoon system (two teachers for two classes but in the same room) is found in the Department of Education and Training (D.E.T.) areas and in the non-independent homelands. This indicates that there is a shortage of classrooms and consequently overcrowding occurs. Furthermore, the report by the Department of National Education in June 1991 points out that "In the case of Black education only about 30% of all teachers are suitably qualified".²⁵ Furthermore, many newly qualified teachers in Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging area could not find employment with the D.E.T., the problem being that "newly qualified teachers are selective as to where they want to teach; not all newly qualified teachers can be given posts in Soweto; according to Schoeman.²⁶ This and the above figures show that there is an imbalance between urban areas and homelands and the problems in the rural

areas tend to be more acute than those in urban areas.²⁷ With regard to education in Kwazulu Dr Oscar Dhlomo described schooling as "glorified literacy campaigns parading as full-fledged education systems".²⁸ According to Moulder "Black students can't read, write or calculate as well as we would like them to" and in addition "Black students, because of the deprivations and inequalities of apartheid education, are often better at passing an examination than solving a problem in a subject".²⁹ The physical facilities in black schools in Kwazulu and D.E.T. areas in Natal leave much to be desired, particularly when coupled with the political unrest in these areas in black schools since 1976. The students sampled in McGill's study can only have suffered educationally under a system which has so many difficulties and problems. The influence of these factors must have influenced the student teachers' historical understanding adversely.

The problem of poverty among blacks

Poverty within the black community can also have an adverse effect on the education of the student teachers. Various theoretical approaches regarding the nature of poverty have been developed, according to Emmett³⁰. Emmett points out that Lewis puts forward the idea that poverty exists as a "culture of poverty" among the poor and "the poor are seen as manifesting particular patterns of behaviour and values" resulting in the formation of a subculture which reproduces itself once it has come into existence. Those who are socialised into a subculture of poverty are "psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improved opportunities that may develop in their lifetime". This conception of poverty is helpful as it helps explain why student teachers who come from an impoverished background fail to accept fully Western values and the educational system. The students tend to be so embedded within their cultural background that they find new ways of thought, teaching and learning difficult to accept.

The adverse effects of poverty on black education in South Africa are well documented in particular with respect of the problem of income poverty and malnutrition. This paper will briefly consider how malnutrition can affect students' performance. It is possible that students have suffered from the problem of malnutrition while at school and according to Marcum this can result in the following handicaps: "psychical and mental stunting, hearing and sight defects, and sheer hunger conducted to apathy, low concentration, lack of maturation, low achievement, absenteeism, and ultimately a high dropout rate".³¹

The influence of political forces

Political forces at work exert a considerable influence on students' activities and education at Indusimo. Since 1984 there have been class boycotts, strikes and calls by students for the resignation of the Rector. Such politically inspired action must be seen in the light of political developments in South Africa over the last ten years. Leatt argues that there are a number of "conflicting ideologies in South Africa such as 'capitalism', 'African socialism', 'Afrikaner nationalism'".³² The

general effect of the political forces on black education is well documented, for example the report of the Institute of Race Relations. Hofmeyr and Moulder analyse the influence politics has on the educational crisis in South Africa.³³ Moulder also analyses the political basis for a "People's Education" in South Africa.³⁴ The ideas of Moulder and Hofmeyr are helpful in explaining how political factors generally affect education. This paper will first examine these general factors and then focus on political developments at work in Natal that influence students' teaching and knowledge of history.

Hofmeyr and Moulder examine and analyse Sunter's idea that education can be perceived as "a game" in which there are rules, plan and choices the actors may make within the game! With respect to the education game Moulder and Hofmeyr identify two games played by blacks in education. The first game "Legitimacy" results from "black youth who are alienated from their system of education because it lacks legitimacy at two levels: blacks have no power or say over their education because they do not participate in the central government and they do not enjoy any meaningful decision making within their education system". The second game played by black South Africans is called "Justice" which aims "to confront and, if necessary, to destroy the elitism and privilege that is encouraged by those who are playing the 'Centres of Excellence' game played by White South Africans". In order to challenge the Government's control over Black Education, black people have demanded an alternative educational system, 'People's Education', which is closely linked to politics. The main aims of 'People's Education' include preparing people for "liberation, justice, and freedom and South Africa should have a system that is unified, democratic, anticapitalist, antiracist and antisexist". In order to achieve these 'objectives' teachers formed organisations such as the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA); parents and students utilised different organisations such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the South African Student Council (SANSCO) in order to oppose the government.

In the case of Indusimo it appears as though these political forces manifest themselves as follows: the black students represent the alienated who play the game of 'legitimacy' and 'justice' while the College Staff represent

'the government' and the game of 'Academic Excellence'.

Indumiso is South Africa as a microcosm and has the same political forces at work in it. These forces, when they are made explicit, result in strikes which disrupt academic activities at Indumiso. Some students have a preoccupation with and commitment to certain political ideologies. This results in playing the white man's "game" without any real commitment to academic excellence and a set of coping strategies are simply used to succeed.³⁵

In Natal there are many different political groups among black people, each with its own agenda. For the last five years there has been considerable conflict between the UDF and the ANC on the one hand and Inkatha on the other. The political violence between the ANC (and its affiliates) and Inkatha usually takes the form of murder, arson and beatings. This has adversely affected black schooling in the greater Pietermaritzburg area³⁶ as well as educational activities at Indumiso. Education takes place in stressful and tense conditions, with teachers being threatened with physical violence. The pupils are "'scared', 'depressed', 'angry'" and have feelings of hopelessness; such conditions would result in poor academic performance among school pupils. Students from Indusimo come from a background of violence and this "influences their interpretation of history and their performance when teaching or learning history".³⁷

At Indusimo there is "relative peace" apart from the "traditional yearly strike against the management".³⁸ Reasons for disruptions given by the students are 'poor food', 'racist while lecturers', 'the Rector's dictatorial use of power and authority' and 'demands for an S.R.C. with a constitution developed by students and not a D.E.T. constitution'.³⁹ The student body is divided among itself with a number of pressure groups in operation, for example The Indusimo Society which served as a front for the activities of SANSKO and COSAS in 1986, The Entertainment Committee (1990), The S.R.C. (1991) and SANSKO covertly since 1987.⁴⁰ The majority of students are highly politicised, but it is felt that "it is a small minority group who wish to impose and promote their views on the majority and this leads to intimidation among the rest of the student body".⁴¹ Academic work suffers during this time of political

unrest. Female students are assaulted, bricks are thrown at their rooms at night. Such political activities cause tension and stress among the students, making it difficult to learn and study.

An atmosphere conducive to learning is not always prevalent because the conflict between the students and the college authorities tends to be continually simmering beneath the surface. It takes only a minor incident for it to explode into the open. Such an atmosphere affects all the students' activities and influences the learning and studying of history. Outside political forces can also influence student performance during teaching practice. "The black community in Imbali and Edendale identified Indumiso as 'Botha's children' and see students as not supporting their action (struggle) during the violent unrest of 1988-1990. Students during teaching practice therefore feared for their lives".⁴² Under such conditions it is difficult to teach and learn history. Many History students consider 'History' used as a subject to justify the white man's political supremacy in South Africa and they consequently demand a "People's History".⁴³ This view of history would be in line with their political thinking and results in students implicitly rejecting the history taught at Indusimo but they nevertheless study the subject for purely utilitarian reasons.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion shows that there are many forces at work at Indumiso which can influence and cause students to experience difficulties in understanding history. The indirect factors discussed above are closely related to one another, and the way they influence students' historical understanding and history teaching is not always clear, but such circumstances are not conducive to an academic ethos. One can argue that it is possible that similar circumstances exist at other black colleges of education and that these forces will adversely affect students' academic achievements at those colleges not only in History but in all subjects.

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MISSIE VAN GESKIEDENISONDERRIG

Die missie van geskiedenisonderrig is om leerlinge met 'n historiese bewustheid toe te rus wat 'n bydrae kan lewer tot hulle vermoë om hulle plek en rol in die samelewing te vind.